

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 – Wednesday 11 March 2026

MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Alison Geale, Chief Executive Officer, Bravehearts.

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

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

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

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

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

Alison GEALE: Alison Geale, and I am the CEO of Bravehearts.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will now go around and introduce ourselves. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio, MP for Northern Metro and Chair.

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

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Melina BATH: Good morning. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good morning. Jacinta Ermacora here, Member for Western Victoria Region, and I am here in Warrnambool today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I would now like to invite you, Ms Geale, to make an opening statement and just ask if you could please keep it to a maximum of 10 minutes, just so we have plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

Alison GEALE: I am very pleased to be here. Good morning. I am joining you via Zoom but on the land of the Kombumerri people of the Yugambeh language group, and I pay my respect to their elders past and present. Bravehearts hopes that as a nation we can move together to a place of equity, justice and partnership.

Thank you very much for providing the opportunity for me to speak today on behalf of Bravehearts. Bravehearts is a national child protection organisation solely dedicated to the prevention and treatment of child sexual abuse, and for almost three decades we have been working hard to make sure that there is a holistic approach to prevention and treatment of this crime. You will note in our submission that the statistics on this widely under-reported crime are quite staggering for a nation that would be considered quite progressive, Australia. One in four is a statistic that I feel everybody should have a focus on and work towards reducing with what is essentially a preventable crime.

Bravehearts offers a number of different services. We provide specialist counselling to young people under 18 who have been impacted, and their non-offending family members, by child sexual abuse. We have a harmful sexual behaviours program, called Turning Corners, that is basically about changing the trajectory of those

young people under the age of 18, but up to 25 if they have an impairment or intellectual disability. If they are displaying or at risk of displaying harmful sexual behaviours, we provide specialist counselling to those who are displaying those behaviours and to the young people impacted by that behaviour. That has been going for about five or six years, and we see that as a very growing element of this crime type, absolutely.

We also provide education services nationally. This year our program, Ditto's Keep Safe Adventure, which is a live incursion for 45 minutes that goes into early learning centres – that is the big shift we have seen from lower primary school. As children age out of the program a lot quicker, we see that we are going more and more into early learning centres. In fact 65 per cent of the almost 45,000 children that we see each year are in early learning centres, including in Victoria. So that is a 45-minute incursion that is about personal safety. It also has resource plans for teaching and lesson plans and also is an app that can be downloaded, and there is a digital online version which is available through our LMS. To complement that we also provide adult training for child-facing organisations. We provide those right across Australia, including some very large schools and early learning centres in Victoria as part of the broader group.

So today I would be talking from my experience of our interactions with early learning centres and victim-survivors who have contacted us with their experiences in early learning centres most recently. Bravehearts also is a national redress provider and has been from the beginning. We are quite a prolific redress support provider, and we also spearhead research into many different areas related to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

I think that is a reasonably good opening statement to give you background on Bravehearts. I am very keen to discuss some of the elements that you have proposed this morning. If you would like any more information, I am happy to keep going. I thought 10 minutes felt a bit long.

The CHAIR: No, that is okay. You do not have to take the full 10 minutes. It is just an offer, but it is completely up to you. But we are very happy to begin our discussions with some of our questions, so I will kickstart that. I have got a few questions actually. How many, would you say, early childhood centres specifically here in Victoria have you provided your training to?

Alison GEALE: I thought that I would be asked that question. I was hoping I could take that on notice, because we actually had a Melbourne team before COVID and then that Melbourne team closed down. But we operate in Shepparton and we operate in Geelong and have done for many years. So if I could take that on notice, in as quickly as a couple of hours I can get you that information.

The CHAIR: No, that is absolutely okay. Can I just ask you about the 45-minute incursion that you provide in early childhood settings? So that is obviously for the children but also for the educators, is that right?

Alison GEALE: Yes. It is quite difficult, because one of the things no doubt we are going to talk about is the cross-pollination of different states into child protection. For example, if you are taking one very large group of early learning centres, they operate in different states, so our approach to them might be a bit bespoke. In one state we might provide that adult training and in another we do not.

The CHAIR: But here in Victoria specifically, the 45-minute incursion that you spoke about in your opening statement also involves the educators, correct?

Alison GEALE: It does and it does not. They are sent material. I know it sounds convoluted. One of the issues is around it not being mandated. Our material is very specific to grooming, to factors that may lead to impact or reporting when it comes to child sexual abuse, so they can be applied in domestic and family violence situations et cetera. It is at the discretion of the director.

The CHAIR: We have heard from witnesses – specifically some of the large for-profit providers like Affinity – who have actually used your service, your child protection training programs. Are there any differences that you see when you are giving training to for-profit, non-profit, community, government settings?

Alison GEALE: Not that I can think of, immediate trends, because they all participate. It is the call for feedback that is the one that probably prompts the most inquiry. Who is asking for additional materials? Who is asking for feedback? I am speaking very broadly here, but I can disclose on notice if you like if we have had particular uptakes et cetera.

The CHAIR: Okay, that would be great.

Alison GEALE: It is a digital, online – so it is very difficult to gauge, beyond certification, their input and application.

The CHAIR: That is fine. Thank you. You said in your opening statement that your organisation is dedicated to prevention. We have had witnesses come before the committee as late as yesterday who were told by government representatives that it is just not the time for prevention at the moment. It is quite concerning if we are not working towards disrupting child sexual crimes happening towards vulnerable children. What do you have to say to that, given that prevention is part of that holistic approach you spoke about?

Alison GEALE: Yes, I can use an example if you like. Bravehearts started as a victim-survivor advocacy organisation, and it is – it still remains that. If you take the Turning Corners program, which is a program that interrupts a certain behaviour or serves people that are committing a certain behaviour, when that was launched nine years ago there was quite a backlash, because the idea is that with prevention and treatment one has to come at the cost of the other. But if we are continually downstream, we have no shortage of children to counsel and treat. But if we do not start going upstream in terms of how this crime happens and how we intersect it, my position on prevention is very strong –

The CHAIR: What do you say then, Ms Geale, best practice sexual abuse prevention would look like?

Alison GEALE: I think if you look at normalising the discussion, not normalising the crime, there are a number of very key components. This crime type is so heinous that people cannot imagine it happening to them, do not want that to happen. Therefore there is a reluctance to become involved in educating yourself about it. I am talking about trusted adults around the child and certainly people who work in child-facing organisations. For example, a parent might go into an early learning centre and be very concerned about the diet, the play equipment, the modelling in terms of: is it a Montessori? What is their ethos and architecture of learning? But they are very rarely saying – and I am not parent shaming here at all – ‘Where is your child protection statement? Talk to me about how you protect my child from a number of different issues.’ They do not feel knowledge-informed or they are just not thinking about it, so it is that level.

The CHAIR: Just on that, if I may, Ms Geale, many services appear compliant with Child Safe Standards on paper, right? From your perspective, what distinguishes organisations that genuinely embed child safety or are child safe organisations from those that are simply meeting minimum compliance requirements?

Alison GEALE: It is the culture of the organisation. It is the reporting culture of the organisation. What we have seen, certainly in the cases in Victoria and recently, is you can have a culture of compliance but that does not create a culture of safety. You have to have a culture akin to – it does not matter hierarchically who walks onto a building site; anyone knows they can call someone out for not wearing a hard hat. It is if you have a culture where the only key outcome you are looking for is not the brand of your centre or not getting in trouble by reporting something to your director, and the director then having to be hesitant about reporting to their head office because of brand, but the child – what is best for the child and what is best for the safety of the child is at the heart of it and people do that without fear or favour. So culturally analysing an organisation: do you have confidence and freedom? It is not about whistleblowing, it is about increasing protection measures, and that can come from anyone in an organisation – a day two starter or a centre director. It is the fear and lack of knowledge, that combination in centres – a checklist cannot protect a child. It is not safety by design, if you understand what I am saying there.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. You make it perfectly clear that a culture of compliance does not necessarily equate to a culture of safety. But my time has run out, I am sorry. You will hear a beep in the background, alerting that we have finished our time. So I am going to hand it over to our Deputy Chair Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Morning, Ms Geale. Thank you for joining us.

Alison GEALE: Good morning.

Michael GALEA: Why have so many childcare centres completely failed to establish that culture?

Alison GEALE: You in some ways expect what you do not inspect. I think when you are looking around service delivery, there are a lot of benchmarking, assessment issues, consequence. If I can take an average day when you might have a workforce that are en masse female, en masse have a certain level of education, en masse are probably not resourced or, depending on the centre, paid in accordance with the work that they do, and you have the massive commercial-minded machine that has become Australian day care – the privatisation and the commercial drive –

Michael GALEA: Do you think that there is a correlation between increased for-profit provision of child care and cultural failings?

Alison GEALE: Yes, because of scale. We partner with a lot – and I want to go on the record saying that there are so many fine, fine people that are looking after our kids every day in centres, and there is a lot of compliance and also educational architecture; there is a lot to get through. However, the bare minimums often – when I am looking at different ratings, you have got ‘near enough is good enough’, because there is not an obvious consequence; there just has not been. So the stick is one part, because if we are looking at prevention and treatment, prevention is about: what are the safeguarding things that we can put in place? If I speak freely about some of the cases with those two prolific offenders in Australian day care centres in various states, it is worthwhile looking at the centres where there were no offences, because modelling what it was that was going on in this centre – and it is very rarely in isolation or luck; it is actually by design. There was offending in some centres with CCTV, so it is not a kind of one and done; it is not like ‘If we have a register then we know.’ Centres that might have recruitment policies that clearly state ‘If you come to work here, our focus is the child; we are a child safe organisation’ – not so much just the kind of lip-service in some of those recruiting ads. So they start at the front door and in their induction, and very quickly we saw some of those offenders only last in those centres for a month, because it is not easy. So we have made soft targets out of some of these centres.

Michael GALEA: If we put more stringent requirements for centres to be transparent, for example, not just about their AQF results but about various other metrics such as shareholders, how much is being paid and that sort of stuff – we have had some suggestions to our inquiry about that – do you think that if more data is provided to parents in a variety of forums, be it physical, onsite, online, on websites that centres are required to show, that will contribute to improving that culture by basically making it harder for them to hide by not doing it?

Alison GEALE: I think that transparency of the money is probably – it depends if shame is a motivator for someone. I think there are many different motivators. I feel that they should be very transparent about their child safety incidents.

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Alison GEALE: I think that should be the first thing on any one of their reports to their head office, because also you just create a problem for the people who are working the day-to-day. They have got to deal with the comments around salaries et cetera. So I feel that if you are motivated by shame, they should be way, way more motivated by their level of safety and transparency on and relevancy on child safety incidents.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. We have had it put to us, including just yesterday from some in the industry, that there is a disparity between the broader quality outcomes between, for example, for-profit and not-for-profit. We have had some industry representatives say that we should be investing more money into the for-profit side to help them to rectify that. On the other hand, we have had Productivity Commission Associate Commissioner Brennan say we should actually specifically invest in not-for-profit because that is the model that seems to be working. Do you have a view on that? Should funding be agnostic, private or public, or should we be focusing funds on one or the other?

Alison GEALE: Yes, it is an interesting question, because such is the convoluted state in Australia of child protection and where state and territories intersect et cetera. I think however it is funded is probably putting the cart before the horse. I think constructing what is required as not even the – I do not like saying the bare minimum, because that sounds like a compliance checklist. If Australia is going to rejuvenate its ECEC sector, it does not matter what sign is above the door, it is what goes on in there. So I think in building that, we will actually then see where the funding is required, and then doing reasonable evaluations and assessments on the

impact of the application of that, keeping in mind you are measuring the absence of an event. Prevention is sometimes difficult to measure.

Michael GALEA: Because as you say, centres that are doing that do not have these issues.

Alison GEALE: Yes, correct – and remember people do not speak up. Protective adults that we see around children who have been impacted by child sexual abuse and exploitation have misplaced guilt; these well-meaning parents and carers go and get the equivalent of a PhD in the subject because of that misplaced guilt. So how do we make people feel knowledgeable and confident through education and not experience? There should be broader elements in the basic certificate training that this is a real harm. When you look at those levels, it is very broadly touched on. Given those statistics, it could almost be an element, and again that training is our social enterprise. I am literally working us out of a social enterprise but towards the mission that this is a very real threat. It is not it is not just falling off the monkey bars – there are sexual predators.

Michael GALEA: I am out of time. If I may very quickly ask for a quick answer – sorry, I very much hear the need for that – do you support the introduction of the new mandatory training that is being brought into the national law in Victoria and is to be rolled out in other states?

Alison GEALE: Yes, I do.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for your time. Noting that you do good work in Shepparton, I feel like – the Member for Shepparton Kim O’Keeffe has spoken with me about this in the past, but I have not had the conversation today with her – I would like to put that lens over regional operations and centres because, as you will know, we have childcare deserts in regional Victoria and many in my electorate of Eastern Victoria Region. Putting that lens over it, are there further complications in regional-based centres? We have thin markets, we have exhausted staff, we have parents that need to access, so there is less choice. Can you walk us through some of the complications and then potentially a solution to those complications?

Alison GEALE: Yes, absolutely, I agree. I think that regional Australia deserves better, because if the formula that is proven to have the best efficacy is that there are a number of things that are happening, not just the onus of the education being given to the child. So, for example, we have been training in every school setting and in every early learning setting in Tasmania, including rural Tasmania, as a state, but the investment was not made in the complementary and equally important services around that. So what we see in regional Australia is if the child is being exposed to personal safety education, the onus of their protection becomes their issue, because if they speak up, they are not speaking to an adult who has had the time or can access, whether it be because of a distance issue or it is not available, any kind of training to support them or parents. So we see there is a diminishing in services, and that would not be exclusive to childcare centres; that would be in regard to health or access to health et cetera. I do believe that any child in any setting should have exposure. And in our world, given how we can introduce connectivity very simply, the issue is funding. I will take Shepparton as a case in point. For over 15 years we were funded by the CASA – not all of the CASAs, but GV CASA, and that funding has just ceased.

Melina BATH: When you say CASA, that is the centre for sexual assault, and it has state-based funding through Victoria Police, is that correct? Or is it the justice department?

Alison GEALE: I do not know if it is police. I think it would be health.

Melina BATH: Okay.

Alison GEALE: I think – my apologies there. I only know that CASA is one of 13 of the CASAs. Jacinta might know more there. I do not know if there is –

Melina BATH: Sure, sure.

Alison GEALE: Sorry – minister. Your name is on the screen. My apologies.

Melina BATH: No, that is all right. We are not ministers here.

Alison GEALE: Committee members.

Melina BATH: We are committee members and we are multiparty. I am a National Party MP, and we have Greens and Labor MPs on this committee as well. It would be interesting to look for a case study. So if you said that that has worked well – I am suggesting that it has worked well – in regional Victoria, and there has been funding and it has been cut, would you provide on notice a short briefing on what you feel that Bravehearts has achieved in that specific case, maybe even the funding levels on that, without giving away anything that you cannot, just to provide that case study, because I think that is really important. If it is working – and then funding has been retracted – how is that not serving the community? So that is that, if you do not mind taking that one on notice.

Alison GEALE: Of course.

Melina BATH: I am interested – you talk about child safety capability, a core licensing and funding requirement that would require services to demonstrate a lived culture of safety. Child safety capability, a requirement of licensing and funding – is that something that you adhere to, and could you walk us through that? I just want to get your perception on that.

Alison GEALE: I wonder – and this again is in order to operate a childcare centre – what are the basic level licensing requirements. I doubt that they focus at all on or have any kind of indicator or something that is assessable regarding child safety and specifically child sexual abuse. What are the checking mechanisms? You have also got family day care centres. You have also got smaller operators. Why that is a back-to-front question is when you look at who is sitting after assessment at ‘continuous improvement’ without action for weeks and months and months and without consequence, my point is I wonder how this is the framework to operate. This is the consequence of that deviance when it comes to the beginning process. In order to have the licence to operate this facility, these are the non-negotiables. I feel that there might not be any rigour around who can open a day care centre. It certainly looks that way when you look at the continuous improvement and, in the minutiae, front gates – things that really –

Melina BATH: Should be non-negotiable.

Alison GEALE: Correct.

Melina BATH: On the weekend I had a conversation with a wonderful human being. She has been in not-for-profit family early learning centres and day care for 25, 30 years, so for my value very trustworthy, outstanding commitment to child safety and children. She provided a submission to the regulator on two different occasions, and she got two completely different pieces of feedback from the regulator: one, it was perfect, accept all of it; the other one, it was not up to speed – the same document read by two different people within a regulator. I am using that as an example. Care centres can be providing information and seeking genuine feedback. Have you had any experience about the quality of the regulators in Bravehearts or direction from them? Clearly mixed messages do not help centres provide that level of care.

Alison GEALE: In short, no, not regarding the regulator. But if you think about the lax approach or the elements that are up for interpretation – someone has interpreted something one way in the regulator office and the other has interpreted in another way – just the very thought that that is up for interpretation, if it is, means there is no benchmarking in response. I am inquiring: is that when the regulator body was through Education?

Melina BATH: It would have been through the education department.

Alison GEALE: I will note that Victoria has moved to action stations.

Melina BATH: That is right. One would have thought that should not have happened in Education. We should not give them a chop-out for saying, ‘That’s okay. We’ve now changed. It’s gone to VECRA. All will be well.’ I am seeking some discussion around quality and consistency of feedback and what that might look like from Bravehearts. I know you sit separate definitely to the regulator, but what is some of the messaging?

Alison GEALE: That was not a free kick to Education at all. The idea that it is not mandatory depending on what curriculum you work off – and when I say ‘curriculum’ there are elements of ‘This are covered in the

curriculum; we don't need to do that.' You have individuals who have the choice as to whether or not they undertake that kind of training in a school setting. For example, we have been operating in Geelong for over 15 years. Schools pay to see the program in Geelong, and every school bar one has had that incursion every year for those 15 years. That is a community and the school doing what is not necessarily mandated for them to do. They only need to provide what is in the curriculum, and it is not covered appropriately.

Melina BATH: My time is up. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you, and thank you so much for your submission and for appearing today. In your submission you have talked about the need for greater standardisation and transparency of compliance reporting. Can you explain what you mean by that and why that is important?

Alison GEALE: Yes. I think it goes back to clear consequence. If you allow reporting to have different interpretations when it is being supplied, it is basically, without training – we have had some centre directors talk about you could almost sometimes put it at a high scale of a report, even though it is not that but it is interpreted that way. I think the reporting and assessment needs to be levelled, standardised and not based on exception and continuous improvement. It does not seem to have, 'This is how long you stay in continuous improvement, these are the amount of checks, unannounced checks, rigour.' The reporting seems to be treated as, 'Look, we just have to do this. We'll just get this in.' And I hope I am being clear there. I think that there are different reports, Remember I know that that was a submission particularly for Victoria. But we along with you, Victorian government. I know there are elements that could be national. National standards could be evidenced.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And you also advocate for the public reporting of things like compliance breaches. We have had mixed feedback about some of that, in particular about the risk that it may disincentivise reporting. A lot of reports does not necessarily mean it is less safe. It could actually mean that it represents a good culture for child safety if there are lots of reports made, but it might not be interpreted that way if you have got a place with lots of reports and then others without reports. What do you say to that argument?

Alison GEALE: Yes, I do not necessarily have the answer because there is always a trade-off, isn't there? I know that we are living in the absence of it. I would suggest that the absence of really clear, transparent – it goes back to how parents pick a centre, and there are a number of different motivators. One is obviously catchment availability, because that is difficult. But it will be the architecture on the style, maybe the friends go there, et cetera. Putting safety at the top of that list and their child's right to a childhood free from sexual harm goes some way. I know the motivation for the centre – that is probably more of a question. Why would the centre want to distort? Because that should really drive action. But that is a brand problem, and we see that with really large commercial operators.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. So you still believe that it would be an improvement to have greater public transparency around some of those compliance breaches? We have certainly found it hard to get information about that.

Alison GEALE: I do. I think we are living the converse of that now, so if there is an opportunity for people to be better –

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. And you have mentioned a number of times the lack of consequences. Can you expand a bit on what you mean by consequences and who should those consequences be for?

Alison GEALE: Yes. In a number of different fashions. There is no consequence for remaining in continuous improvement for months and months with regard to compliance. There is no evidence of 'Your centre will be closed. You will cease to operate.' There are certainly ones that have been. But if you look at the consequence to the centre of remaining in continuous improvement in high-priority areas like child safety incidents, number one, the consequence for not reporting – we have seen in a lot of the cases that have driven these inquiries that there was no consequence for the operators when parents came forward and made complaints. There was no consequence. There was not a consequence for the staff. They were either, you know, not stood down or they were just paused on pay and then came back again. There was no consequence in regard to their working with children checks. Consequence is a theme. And the ultimate consequence is that a child is sexually harmed and a family is ripped apart. There is not anything on the other side.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. And you said –

Alison GEALE: I could not be a brain surgeon without the correct compliance, qualifications et cetera. I just feel that there is a ‘I hope it does not happen. They all seem really nice at my centre.’

Sarah MANSFIELD: You said – we have heard this a few times – there do not seem to be many limits around or any rigour around who can open a centre. If someone has a track record of, you know, owning or operating a centre, or a company has, where there have been serious child safety concerns or there is a pattern of poor compliance, do you think that they should be allowed to open new centres?

Alison GEALE: Well, the answer could be conditional. For example, depending on what those incidents were, but if there were tiered incident reporting, then no. Depending on what constitutes a breach, they have got evidence of something – I mean, evidence of escalation, mitigation, treatment, like any kind of rich risk management system, seems to be not in play. And it is harder when you are dealing with big commercial operators who are assuming or merging or taking over smaller operators.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good morning. Thank you very much for appearing – a really interesting perspective. Alison, if I can call you Alison –

Alison GEALE: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: You mentioned a convoluted state. I am a former CASA counsellor, advocate and therapist, so I know what you are saying. They are funded by the Victorian government. You mentioned a convoluted state of child care in Australia, and you also mentioned that really what we should be doing is building the core service. I think you are meaning construct the service delivery and then look at the accountability and support that are needed after that. Instead what we have got is this convoluted state. I just wanted to know – first question: do you believe that the report we do for this inquiry should map out the peak bodies in Victoria, the advocacy and prevention bodies in Victoria, the state regulatory bodies and the Commonwealth regulatory bodies and the service providers in a visual kind of sense, so we can see what we have got as far as your convoluted state?

Alison GEALE: When I say ‘convoluted state’, I mean condition, not Victoria.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, I assumed that.

Alison GEALE: But yes, I do. It is a very busy sector with a number of intersecting – you know, there is different legislation that applies. You are, I would not call it the Wild West, but probably pretty close. The average person but, even beyond that, people that work in the sector would not have the idea around any kind of national oversight, state-based oversight, who is the regulatory body? There is nowhere to go. Those people that do kind of the version of Compare the Market around childcare centres are doing that for financial gain. That is a commercial model. So that would be welcomed, I would suggest.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Well, just looking at the terms of reference for this committee, I think there are a couple of items in the terms of reference that would need that picture before some recommendations could drop out of, you know, all of the providers and witnesses we have had. All right. Thank you.

The other question I have got is just over the last day and all day today we will have heard from six advocacy or education bodies, all of them doing an absolutely sensational job and all of them having profoundly stronger understandings of the abuse dynamic and of the culture that is needed and that it is culture, culture, culture and no manner of perhaps videos and so on can help that. Do you believe, for starters, without looking at that big picture, that there should be a standardised, perhaps a minimum list of topics that should be provided to schools and ELCs, early learning centres, on this topic? Because I am guessing that they are all probably doing a great job, but some of them are missing some topics and others are doing other topics. Should it be described, what is the content of adequate education on sexual assault and violence against children?

Alison GEALE: Yes –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Sorry to take so long to ask my question.

Alison GEALE: I understand what you are saying because the Venn diagram crosses over significantly, but with that comes huge gaps. It is almost like picking a pay TV model. You can have sport this, that and that, but I really want one over there. It does feel a bit like that. A broader open at the risk of covering more than less is actually better. You have limited understanding. The key thing here too is the societal reform that needs to happen. For any government, it is that systemic reform we can work on, but those individuals around the child are members of a society who bring themselves to work with their views. The societal norms are the very thing that is difficult to change, because it is still a ghastly crime that we are charging these folk to be taking the lead on preventing when they are still working through their own shame, stigma, et cetera. The societal norm changing alongside the systemic is important. But I am for broader standardised inclusion. Because that Venn diagram, even within organisations – we call ourselves serial collaborators. It is difficult because NGOs are all going for the same funding. You know, it is designed so that we compete in a sense. But everyone wants to be attached to the solution. I think government probably holds the key to that. And setting the standard makes it easier for people to understand and conform. It just makes it easier.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I am imagining what this diagram would look like with all five of those categories in them.

Alison GEALE: Probably convoluted at first glance.

Jacinta ERMACORA: The risk for this committee, I imagine, is that we do not add another list of things that have to be complied with.

Alison GEALE: Of course.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So would you recommend that this committee recommends simplification as well as streamlining and greater efficiency? I hate to use the word ‘efficiency’ because that is very market language, but it looks to me like there is enormous inefficiency in the way the system is structured, that convoluted state of the system at the moment.

Alison GEALE: Yes, I do. And I understand that you do not mean simplification in a watered-down sense. I appreciate that. But I think that there is a lot of room for – if you look at any risk model, the minute there is an exception to the rule, you have a problem. When you have a quantum, then you have a quantum of exception.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And complexity is a weakness.

Alison GEALE: So if the baseline is black and white, you will see a lift in rigour regardless. As long as the baseline is mandatory and simple – and so they are shifts in reporting – they lead to a shift in culture too, even if the motivation is not necessarily to protect the child. And I am not suggesting that; I am suggesting that it is to avoid any kind of repercussion. Well, the child benefits anyway. So shifting that culture – and there is often pushback around that.

Jacinta ERMACORA: But it is the only sector that I have been in that the first 10 minutes of your conversations at a party about what you do are justifying that sexual assault actually happens in everybody’s own communities, whereas when I was in the water sector, no-one asked me, ‘Do we really need water? Do we really need to capture it?’ That was assumed. So there is a lot of work to do.

I will just finish my last question, which goes to your very succinct paragraph in your submission, on the data, which aligns with much of the incidents data of other submitters and witnesses to this inquiry. It is prevalent; it is everywhere. These are awful things to say, and we are all guilty, me included, of just keeping it nice, because it is easy to keep it nice, the discussion about this. What do you suggest we do around that social reform that you were mentioning?

Alison GEALE: I have experienced exactly that myself. I have been here at Bravehearts for almost eight years, but I came from a completely different sector. I pretty much focused all my conversation – and I am a mother – to me before, and it is really interesting how I would not have had that discussion. What was that about? I will get probably four disclosures a month. So it has been a real over-eight-years going ‘My goodness; this is a problem.’ We teach kids about personal hygiene, road safety. Parents instinctively know ‘This is how

you teach your child to cross the road.’ But this topic is still steeped in shame and secrecy and silence. So what I do is I do not shy away from the term ‘child sexual abuse’. That interesting thing about ‘What do you do for a living?’ – I used to call it the step response. I could say, ‘I work in child protection’, ‘I work for Bravehearts.’ Till you got to what it is – and now it is ‘I work for an organisation that is dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse.’

Jacinta ERMACORA: Whenever we get a new government, we get a new flurry of TV advertisements against violence against women. What more should we do as a broader education piece in that space?

Alison GEALE: Yes. We know that the federal government’s office for child safety did ‘One Talk at a Time’. There was a very, very significant research piece that was done interviewing NGOs, those in the sector, outside parents. I think the quantum was about maybe 3000 people. What came out of that was ‘We just don’t want it shoved in our face.’ So when the ad came out, it was very easy – you know, ‘You can talk to me about it.’ Those in the sector were like, ‘Is that it?’ And you are like, ‘Well, you’re in the middle of the hurricane, remember. It’s different outside of that. It’s this process.’ And up until that point we could not do advertising that had the words ‘child sexual abuse’ in it. You still cannot on Meta. So you have these guidelines that –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yet they host it –

Alison GEALE: Correct.

Jacinta ERMACORA: That is ironic.

The CHAIR: Your time has expired, Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I apologise.

The CHAIR: That is okay. We are going to quickly have just one question each from me, Mr Galea and Ms Bath for you, Ms Geale, to wrap up our session. I just wanted to quickly touch on your submission around fostering interagency collaboration. I think what was evident and very clear following the unravelling of this horrific sexual abuse that was happening in an early childcare centre was the incompetence of government departments. The Department of Education was not talking to the Commission for Children and Young People and other oversight bodies. What do you recommend to ensure that there is proper cross-sector collaboration moving forward, mainly around prevention?

Alison GEALE: There are different levels of course, but I strongly advocate for a national register, a national negative notice and a national working with children check that does not invite collaboration, it just mandates it and is a part of every strategy when it comes to putting people through the front door and in charge of our children; that would be a good start. You would then have different state-based collaborations. You might have children that are known to child safety in day care centres, intersections with domestic and family violence where we can – for example, we are headquartered on the Gold Coast, so we are mere moments from New South Wales; if you are in Albury–Wodonga you also are subject to different rules and regulations. So where we can put a national framework in place enacted by states, I feel that is the long-term answer, as much – look, some centres do interagency collaboration at a state level very well and others do not, but the rigour of that collaboration is determined by either the director or the owner of the business. Where we can have a national approach to protecting children, we should, and I cannot see why we do not. Those with the lowest standard, those states, need to rise.

The CHAIR: Fair point. Thank you. I will hand it over to our Deputy Chair Mr Galea for his question. Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. I am going to actually try and bring a couple of things together, because I was going to ask about what we talked about earlier, Ms Geale, about inspections being so important. You may be aware that from our rapid review in Victoria we have now got the new independent regulator VECRA set up, which has been specifically resourced and tasked to dramatically increase the amount of unannounced inspections. I was going to ask you if you were in favour or supportive of that, but I think to touch on the point you have just made, the federal government walked away from funding towards regulation of this space in 2018, I believe: do you think more of this needs to be done from the federal level?

Alison GEALE: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Great.

Alison GEALE: I do.

Michael GALEA: A much quicker answer to my very long question, but that is perfect – great to know, thank you.

Alison GEALE: I can give you an example if you like, Deputy Chair. If you put the United Kingdom and Australia side by side now, there are different problems there with regard to human trafficking et cetera, but in the absence of the approach from, say, a county perspective because we have this federated model, it is not about taking control away from the states, it is just about how, where there can be national enforcement, you get proliferation, you get uptake, and that makes it easier for the states.

Michael GALEA: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks very much, Ms Geale. We are mere mortals here. We are a mixed-party, upper house inquiry – very important – and we are going to make recommendations to the state government, so if I could drill down to this: if Braveheart had one recommendation to state government, what is your top priority that this this committee should call on the state government to?

Alison GEALE: I am going to go with enforcement. I am going to go with the situation we have right now, which would be an overhaul of the assessment criteria to open a centre, manage a centre, continuous improvement, rigour on benchmarking and rigour on doing everything they can to the working with children check. Victoria is, I have said, moving faster than most, and I know that is the shared position. I would go with rigour on the scorecard at the moment, because other than that, it is a bigger, holistic, lot-of-moving-parts framework, but you could improve centres materially by their compliance rigour.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Geale. That brings our session to a close. I appreciate your contribution to our committee inquiry and hearing this morning. You will receive a copy of the transcript to review in about a week's time before it is published on the website. I just want to note that there are some questions and documents on notice – if you would not mind getting onto that when you are free.

We will now take a quick break to reset for the next witness at 10:20. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.