

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

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WITNESS

Martel Menz, Manager, Strategic Policy, the Front Project.

The CHAIR: Good morning 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 the committee's website.

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

Martel MENZ: Yes. Martel Menz, and I am appearing on behalf of the Front Project.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are now going to 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 Region.

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

The CHAIR: We also have Melina Bath, who is here, and Ms Ermacora, who is online. I would now like to invite you to make an opening statement if you wish. If you could, please keep it to a maximum of 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

Martel MENZ: Great. Thank you. Chair and members, thank you so much for the invitation and the opportunity to appear today. The Front Project: we are a national independent organisation working to ensure every child in Australia experiences safe, high-quality early learning and care. At the heart of our work is a really simple proposition for children to thrive in stable, trusting relationships with capable adults. Those relationships are the foundation of safety, learning and development. Recent failures in the sector have caused real harm, and we acknowledge the families who have been impacted. From our perspective, these failures reflect systemic weaknesses that allow risk to persist and, in some cases, to have gone undetected. Children are the safest and outcomes are strongest when they experience stable, trusting relationships with educators. However, high turnover, casualisation, reliance on agency staff and prolonged use of staffing waivers can weaken supervision. It can erode professional culture and reduce the likelihood that risks are identified early.

During the hearings here in Victoria and indeed nationally, a consistent theme has emerged: workforce instability undermines safety. Our research shows that services rated 'exceeding the National Quality Standard' invest intentionally in their people. They provide fair pay, adequate planning time, access to professional development, mentoring and coaching and have strong centre leadership. We would say these things are not luxuries; they are very much the foundations of quality and safety. However, current national policy settings too often push the system in the opposite direction – a market-driven model that rewards occupancy and efficiency, encouraging more transactional practices that can prioritise profit over time, stability and relationships. So to give you a sense of what this instability looks like, first of all at a national level, we know through publicly available data, the national workforce census, that educators are only spending on average three years and four months at their centre before they move on; 25.5 per cent of qualified educators in child care are employed on a casual basis, and that is compared to about 19 per cent across the broader labour market; and 9.6 per cent, almost 10 per cent, of childcare centres are operating under a staffing waiver.

In Victoria it is important to acknowledge the scale and ambition of the investments that have already been made in the early childhood workforce, particularly for preschool programs. These are the most substantial of any jurisdiction, and they have been supported by quite a comprehensive workforce strategy. And we can see that this investment has made a difference. Looking at those same data points for Victoria now, Victoria has the lowest level of staffing waivers, at 0.8 per cent; 14.8 per cent of staff in centre-based care are employed on a casual basis; and Victorian educators have slightly higher tenure and years of experience in this sector compared to national averages. We would say it is really important that the Victorian government continues its significant investment in the early childhood workforce to sustain the state's strong performance on quality, where we do indeed have 96 per cent of services here meeting or exceeding the national quality standards and the lowest proportion of services rated 'working towards' in the country. When the workforce is supported, children are the ones who benefit. They thrive when they are cared for by adults who know them well, who work in stable teams and who are supported by strong leadership. These conditions, as I said earlier, do not happen by chance; they are shaped by the way the system is funded, how it is regulated and how it is stewarded. And no single state can solve this alone. Any meaningful response must be nationally coordinated and consistent.

We welcome the efforts of education ministers collectively to respond to these issues, including, just as of last week, agreeing to remove 'across the service' from the law in terms of how staff-child ratios can be applied and to move to a more clear definition of what we mean by 'adequate supervision'. But roles and responsibilities remain divided. Funding for child care sits primarily with the Commonwealth through the childcare subsidy, while the states and territories take primary responsibility for preschool funding, including preschool programs delivered within childcare centres. Regulation and quality assurance are shared across federal and state and territory authorities. Workforce levers are fragmented, and as a result we lack a clear national steward to align funding, workforce policy and quality reform toward the same goal, so we end up with a situation where there is really no overarching coordination or accountability.

If we want safer services, stronger educator capability and better outcomes ultimately for our young children, we say that we must design this system intentionally. We think that means addressing five key areas: one, clarifying national accountability, getting really clear about who is responsible for what; two, reforming the national funding model so it better meets the needs of all children and families, including a dedicated inclusion fund and sustainable funding and support for ACCOs; three, supporting the workforce with the pay and conditions they need to stay and thrive in their centres; four, using the rich data sets that we already hold to identify persistently underperforming services, understand where they are struggling and target them with an intensive quality uplift support; and finally, where improvement does not occur despite that support, we must also strengthen governance and leadership capability across the system and be very clear that services which are unable or indeed unwilling to lift their quality cannot remain in operation indefinitely without consequence.

Child safety cannot rely on goodwill or luck. It depends on system design that puts children's wellbeing at the centre everywhere, every day. Victoria has a really important opportunity to lead on this, but national alignment will be essential. Thank you. I welcome any questions you have.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Ms Menz. I will start with questions. We know that the responsibilities for the early childhood and care sector are shared between federal and state and territory governments, and in your submission you talk about how this creates complexity and overlapping accountabilities. Do you also see these as risk factors for ensuring children's safety in early childhood, the overlapping accountabilities between state and federal?

Martel MENZ: I think it is a really important question to ask. I think wherever there is lack of clarity you can build confusion within the sector, and I think we have probably heard that and how that can trickle down particularly to teachers, educators and service leaders in centres, where there may be confusion about what the requirements are as per the national law and regulations. Whilst those things are spelt out, they can sometimes be open to interpretation, or an authorised officer may come in and suggest one interpretation of a rule or regulation and another may come in with a different perspective. And it is hard. This is a human-based sector, and so on some issues things are very black and white and there should not be any lack of clarity or misunderstanding about how the rules and regulations apply. In other instances things can be a little bit more subjective. For example, having been a former early childhood teacher myself, if we think about how different teachers implement the curriculum framework, of course it is really important that can be open to interpretation so that it is contextualised. So we need to look at, where there is overlap or lack of clarity, how we can achieve

greater alignment and greater consistency so at the end of the day teachers and educators delivering the care and early learning are under no illusion about what they are required to do.

The CHAIR: Speaking of alignment, you also spoke about needing more coherence and quality in the context of stewardship. There is stewardship in Victoria when it comes to kindergarten programs, and yet when it comes to zero- to three-year-olds that stewardship is pretty much absent. How do we close the loop to ensure that there is alignment, coherence and consistency, given that zero- to three-year-olds were the ones who were mostly on the receiving end of some of the horrific sexual abuse that we saw last year?

Martel MENZ: I think you have nailed a really important gap and problem that we have under the current system with that lack of national alignment and consistency, particularly for the youngest children, as you said – the children from birth to three years of age. What I would point the committee to are the recommendations indeed from the Productivity Commission’s very comprehensive inquiry into early learning and care quite recently, and it –

The CHAIR: Was that the one where they recommended a national commission?

Martel MENZ: Correct. Well, they did not actually go as far as to recommend a national commission per se, but they did very much recommend stronger national stewardship. Now, that can come in many forms. Indeed, as you said, it could be in the form of a commission, and that is something that we as the Front Project endorse. We think that could have real value and utility in stewarding the whole sector, bringing everyone onto the same page and having a national authority or body in the form of a commission who has that oversight and could hold everyone to account.

The CHAIR: What is the role of ACECQA? All we are doing now is creating extra bodies, but how does that ensure safety and oversight? How do they differ? Should ACECQA have an added responsibility of being a national commissioner, or do you think that is just too much?

Martel MENZ: That would be one path, and we would say there are many paths to good. We are not prescriptive about the architecture of stewardship. There are many ways you could do it. One option would be to establish an early childhood commission and to bring ACECQA into that, or it could still be independently sitting aside. But ultimately we need to make sure that whatever bodies exist are all coordinated, they are all talking to each other, they are all sharing data and they are all sharing best practice so that we do have that overarching oversight and accountability across national, state and territory governments and authorities.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Your report cited children in ‘exceeding’ services having better developmental outcomes than those in ‘meeting’ or ‘working towards’ services. What strategies would you recommend to ensure that there is sustained quality uplift across all services and that it is not just compliance checks?

Martel MENZ: I think that is a really important distinction. Of course we must have compliance. We must ensure that every centre is meeting all the rules and regulations as per the national law. But compliance on its own is not enough, so we do need to make that investment in high quality. ‘Exceeding’ services, as you have noted and as we put into our submission, do achieve the best outcomes for children. There are no two ways about it.

The CHAIR: Can I ask a question to add on to that, because I am just looking at the time. One of your five key areas you identified, the fifth one, was ‘strengthening governance of leaders’. How does that work when there is a profit lens on centre directors when it comes to occupancy and enrolment? How does that all fit in?

Martel MENZ: It undermines quality. I think that is the simplest way I can state it. When profit is driving what happens in practice, it puts safety and quality at real risk. I will be very clear: I do not have the view that all for-profit centres are bad, are terrible, and all community-based, not-for-profit centres are of excellent quality. That would be simplifying the issue too much, and I do not want to do that here today. We have very excellent for-profit providers who do an amazing job every day, and we have some community providers that do need that quality uplift. But again there has got to be that effort across the whole system so that we can look at the examples of those ‘exceeding’ centres, really investigate what are they doing, what are the factors of their success and the impact they are having on children and their outcomes and what can we learn from those centres and implement that, particularly in the ‘working towards’ centres. I would suggest the ‘working

towards' centres that are persistently underperforming have been rated 'working towards' for two or sometimes even three cycles of assessment.

The CHAIR: Which is not good enough. Thank you very much, Ms Menz. I will pass to our Deputy Chair.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Menz. Just to touch on that very quickly at the start, clearly you would see the national quality standards as a reliable metric for educational outcomes. Is it a valuable metric for child safety as well?

Martel MENZ: I think they are two separate but connected things. I think the safety side of things you will find more in the everyday rules and regulations that services and staff are required to comply with, and then the national quality standards certainly do speak to the safety issues as well but then take it further more in terms of the outcomes for children.

Michael GALEA: There is connection but not the whole picture.

Martel MENZ: Correct.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. You mentioned in your opening remarks another correlation between outcomes and investment in the childcare workforce and then went on to say that Victoria is by far leading the nation on that metric. Can you give us an example or comparison of where we sit in relation to other states? Are we slightly ahead? Is it leaps and bounds? What does the picture look like?

Martel MENZ: Look, I have not done the mapping as of, you know, really recently, but in terms of the pay and conditions, Victoria would be slightly ahead of other jurisdictions. But then we also need to I guess put it in the picture of education more broadly. If we think about one of the historical issues we have had for early childhood teachers and educators, there has been an undervaluing of their work, particularly comparing them to primary and secondary teachers. So there is still this persistent gap in how early childhood teachers and educators are paid compared to their counterparts in the school system.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Is it also a reflection of investment in the childcare workforce and actually training the workforce itself and providing those incentives for people to take up this as a vocation?

Martel MENZ: Yes, and I think if we look nationally, one of the things that I think all stakeholders in the sector have really welcomed has been that worker retention payment – the initiative of the federal government to acknowledge there has been undervaluing of the workforce. So pay has lifted. The Fair Work Commission has investigated this from a gender perspective as well, and the award wages will also lift as a result. They are really important measures, but pay is only one of many factors that facilitate and support teachers and educators to do their very best work and to stay and to thrive in the sector.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Your submission also touches on the federal government in previous terms walking away from funding for regulatory provision in 2018. Would the federal government re-entering this space on an ongoing, sustainable basis be something that you would support?

Martel MENZ: Yes, certainly. I think we would very much, and we have put that in our submission. We would call on the reinstatement of sufficient funding for all state and territory regulators so that they can do the really important work they need to do and so they are not stretched thin. That is when issues can arise.

Michael GALEA: Yes, thank you. Just also touching on your previous discussion, and obviously it is not as simple as a picture of not-for-profit good, private bad or anything like that. There is a wide range in each, but as your submission shows, there is a very large disparity as a whole between the two. We have had some stakeholders representing industry say that they should be receiving more funding to give them that support to close that gap. You may be aware of the Productivity Commission report, with Professor Brennan saying we should actually be investing in what works, what is proven to work, and that is by actually specifically targeting investment towards the non-profit sector to grow that again. Do you have a view on that? Should it remain an agnostic model, or should we be favouring one or the other?

Martel MENZ: I think we need to strive towards a more balanced market. At the moment we do have an overwhelming number of providers who are for profit, and they are not all performing at the standard that we would say they should be performing at. I think it is difficult for many community-based providers, particularly

those that rely, for example, on parent committees of management – you know, the goodwill of local community mums and dads essentially volunteering hours and hours of their time every week to deliver complicated services with quite reasonable budgets that they need to manage. It is not an easy thing to run an early childhood service, whether that is a childcare centre or a kindergarten. So I think anything we can do to invest in the sector in that way to ensure we have a diverse range of providers – the ultimate goal being quality and outcomes for children. I am less interested in the provider type. I think a balanced mix is best, and I think there are definitely investments governments can make more towards those sorts of goals.

Michael GALEA: Do you think there should be stricter requirements around all providers being transparent about, for example, their NQS results, other sorts of key metrics that they have that they perhaps should be reporting on to parents? Do you think that should be more prominently displayed or available on, for example, their websites or on other forms of communication?

Martel MENZ: Yes, indeed. I think the more information parents and families have available to them can only be a good thing. Many of those requirements have been there since around 2008, 2009, when the national quality framework was introduced. Centres do have to display their quality rating, their overall rating, and communicate that to families. Whether that is happening in every centre, every day, in practice is probably another matter, and that is where it is very important that we have regulators where that is one of many things they look for on their visits. I think what is really interesting, if I reflect on a conversation I had recently with a centre director – she runs a little for-profit childcare centre. She said it is fascinating for her to observe – in the last couple of months I think she had three prospective families visit her centre. In the past, she said, families were looking for the bright, shiny, clean environment – not to dismiss parents looking for those things; an attractive, warm, inviting, clean environment is very important. She said what families are now asking her up-front is, ‘Tell us about your policies in terms of child safeguarding and child safety.’ And I thought that was such a heartwarming thing to hear, that despite what has emerged and the absolutely horrific allegations and cases of child abuse, perhaps it is prompting parents to look for that information and to actively seek that transparency from the centres where they are looking to enrol or where they already have children enrolled.

Michael GALEA: And in turn, one would hope to drive that cultural change.

Martel MENZ: Correct. Yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much. Thanks, Chair.

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

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, Ms Menz, for being before the committee this morning and for your work in the advocacy that the Front Project does. How long have you been with them for, working in that role?

Martel MENZ: I have been with the Front Project for, it would be, two and a half years.

Georgie CROZIER: And before that?

Martel MENZ: I was on a period of leave, supporting my children at the time.

Georgie CROZIER: Have you worked in government before?

Martel MENZ: Yes, I have.

Georgie CROZIER: As a ministerial adviser.

Martel MENZ: Yes, I have.

Georgie CROZIER: So when you answered a question with, ‘I haven’t done the mapping recently of where Victoria sits,’ was that the mapping you did when you were a ministerial adviser?

Martel MENZ: Sorry, what sort of mapping are you referring to?

Georgie CROZIER: It was a question, I think, from Mr Galea around mapping, and you said, 'I haven't done the mapping recently of where Victoria sits.' You were talking up where Victoria sits, and I am wondering if you did that mapping when you were a ministerial adviser and which minister you were advising.

Martel MENZ: Part of a role of an adviser, as you would be aware, is to be looking across the landscape of the portfolio that you are working in and compiling evidence, data, information. So I would have done a whole range of mapping in that role.

Georgie CROZIER: So which minister were you advising?

Martel MENZ: I was advising Minister Stitt.

Georgie CROZIER: Right. In her role as?

Martel MENZ: Early childhood minister.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you. I am just trying to work out, in terms of that mapping of where Victoria sits, when you said the private sector again were not all performing at the standard they should be at – given where we are at, given where there are system failures and what this committee is trying to do, I am interested in your views on that. You said that not every facility is detrimental to the outcomes of children. We have had this situation in Victoria where, on the working with children check, the Ombudsman made a recommendation to government back in 2022, when you were advising Minister Stitt. Were you aware of that?

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, it is in relation to the quality and standards. I will rephrase it.

Michael GALEA: On a point of order, Chair, even if the witness were in a position to answer it, which Ms Crozier knows that she is not, Ms Crozier should also know that the working with children check was not within that portfolio at that time.

Georgie CROZIER: If I may, Chair, it is an important issue given what we are discussing around quality, and I have been asking other witnesses these same questions about the Ombudsman making a recommendation in October 2022. I have asked the question to other witnesses: 'Were you aware of that recommendation?' So I will rephrase it, and ask Ms Menz that, if you are happy for me to.

Jacinta ERMACORA: On the point of order, Chair, the Chair needs to rule on Mr Galea's point of order before we go on.

The CHAIR: Okay. I will not uphold your point of order, Mr Galea. Ms Crozier, you will need to rephrase your question to Ms Menz and ensure that it is in line with the terms of reference, so if you could do that.

Georgie CROZIER: I am happy to rephrase it. Thank you. I have been asking. The Ombudsman made a recommendation in October 2022 around strengthening the working with children check. Were you aware of that recommendation?

Martel MENZ: That was not within the portfolio within which I was advising at the time.

Georgie CROZIER: The working with children check impacts early childhood educators, so I am surprised you say that. Nevertheless, you are saying that no, you were not aware of that.

Michael GALEA: Chair, a point of order.

The CHAIR: Yes, Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: The witness has answered the question. I would appreciate if Ms Crozier did not put words in the witness's mouth. I would also repeat my point of order that it is inappropriate to be asking any ministerial adviser on advice given to a minister as part of their work.

The CHAIR: I will uphold that point of order. Ms Crozier, I will ask you to move on.

Georgie CROZIER: I am happy to move on. I will just make the point, Chair, if I may, that this is an important inquiry, and there were failings within government around not taking up that recommendation. That is a fact. That has been well established. I think it is important to understand exactly what has gone on. We have got witnesses here who have been working in government around the time, so I think it is important to get that on the record.

The CHAIR: Ms Crozier, no-one disagrees with you on the significance of this inquiry; however, Ms Menz is here representing the Front Project, and her submission is on behalf of the Front Project. She is a witness here on behalf of the Front Project. So I am going to uphold Mr Galea's point of order and request that you move on.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for that guidance. If I may, Ms Menz, in terms of you saying there needs to be greater education attraction and retention, what do you see as how that can be attained, how that can happen?

Martel MENZ: I think there are two measures by which you do that: one is industrial and one is workplace culture and what providers themselves can do to attract and retain staff.

Georgie CROZIER: Industrial action, as in your previous role as a union leader?

Martel MENZ: No, sorry. You have put words in my mouth again. I did not actually say industrial action.

Georgie CROZIER: Industrial. What did you say?

Martel MENZ: Industrial measures, I think.

Georgie CROZIER: Industrial measures.

Martel MENZ: Yes –

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you.

Martel MENZ: which, as you would be aware, are those conditions you have in your workplace. That is all I mean by that. I think what we have here in Victoria is an example of the difference between the conditions that preschool or kindergarten teachers have compared to their counterparts who might be working in those baby and toddler rooms. I think that is a good example of where we do have this split of responsibilities between who looks after and stewards the preschool sector and where there is that lacking stewardship of the nought-to-threes, which is a national responsibility.

Georgie CROZIER: Is that across all early education organisations that you are referring to, do you think?

Martel MENZ: That split in roles and responsibilities absolutely occurs across the country.

Georgie CROZIER: What about Victoria?

Martel MENZ: In Victoria, yes.

Georgie CROZIER: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for your submission and for appearing today. In your submission you have identified that further reforms are needed to realign market incentives with children's safety and wellbeing. That is with particular reference to some of the concerns around the market-based approach for some centres, and I take on board your comments earlier that they are not inherently good or bad but there may be an issue with the alignment of incentives. Can you explain what sort of reforms are needed to realign those incentives?

Martel MENZ: Sure. I think the starting point is, again, the issue of national stewardship and ensuring that providers who seek to enter the industry or indeed expand their portfolio of services are in it for the right reasons and that children are at the heart of every decision they make. I think it is really pleasing in fact to see that education ministers – that was one of the suite of reforms introduced last year, where that paramount

interest of the child must now be at the heart of governance, of leadership and of decision making. I think that is a very important step forward. But that will take some time, so I think it also requires continual monitoring of providers and them to be doing what they have signed up to do and putting children at the centre. That can be done in many ways. That can occur at the earliest stages of approving a licence to operate. It then of course will occur during visits, either announced or unannounced. It occurs through the national quality standards assessment and ratings process. So there are these various checkpoints where I would suggest that regulators already have and could strengthen their monitoring of the overall system but also of each individual provider and service.

Sarah MANSFIELD: We have heard from a number of witnesses that pretty much anyone can open up an early learning centre or that there are very few restrictions on opening up a new ECEC. Do you think if an operator has a track record where they have ownership of or a connection with other centres that have had safety concerns or other serious compliance breaches they should be allowed to open new centres?

Martel MENZ: I think it is a really important question, and I think what I would point out is that departments have available to them rich datasets of information. But what is sometimes difficult is when you have got a provider that is not just in one state or in one location but is operating crossjurisdictionally; sometimes that data sharing and access to information can be a potential barrier to having that broader oversight of those larger providers. But I think it is a really important question. A provider's quality track record, if you like – how they are complying day to day and also their overarching national quality rating – should absolutely be taken into account if they are seeking to expand their operation. I think that would be very important.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You have also identified that there is often a clustering of ECECs in predominantly metropolitan areas where families can afford to pay the fees and there are potentially greater profits to be made in those areas. We have heard from other witnesses about the need for some more strategic planning of ECEC locations to better match population needs, rather than what is I guess a bit of a free-for-all open market sort of system. What are your views on that?

Martel MENZ: Yes, I would agree with that position as well. That is where the national stewardship – I keep talking about it, but I think that really does underpin so much of this conversation. At the moment we do not have any authority, any body or any regulator looking at supply and demand across the state or indeed across the country. So we do end up with each end of the spectrum: we have areas of massive growth and oversupply – centres popping up on every corner – and then we also have the opposite issue of very thin markets, childcare deserts if you will. So we need that more balanced approach to where centres are established if there is a need in the community. And we know of course in Victoria there are areas of really high growth – those growth corridors in the outer suburban areas. We know of course there are issues in regional Victoria, where it is very difficult to access a place. So again it is this issue that no-one nationally has taken responsibility for that. That sort of stewardship has occurred for preschool programs, and I know that Victoria has quite a comprehensive plan for the building and growth of centres, but we have not seen similar for childcare centres.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Given the focus of this inquiry is on child safety, are there safety risks associated with that issue of oversupply and undersupply?

Martel MENZ: I think it can make the delivery of services a little bit more challenging, particularly where we have workforce shortages. As well as stewardship being a really important underpinning factor, workforce is the other critical factor. If we do not plan for the people who work with these young children, it is just a free-for-all and we are not doing it in a really smart, strategic way. Again, we have not had that workforce planning across the federal level, so where there are centres popping up, or there is a shortage of centres, that is where we see staff being pulled and more attracted to work in different centres where they might get paid more and have better conditions, for example. Then they are leaving centres and leaving a gap in worker capability and that overall coherence and not making sure that the team is humming along really nicely together. So it is all connected.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thanks very much. That is my time.

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

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for being here today, Ms Menz. I am interested – you just made a comment there that the departments have rich datasets of information. You just made that comment?

Martel MENZ: Yes.

Melina BATH: Could you expand on that? Often, particularly if you are in opposition, you sit outside that understanding. Could you provide context around what that looks like and how that could help with understanding more about those datasets, potentially what the richness of them is but also what the gaps in them are and how they could assist our inquiry?

Martel MENZ: Certainly. If I think about the information we have about centre quality, that is information that is held by ACECQA, the national quality authority, and that is based on of course the assessment they undertake of every single centre in the country. There are over 70-odd data points within that assessment, because that assessment is so comprehensive. When an authorised officer goes to visit a centre, they are looking at the entire operation: issues of workforce, issues of the physical environment and issues of curriculum, of inclusion and of cultural safety. All of that very rich information is collected and held by ACECQA and departments, and a lot of it is also publicly available, might I say. So a lot of this information is actually quite transparent and quite available. We use that sort of information at the Front Project quite a lot. There are quarterly snapshots released by ACECQA. The most recent one was just released a few weeks ago, and I would say that is such a rich source of information that any of us can have a look at but also, to your point, Ms Bath, that departments can look at in terms of their roles and responsibilities and what part they can play in identifying where centres are persistently underperforming. I think a point I really want to emphasise is that we know who those services are. We know what they are struggling with, right down to the fine-grain detail of what elements of each standard they are finding difficult to meet. I think with that information at hand, it does enable the Department of Education and regulators. Providers themselves are also a really critical part of the system, and they should be using that information to evaluate and review what is happening at their individual service and where they can indeed improve. Centres are doing that. I do not want to sit here and make it sound like people are not already doing these things. In the vast majority of cases, they are. That is why we see that 96 per cent of centres in Victoria are meeting or exceeding the standards.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I will go to the point you raised, and I have raised this before. Over the weekend I spoke with a lady who has been heading up a not-for-profit profit centre in Gippsland for 25 years. She has a wealth of experience and is very trusted, and she said that she was putting through – now, I forget the exact intricacies of it – an update on the Child Safe Standards or some reporting back in. She provided it to one authorised officer, one part to one person: ‘Give me some feedback.’ They said it was not up to speed: ‘You need to go back and have a look at it and rejig it.’ She provided the exact same document to another and they said, ‘That’s excellent, it’s all fit for purpose.’ So I wonder whether or not the Front Project has had any experience with irregularities in assessment and understanding that it is not at the centre level – the same document – but it is at the regulator level. I wonder if you have had any experience with that.

Martel MENZ: It is not something that people talk about with us. I would suggest that when it is a human-based system, there will be some level of subjectivity, depending on the context of the issue. Now, not knowing the particulars –

Melina BATH: No, that is right; it is anecdotal evidence.

Martel MENZ: Yes, that is right. So without knowing the exact circumstances, some matters are very black and white and there is simply no room for interpretation or misalignment of any advice. Now, if it was that type of example where it should be a very black-and-white matter but unfortunately there have been two sets of advice, I think that is something that should be addressed, because we would say there should be alignment and consistency and clarity for everyone in the system.

Melina BATH: Again – this is a real situation, but I am keeping it de-identified – if the centre then comes back and says, ‘Listen, I’ve had trouble; one says yes, one says no’, in Front Project’s experience, does the regulator sometimes target? I am sure this centre has had an outstanding performance over decades, but how do you balance that? Have you seen any evidence of the regulator targeting ECECs?

Martel MENZ: No, I have not.

Melina BATH: That is fine. The other one I want to look at is some of your commentary around the effectiveness of the regulatory system being undermined by long gaps between assessments and ratings, which

can average around 3.5 years, so quite a time. What steps do you recommend to be more proactive and timely in a regulatory monitoring sense, noting that there is still a limited workforce within the regulator?

Martel MENZ: I think there are two things that need to occur. I will come to that final point you have just made, which is about limited resourcing for the regulator; that makes efforts to improve safety and quality just that much more challenging, because if authorised officers cannot get around to all services in a timely way and be not just reactive and responding to issues but also on the front foot and as proactive as possible, staying very well connected with all services and all staff and all centre directors and managers, it does make it difficult to make progress on quality and safety. So I think well-resourced regulators is one step that needs to happen. I would think also more frequent assessment, particularly of those centres that as we know and as we can tell through the data are persistently underperforming, that require more comprehensive, more regular checking-in and support in the first instance to lift their quality. I think about how that occurs with Victorian preschools; there is a quality uplift program that has been in place for a number of years and has worked really effectively, and it targets those ‘working towards’ centres. The centres are given an opportunity to engage with the regulator about where they need to improve – open, honest reflection – and then a period of time to improve what they do. What I have been really pleased to see, again, just very recently at the federal level, is that there are about 70 centres that are on a watchlist, if you like, federally, that have been told ‘It’s time to now improve your quality.’

Melina BATH: In Victoria?

Martel MENZ: Seventy nationally.

Melina BATH: Right. So you would not have the breakdown.

Martel MENZ: I do not, no.

Melina BATH: That is fine. Thank you very much. My time is up.

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

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. Thank you very much for appearing today. I just want to acknowledge your experience; it is a great perspective. You mentioned that no regulator monitors demand and supply across the nation. We have got areas of undersupply and oversupply, which is not news certainly in Victoria. I know the state government has done some work in that space. You also mentioned that where there is a lack of clarity you build confusion, which I thought was a great description of the whole sector and the regulators, peak bodies, advocacy groups and service providers. Rather than increasing regulation, would you agree that improving regulation is what we need to do, perhaps even simplifying and improving?

Martel MENZ: Yes, I think anything we can do to enhance quality and safety and clarity for every single educator, centre director and manager and through to every level of governance can only be a good thing. I think I would just add a note of caution that sometimes in simplifying regulation or removing red tape, as we sometimes talk about, you want to be very cautious, in doing that, that you do not water down quality and standards. So, again, it needs to be a balanced approach. I think if we can have consistency and alignment and a good, deep understanding across the entire sector so everyone is really clear about their requirements and their obligations, that is a really important thing. And, I mean, there is always room for improvement. I think it is wonderful that this committee inquiry is afoot, because it is a real opportunity, isn’t it, to really dig deep into the system and identify where there have been gaps and issues and collectively the entire sector gets a chance to look at those and to address them, again with that lens of overarching stewardship.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So, more is not necessarily simpler, nor is it necessarily better quality, is it? In terms of the confusion for regulatory compliance for, say, service providers, ensuring that the most important things are focused on and that duplication is removed et cetera is an appropriate way forward.

Martel MENZ: Yes, I think that is right. I think we do need to look at where there may be duplication of processes – that should be addressed – and where there is lack of clarity or confusion. I think the most important thing we can do, in implementing any changes, is to ensure that the sector continues to be consulted, particularly those on the ground – centre providers, staff – so that everyone who is working with children and

families and communities day in, day out, who know the system so well, can have that opportunity to discuss what those changes need to be, what they should be and how they might potentially work in services.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So perhaps a ground-up model. You talked about the training and support for the sector, for professionals in the sector. Would you support the Commonwealth government investing more in early childhood education? I probably specifically mean the degree in early childhood, given that universities are a federal space. We all know about particular shortages in regional Victoria for professionals. Would you support our committee recommending that the Commonwealth invest more in early childhood education?

Martel MENZ: Yes. I think to the issue and your question of how people obtain their qualifications, it is indeed really important to provide as much support as possible to people who have that passion and interest to become an early childhood teacher, to harness that and to provide pathways into qualifications to successfully graduate and then come and work in the sector, because we do have those shortages. I would also say that some really important measures have already been made at the Commonwealth level. I point out the paid practicum support for teachers, which is not just limited to schoolteachers but does encompass early childhood teachers; that has been a really important initiative. There has also been some support in place for a little while now for early childhood teaching graduates to find a mentor and have a mentoring relationship and engage in professional development. So those sorts of measures are very important. Can you do more? I would say yes; you always can do more. I think also, whilst we talk a lot about teachers, we must not lose sight of our amazing educators, their colleagues – so the folk with certificate III and diploma qualifications – and pay attention to their training and their pathways and make sure that they are also given great support.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. Thank you. So with the role of the Commonwealth in this space, I am just wondering what your thoughts are around the private and public issue. You said that when profit drives practice, safety is compromised. One of the witnesses we had was from an ASX-listed company, and we all know that from a governance perspective ASX-listed companies must prioritise returns to shareholders in the first instance. Do you have any thoughts on reform in that space?

The CHAIR: Just before you answer, Ms Menz, I am so sorry, we have gone over time. Please answer, but if you could just keep it short. If you would like to provide a longer response, we would be very happy to have that in writing, if that is okay. Sorry.

Martel MENZ: No, all good.

The CHAIR: Apologies.

Martel MENZ: That is okay. I think the short answer is yes, we do need a really close look at who makes up the market, how they are performing and what is driving them to be in this sector. I do not want to use the word ‘business’ because this should not be about business and this should not be about profit-making. This should always remain very much focused on children’s early learning and healthy development and ultimately for those children to be thriving no matter what type of centre they are in, who runs that service or where you live in the state or indeed the country. I think that has to be our primary objective: children number one all the time.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I am happy for a response on notice in that space, if you want to add anything more, particularly around that notion of a quasi market where in the absence of subsidy there would be no marketplace either for child care in the private sector. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Ms Ermacora. That brings our session to a close, Ms Menz. Thank you very much for your contribution and your evidence today. We really appreciate it. I am just noting Ms Ermacora’s question on notice for a more extensive response, because we have run out of time. I also want to let you know you will be receiving a copy of the transcript for review in about a week’s time before it is published.

We are now going to take a break for lunch and come back at 1:05. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.