

# TRANSCRIPT

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN VICTORIA

### Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 10 March 2026

#### MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESSES**

Merrin Sulovski, Training and Development Specialist,

Taihan Rahman, Youth Adviser, and

Alice Dolin, Researcher and Youth Adviser, National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

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

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 and you are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. 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.

**Alice DOLIN:** Alice Dolin, on behalf of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

**Taihan RAHMAN:** Taihan Rahman, on behalf of the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Merrin Sulovski, representing the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

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

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

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

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Good afternoon.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, member for Western Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would now like to invite you to make an opening statement and ask if you could please keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes so we have more time for discussion. Thank you.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Thank you. Thank you. Chair. Thank you for inviting NAPCAN to appear at today's hearing, I am joined by Taihan Rahman, a member of our youth council – NAPCAN Youth Speaks Out, or NYSO – and Alice Dolin, a researcher at NAPCAN and also a member of the NYSO council. We would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on and pay our respects to elders past and present. We would also like to recognise victim-survivors of child abuse, particularly those who were harmed when in the care of organisations who should have protected them.

NAPCAN – the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect – is dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect through advocacy, education and community engagement.

**Taihan RAHMAN:** NAPCAN believes that children and young people must be meaningfully involved in discussions that impact them. That commitment is reflected in our work, where we prioritise co-design with children and young people in policy recommendations, submissions and program designs. Alice and I were

both involved in drafting NAPCAN's submission to this inquiry, and we are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today's hearing.

Too often young people's perspectives are missing from conversations like this, even though the systems being discussed are the ones that shape our safety, wellbeing, and futures. As a year 12 student, it is quite remarkable to come here straight from my economics class to take part in this hearing. I feel incredibly privileged to have had opportunities to step into leadership roles advocating for young people, including serving as a premier of the Victorian Youth Parliament, chairing the national Youth Steering Committee and now as a member of NAPCAN's Youth Speak Out council.

The NAPCAN Youth Speak Out council, or NYSO, is a national group of young people aged 13 to 25 who are passionate about ensuring children and young people are free from maltreatment by adults and peers. Our members come from every state and territory in Australia, including many from regional and rural communities. Together we contributed to NAPCAN's submission by bringing forward the lived experiences, concerns and insights of young people across the country. That is why two members of the NYSO council, Alice and I, are here today; we are here to ensure that youth voices are embedded in the outcome of this inquiry. In particular we will emphasise the importance of relational safety. This means creating environments where children, families and educators feel empowered to speak up when something does not feel right and where those concerns are taken seriously and actually acted upon.

When children feel safe to speak, when families are confident to raise concerns and when educators feel supported to respond, we move beyond compliance and start building systems that genuinely protect children and their rights. If this inquiry is to make a lasting difference, the voices of children and young people cannot sit at the margins of these discussions. They must be at the centre of the solutions, because the safest systems are not the ones designed for children, they are the ones designed with them.

**Alice DOLIN:** As part of our work NAPCAN has engaged with thousands of early educators across the country. What we know is most educators have the best interests of children at heart and care deeply for their safety and wellbeing. However, we also know that perpetrators of child abuse often target the vulnerable – children who rely on adults to care for their basic needs, children who have little power and autonomy, children who are preverbal or have English as a second or third language, children with disability and children who are away from their protective families. But it is not just children who are vulnerable. Perpetrators also target vulnerable early learning services, services who do not embed child safe standards into everyday practice, who do not have a strong culture of child safety and wellbeing, those who do not take safety concerns seriously when they are raised, those who do not commit the time and resources to ongoing training and professional development for all staff, those who rely solely on a cleared working with children check as confirmation that an educator is safe to engage with children and those who use loopholes in ratio requirements that enable an educator to be the only adult in a room with children. And while we welcome the recent announcement made by the federal government that bans the misuse of under-the-roof line ratios, we await clarification from ACECQA as to what misuse actually means in practice.

In 2024 NAPCAN was engaged by the Queensland government to deliver our protective behaviours training, the Safer Communities for Children program, to early childhood educators across Queensland. Concerningly, the main gaps we have identified in workforce capabilities are identifying and responding to early and often subtle grooming behaviours, a lack of reporting confidence, a lack of awareness of prevention strategies and difficulty translating policy and legislative requirements into day-to-day practice. In July 2025 NAPCAN wrote to Premier Allan in Victoria as well as Minister Blandthorn, the Minister for Children, and Minister Hutchins, the minister for women, government services and prevention of family violence at the time. We recommended an expansion of our protective behaviours program to Victoria as a response to the unfolding crisis. We would like to table this letter if possible.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Alice DOLIN:** Great. We would also like to emphasise that this issue is not unique to the early childhood education and care sector. The crisis is unfolding because until recently perpetrators have been able to remain in plain sight without question. If we tighten up early childhood education and care, they will move to any of the other less regulated sectors, such as extracurricular education, which includes sports, dance and music. So recommendations from this inquiry need to look at how safety can be ensured across all organisations that work

with children, otherwise we will soon be having the same crisis and the same inquiry for one of these other sectors.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Educators have told us that they need practical scenario-based guidance rather than compliance-focused training and that education and support need to be ongoing and need to be resourced appropriately. They want to move from knowing what to do in theory to feeling confident to apply that knowledge when they are faced with real situations. Child safety training needs to move beyond recognising, responding to and reporting harm; it needs to be grounded in prevention – what services can do to create an environment where any attempt at harming or abusing a child is high risk. The recent introduction of mandatory online child safe training is a great first step. However, child safeguarding is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Culture is an essential protective factor in migrant, refugee and First Nations communities, and child safeguarding must be done in a culturally responsive way, recognising the unique needs and strengths of each individual community.

We also need to provide our educators with opportunities to engage with subject matter experts to ask the often difficult and complex questions to work through case studies as a team. We see a genuine willingness and openness to learn, but we have also heard of barriers to accessing training, including lack of funding for backfill. The early education sector also includes casual staff, and we hear from them that accessing training can be costly. They might need to forfeit a day of pay to attend training. They might also have to pay for the training from their own pocket.

As Alice mentioned earlier, NAPCAN have been engaged by the Queensland government to deliver our protective behaviours Safer Communities for Children program to early childhood educators in Queensland. The program introduces the concepts of safety to young children through bush animal stories and activities, and it really focuses on the responsibilities of adults to keep children safe from harm. Between 1 July and 31 December 2025, 153 services accessed this training, with over 400 educators trained in delivering this program to children in their care. What was great to see, but also quite interesting and perhaps reflective of what is going on in the sector, was that 100 per cent of participants stated that their knowledge of grooming behaviours increased after attending the training and over 97 per cent reported an increased ability to identify indicators of abuse. I want to add here that we have the most success and uptake when training is provided to educators for free, such as in Queensland and the Northern Territory where we have been funded.

Early childhood educators are the front line of prevention. However, when educators are undervalued, underpaid or emotionally exhausted, the very foundations of prevention begin to erode. Too often we see profits, brand or reputation prioritised over robust recruitment practices, staffing levels that meet the needs of children, appropriate remuneration, and ongoing support, supervision and training for educators.

I do want to add here that we also hear and see additional challenges faced by early education services in regional and remote areas, particularly in relation to ratios, staff shortages, appropriate remuneration and access to ongoing training.

**Taihan RAHMAN:** Families place a very high level of trust in early childhood education and care services. When parents walk through the doors of a service and leave their child in someone else's care, they do so with the expectation that their child will be safe, respected and protected. What we consistently hear from parents and caregivers is that they do not want to be passive observers of that safety. They want to be genuine partners in prevention. They want to know how safety is being embedded in the service. They want to understand how to raise concerns if something does not feel right. Preventing child abuse cannot rest solely on the shoulders of educators or regulators. It must be a shared responsibility across families, services and the broader community.

Across Victoria there are organisations, including NAPCAN, that stand ready to support this work. We have the training, programs and expertise to equip educators, children and families with the tools needed to build genuinely child safe environments. We have the knowledge; what is missing is sustained investment in prevention. Without meaningful financial commitment from governments to deliver prevention initiatives across the sector, we will continue to respond to harm after it occurs rather than building the systems that stop it happening in the first place.

**Alice DOLIN:** The early childhood education and care sector is already one of the most regulated sectors in Victoria. There are multiple eyes on not only the children but on the educators. Despite this, children continue

to be abused and harmed by the very people who are tasked with caring for and protecting them. What this tells us is that regulation and compliance is just one piece of the child safeguarding puzzle and there is a risk that compliance becomes just another tick-the-box exercise.

So while NAPCAN welcomes the opportunity to speak at this hearing, we have seen royal commissions, inquiries, round tables and panels year after year after year. We have heard from those with lived experience, researchers, subject matter experts, parents and carers and educators about what needs to be changed to keep our children safe. Hundreds of recommendations to improve the safety and wellbeing of children when they are engaged with organisations, services and activities have already been made. We encourage the committee to demonstrate courage and act swiftly on these recommendations and those made as part of this inquiry. Our children deserve no less than this.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I also want to acknowledge you as young people for appearing before our hearing today. It is really great to have your voices and your experience as part of our broader inquiry, so well done for coming straight from economics class to appearing before a hearing today. Now, you said you contributed to this submission. Can you just tell us: what did you learn as you were gathering evidence and research around this? I would like to hear directly from you. What have you picked up on?

**Taihan RAHMAN:** I think something that has been really interesting for me is looking at a lot of the research and data into how important early childhood education itself is. I think I have seen a lot about how it really sets the standard or how it really sets up young people for the later parts of their lives. I think obviously when we are thinking about early childhood education and care the first priority should be safety – are our young people safe? – but also thinking about the other side: what kind of skills or how we can actually empower young people in early education spaces to develop the skills and capabilities that they will need in the future as they start to grow up?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Dolin, do you have anything you would like to add?

**Alice DOLIN:** I think just also the diversity of ways that these organisations engage with young children. When we talk about early childhood education and care, it is easy to think about just perhaps day cares, but you learn that there is also regulated family day care, there is out-of-school-hours care and, as we mentioned in our statement, there are all these extracurricular activities that are even less regulated, like sport and dance and music, and completely unregulated nannies and au pairs and that sort of child care. So you see that it is a very broad sector that takes a lot of different forms, and the findings that come from this inquiry and the recommendations from this inquiry need to cover all these different forms and those that sit even outside the definition of early childhood education and care, as we said in the opening statement.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Now, the protective behaviours program that is being supported by the Queensland government – is there any intention for this program to also be implemented and rolled out here in Victoria?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, absolutely. It is a protective behaviours program called Safer Communities for Children. We are just in the process of wrapping things up in relation to a national approach, so that will be available for early childhood services in Victoria in the next couple of months.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Okay. I guess what we have been hearing with some of the bodies representing primary prevention is that the training is not accessible to all early childhood educators; it is accessible to full-time educators and could be accessible to casualised staff, but it is not always accessible to agency staff. Is the intention of your program to be fully accessible to all educators?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Ideally, yes, but it is –

**The CHAIR:** Would there be any barriers to that?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** It is a fee-for-service model, so there are going to be barriers for that casualised workforce or those from agencies who are likely to have to pay for this out of pocket. What happens normally is that for full-time and part-time staff who are attached to a service, the service provides the funding for them to attend and the backfill. They are paid to attend for the day as well. But casual staff often are not attached to a particular service; they are moving around between multiple services. So who pays for them to attend training?

They do. And they potentially lose half a day of pay or even a full day because they are having to attend training.

**The CHAIR:** You said 153 services you have provided this training to in Queensland?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have KPIs of how many you would like to roll out or have that outreach here in Melbourne?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Not at this stage, but the feedback that we have got from Queensland is certainly that our early childhood educators are finding the program really valuable and they walk away feeling more confident to be able to have conversations with young children about safety. We also deliver a range of other training programs, including mandatory reporting and child safe organisations, and we hear from our early childhood educators who attend those sessions that they want to learn more. They want more sector-specific training, particularly around how we have these conversations with children about how to keep safe.

I think one thing I really want to highlight here is the importance of it being the adult's responsibility to keep children safe. We can talk to children about safety and encourage help-seeking behaviours, but we have got to be really careful that we are not putting the onus or the responsibility on young children to protect themselves. It is a huge burden and it is not realistic. There are power imbalances and other factors. So the aim of Safer Communities for Children is partly to talk to children about safety but also so that people in the service are speaking the same language about safety.

**The CHAIR:** I heard throughout your presentation that the educators that you have heard from are after practical, scenario-based training over compliance training. There are tensions here, obviously, following child care abuse last year. How are we going to balance this so that it is not one over the other?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** It is a really good question, and I think it is something that we are still trying to tackle in some ways. We have got the child safe standards, which are fabulous. For some education services we do hear that they can be a little bit of a tick and flick, so they want the checklist that they can go through and tick off and say, 'Yep, done that, done that, done that.' I think what we are saying is, that is fine as a starting point but we need to keep maturing and developing. Organisations need to do that so that it is not just compliance based, because when it comes down to it, if a child discloses harm or another educator notices something, it is not about going through a checklist. That is not going to help them in that moment to be able to understand, 'What do I need to do?' 'How do I talk to this child?' 'How do I talk to the family?' and 'What am I allowed to say?' and 'What am I not allowed to say?' When we do scenarios and case studies, that can help tease out some of those nuances and the complexity around safeguarding children.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. My time is finished. I am going to hand it over to Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you very much. I am here online, and I really appreciate Merrin and Taihan for coming along and providing your particular unique perspective. Oh, and Alice – sorry, Alice and Taihan.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Alice and Taihan. I am a little bit older.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I just want to ask about, your submission has mentioned strong governance, transparency and independent oversight of the early childhood education sector so that kids are safe. What changes would you suggest in, say, the for-profit centres, because that space has had more challenging issues?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Did you want to take this one, Alice, or do you want me to? Sure. We were here to listen to Ms Carson's presentation, and I think, really resonating with what Ms Carson said around the for-profit sector, when they are putting profits, their brand and their reputation over children's safety that is where we have got a problem. It was interesting in preparation for this, having a look at the statistics on the number of services who exceed the national standards, and the vast majority of them are the not-for-profits. The for-profits are more likely to either meet the expectations or be working towards them. That is telling us something, just those statistics there. We need to have the for-profit services because there are not enough not-for-profits and there is not enough money for all services to be not-for-profit. We have so many families that need early

childhood education and care, so there is absolutely a place and a role for our not-for-profit services. But how are we ensuring that profit does not come before children and young people's safety and wellbeing?

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I have got a further question as well. Your submission also recommends better pay and reflective supervision for educators. One of the other witnesses, in fact a couple of other witnesses, we have had over the last few days of hearings mentioned how much time is consumed when a staff member might report something. If a staff member reports an incident or an issue that they may think or suspect is not appropriate, that often requires many extra hours of work to document and to go through a process, and there is no provision for payment for those hours of work. Would you see that as a barrier as well?

**Alice DOLIN:** Yes, and I think it also comes down to the importance of not relying on single, well-meaning individuals as that kind of bottleneck that ensures child safety within their organisation. So yes, hopefully you would get a very well-meaning person who is happy to do that unpaid time to do it, but in reality that is a barrier for that report to go through in the organisation. Where this relates to the better pay and the reflective supervision is that if you have the whole of the organisation on board, the whole of the organisation participating in this culture of safety, that provides more opportunity for organisational support so that it does not all fall on that one individual who perhaps cannot rely on their management or on their co-workers to manage those compliance requirements on their own.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I suppose that is intimidating in a way, isn't it –

**Alice DOLIN:** Absolutely.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** an individual going through a process completely separate to the operation of the whole organisation.

**Alice DOLIN:** If you do not have that support from higher up within the management of your organisation, it makes it so much harder for that individual to contribute to that culture of safety, no matter how well meaning they are.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** So that is culture as well?

**Alice DOLIN:** I would say so. I think that one of the key things that flows throughout our submission is the importance of a child-safe culture. I want to build on Merrin's point from before, that tension between culture verse compliance that we talked about and say that our perspective is that there is almost, with that tick-and-flick attitude to implementing the Child Safe Standards, a risk that compliance can foster complacency. So within our trainings that we offer at NAPCAN, we do not accredit an individual and we do not accredit an organisation as 'You are now child safe' because we fear that that does create that complacency, whereas safety is actually an ongoing practice that happens every day that we can give people the skills for but that we cannot give them the qualification for, because we do not see that that is how safety operates.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I suppose that is true to each prong, isn't it? There is the child safety status of the individual staff member, which this committee has spent some time looking at, including the working with children checks but other topics as well, and then there is the whole entity as a group and as a cultural organisation. That is sort of what you are saying?

**Alice DOLIN:** Yes. The organisation is made up of these individual workers, but these are two separate forces that can be at play, and it particularly can come top down from the management of the organisation.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. The submission also touches on the training provided and the skills of the workforce in relation to identifying and responding to child abuse, which I think is very core to what you are wanting to talk about. In the rapid review, the Victorian review, which I presume you are aware of, recommendation 19 was for Victoria to advocate to the Commonwealth for action to improve sector training and placements, including stronger Australian Skills Quality Authority powers. Would you have views on that?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** When you are talking about sector training – sorry, can you just repeat that last part of the question?

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** The recommendation recommends that Victoria advocate to the Commonwealth government to improve the sector's training, including through stronger Australian Skills Quality Authority powers.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** What we know is that training in child safety and wellbeing is so varied across the early education qualifications. There are registered training organisations and there are bachelor's degrees and certificates, and it can depend a little bit on the provider that you go to as to how much detail and how much you learn about child safety and wellbeing. And so there does not seem to be this standard approach where you must complete a certain number of units or hours around child safety and wellbeing, around child protection –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Or certain topics – identifying vulnerability, identifying inappropriate behaviours, strengthening culture and communication amongst the staff team, that kind of thing?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, absolutely. It is more likely that there is training in things like mandatory reporting. So when there is familial abuse then what do we do? We recognise, we respond, we report. But what does that mean when it happens within the organisation and when it might be a colleague that you are also friends with and you have got a good relationship with who is the one who is perhaps exhibiting some grooming behaviours or just things that are not quite right. What do we do with that? And so I think that is where there is a piece missing in our training for early childhood educators.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Very interesting. Thank you. I think my time is up, Chair.

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

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your evidence. I just want to follow on from that last remark you made, and I go back to the work that has already previously been done through numerous inquiries. In your submission you talk about creating a protective environment and just in those last comments you made. But we know that this has been recommended before. I am not sure if you are familiar with the work of Save the Children Australia and what they do. They are very clear in processes – it is very clear. And I know this because of the report that I was involved with, *Betrayal of Trust*, where we looked at this work and we went into detail about what they do:

<b>Who can report?</b>	Child or young person.	Parents or adults.	Staff, volunteers or associates.
<b>What to report?</b>	Allegations, disclosures or observations of child abuse ...		
<b>When to report?</b>	All concerns must be reported within 24 hours, or as soon as practically possible.		
<b>Who to report to?</b>			

It goes on:

**What will happen?**  
Possible outcomes

It is spelled out. I do not know why we are recreating the wheel and why you are suggesting that this needs to be done, given these processes are in place. Do you think this has not been made clear enough through the department and government around what is expected for early childhood settings?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** It is a great question. I think what you are describing there is quite a reactive approach, and so if a disclosure is made, if there are concerning behaviours, you are talking about that process for recognising, responding and reporting. And yes, a lot of the training out there absolutely focuses on that, and our early childhood educators need to know how to do that. I guess where the –

**Georgie CROZIER:** Sorry to interrupt you. Do you think they do know that? Or is that a gap?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I think most of them do know, because the early childhood educators – I am one of the training and development specialists – the ones that I have spoken to, attend training every year. They do their mandatory reporting training. They come along the next year, and I ask them, 'Why are you here?' 'Because we have to. It is the annual thing we have to do.' So I think that on the whole they probably do know it in theory. As to whether they are able to put that into practice is a gap that I believe there is.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Why do you think that is, though? Why do you think there is a gap?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I think because when we are talking about child abuse, particularly in the context of organisational abuse, there is still – I am not sure that stigma is the right word, but I feel like there is still maybe a disbelief that it can happen in an organisation, particularly early childhood, where you have got multiple eyes on not only the children but each other. It is I guess a little bit easier to be able to make a mandatory report about a family because you do not have to see them at work constantly. You are probably not friends with them either. So I think that there is a gap there. But also I think one of the big gaps is the prevention side of things.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I want to go on to that, because in your submission you talk about:

**Embed the language of prevention** across all Standards and departmental frameworks, shifting from “responding to risk” to “building protective environments.”

So part of that mandatory reporting is, I would have thought, building a protective environment, given that early educators know their responsibilities and that they are expected to do that if there is, as I have just read out, any form of abuse that they might see. You also say:

Expand community-based prevention education within ECEC networks ...

Can you just give us a little bit more information around that particular aspect?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Does anyone want to pick this up, or do you want me to keep going? I feel like I am taking over a little bit.

**Georgie CROZIER:** It does not matter. Keep going. That is great.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I think when we are talking about the ECEC community, we are talking not only about educators but we are also talking about parents and caregivers and even the wider community. So for the wider community, if we have a think, somebody might know somebody who is working in early childhood – know them from netball or wherever – but if they are aware that that person in their private life might have been acting inappropriately towards a child or in another service, do they know what to do? It is that whole community approach to understanding but also going back to that prevention side of things.

**Georgie CROZIER:** That is why I am saying the process is already there around allegations, just as you have described. If somebody thinks something is happening or whatever, they can go through this process. That is why I am saying it should be embedded, surely, given the work that we have done. Is that, again, that gap that is not there, or have the government departments failed?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** It should be there. Like I said with that statistic before with our Queensland cohort, 100 per cent of them left the session – and this was a 3-hour online session – having a greater understanding of grooming behaviours. I would think that that is something that every single early childhood educator, before they step foot into a service, should know.

**Georgie CROZIER:** That is right. They may never have experienced it at all. It might not be a colleague; it might be a family member or it might be some other form of abuse. We know that there are incredible, shocking statistics of abuse within family settings. Some of that is cultural. It is covered up. So it is very hard for people to put themselves out and report those allegations.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, absolutely.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you. That is all I have. Thanks, Chair.

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for your submission. I was interested, in your submission, in your recommendation that there is a public interest test for ECEC operators. Can you expand on why you think that would be an improvement on the current system?

**Alice DOLIN:** I think – and add on to this as well – in the context of private providers, knowing that they receive funding for their work, that it would be better to have some more oversight to ensure that the funding they receive could have some mechanism in place to ensure that the public is benefiting, for lack of better phrasing, or that the young people are being kept safe, there is that culture of safety, in addition to the

compliance needed, effectively putting a test in place as part of that funding to ensure that safety. I do not know if you want to add to that.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Do you have something you wanted to add?

**Taihan RAHMAN:** No, that is all good.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** There were a few changes, I think, made at the federal level with respect to funding. Do you think that goes far enough to address this idea of public interest, or do you think further changes need to be made?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I do think that there needs to be greater transparency, particularly with the for-profit services. Families should be able to understand what ratios are being applied: how many educators are going to be in that room where their child is going to be cared for? Is it the minimum? Are they actually putting more money in so that they have got additional eyes on the children? So I do think that there needs to be some greater transparency around ratios but also how much the organisation has earned in a financial year. What are the profits that are going to the shareholders, which means they not going into the service, and what does that mean? Why is it that our not-for-profits are achieving 'exceeds expectations' of the standards and our for-profits are struggling with that? There is a gap there. What is happening in that space?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Do you think prevention around child safety is strongly enough embedded currently in the ECEC sector?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** No. I do think that in a lot of sectors, not just early childhood, the focus is on a reactive approach: an incident happens, everyone goes into a panic, we have hearings, the media and everyone gets involved, there is an outcry, parents are stressed and wanting to pull kids out and educators are leaving the sector. I just lost my train of thought there, which I tend to do every so often. Just remind me of the question, and I will go back to it.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** It was about prevention and whether it is –

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** The prevention side, yes. Child safety and wellbeing has been such a reactive approach forever, and we need to actually stop it from happening to begin with. We need to be creating early learning services, like I said before, that are considered to be really risky organisations for potential perpetrators to even walk into. But again, we have got to move from looking at early childhood in a silo – and I understand this is what this inquiry is about – and looking at the other sectors, because if we strengthen early childhood, then perpetrators will just go to the next sector where they can get in because there is employment available. And it is readily available to them, because we know that a lot of centres have got vacancies. They can get in pretty easily. They need pretty minimal qualifications. Checks are often pretty slapdash, to be quite frank, with some services. That over-reliance on things like the working with children check: 'Yeah, you've got a working with children check. Therefore you're safe. Off you go.' Absolutely, the prevention side is where we need to be targeting our funding and our resources.

**Alice DOLIN:** Also, just to add, part of the issue I think as well is that prevention is a very unglamorous thing. When prevention is working well and it is well funded, there are no news stories about it. It is something you do not hear about. So it is hard sometimes for organisations or governments to consider it a priority to spend their funding on, because good prevention is just the day-to-day operation; no-one thinks about it. So it is important I think in these sorts of inquiries and these sorts of situations to try to really emphasise the value of prevention, because we know that prevention efforts almost always save much more money compared to later intervention.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** In your submission you have also suggested an independent early childhood safety commissioner. We know that there has been a new regulator established here in Victoria. Why do you think we need a dedicated commissioner for early childhood safety?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** When we have a look at the Social Services Regulator, their role really is to be having a look at the reports that are coming in and overseeing workplace investigations and those sorts of things through the reportable conduct scheme and the working with children check. If we had an independent early childhood commissioner, their role would be different, so not so much about the regulation side of things but

around the advocacy and being able to have a look at the early childhood sector more holistically, rather than just focusing on the regulation of child safety, for example. And so I think that advocacy piece is so very important because so many of our children – we do not give them a voice. And so the commissioner would be able to be that voice to government on behalf of children.

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

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, and thanks for being here, all. I just want to pick up something from Dr Mansfield, because that was going to be one of my questions. We already have the CCYP, the commissioner for children and young people. We have an Indigenous one as well that has come along in the last little while, and we are thankful for their efforts. But I would say they have been belting down the door of government with recommendations and reports for the last decade. Their muscles are firm from banging on the door. And I am not pushing back on this in that ‘Why will another one work?’ If you are saying, ‘We’ve already got the CCYP’ – fact – an independent early childhood safety commissioner is a potentially great idea. Are they working in parallel? How will this make an inroad where the CCYP has been unable to get the action of government?

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** It is a good question, and I know that the Commission for Children and Young People have spent decades trying to make change. I know that at the moment they have got a really strong focus on child death inquiries, out-of-home care and also youth justice.

**Melina BATH:** They are busy.

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** They are. They are busy. They are under-resourced for the amount of work that they do, absolutely. I think that the two roles could be parallel, absolutely. But you make a really good point.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I sense the need and then the frustration with CCYP over a long period of time. Can I go to the Safer Communities for Children protective behaviours. And then I just wrote down ‘bush animal stories’ – that sounds really positive. These are very delicate subjects. They need to be age specific. They need to support children where children are and not place a burden unnecessarily. I will say you are recouping your funds to provide that service, but is there some way that you could provide a snapshot for us? Is there a little intro PowerPoint or something that you could provide to the committee?

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** Yes, absolutely.

**Melina BATH:** I think that would provide some context for us that is really important.

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** Yes. The stories were written by a team in the Northern Territory, and so that included an Aboriginal advisory group and it included early childhood educators there as well. But they are a really gentle narrative approach to talking about safety. They are designed for age and stage of development around four to six years of age. There is a series of seven storybooks, and then there are activities that go along with that, with questions that educators can ask children: ‘What helps you to feel safe? When you are at kinder, what helps you to feel safe? What perhaps makes you feel unsafe? How might you feel that in your body? What are some of those body signals, and what are they telling us? Who can you talk to if you are feeling some of those signals?’ So what we want to do is encourage children to seek help early on before it becomes abusive in nature.

**Melina BATH:** You put a lot of thought into this, both science and good spirit, I think, by the sounds of it.

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I want to go now to one of your discussions around partnerships with Aboriginal community controlled organisations and multicultural organisations. If I could just hover over ACCOs and cultural identity, again, when there are good partnerships there, productive partnerships where there is a weight, as in a heavy-weighted partnership for the ACCOs, it can really support that early childhood sector and support kids. Could you expand on that? And I have got a question after that with relation to this.

**Merrin SULOFSKI:** Sure. Does anyone want to take this?

**Taihan RAHMAN:** I can definitely speak on the importance of considering cultural background at the same time, because when we think about children in these early childhood education spaces, they are coming from such a diverse variety of backgrounds. They might have different cultural or religious ideals and norms that they are growing up in. So that is something that we really need to consider before we are actually working with those young people and their families to make sure that they are aware of the signs and they are aware of the ways that they can actually address and deal with any concerns that they might have in terms of abuse and/or neglect.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. That is lovely. Thank you very much. I have been in contact with an ACCO from the north of the state in Victoria, and they have provided some context around where they have co-located an integrated maternal health centre with the ECEC. So you have got that very small, nurturing maternal health, childcare health – I am reflecting my age now – and then into the centre. And there is quite a seamless transition, and there is a trust I think; that is my experience from this anecdotal evidence here. But one of the things that they say is that in funding there is a shift away from the per head model to a more expanded model or block funding within the ACCO, so that there are these other services that can be integrated, that are not just sitting on top of the child, if that makes sense. Is that something that you have seen – take it on notice if you need to – in, say, Queensland? Is there any other development around that?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I think that is probably something I would need to take on notice.

**Melina BATH:** I guess it is tweaking the funding or expanding the funding so it is not just on the head and in that centre but part of a broader funding stream in order to work better with those partnerships and those ACCOs.

**Alice DOLIN:** It is a good example of what we and other organisations talk about when we say to break down those silos, because when a family has to navigate all these different systems all funded separately who do not communicate with each other, it is overwhelming. But if they can go to the place where it is the early childhood education centre and the maternal health centre together, if I am understanding your example –

**Melina BATH:** Yes.

**Alice DOLIN:** it just makes life so much easier for families. But that is often just not the way funding for these organisations is set up. So yes, we will take it on notice to provide examples, but I think that is a great explanation.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And I might be throwing myself under a bus here, but in relation to that, it is often that the centres have great communications but the government departments are siloing the funding, so it is looking at that. Thank you. I think my time is up. Thank you for your submission.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Deputy Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much all. Just to begin with, in terms of your submission going to the oversight of the department, is the transition from having a regulatory framework where we had QARD, which was inbuilt as part of the department, to the new VECRA, being an autonomous arm of it, something that you support for a bit more robust regulation?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, absolutely. It helps to remove that conflict of interest. It is very hard when the regulator is within the organisation, having to make findings that adversely affect the sector that they are in.

**Michael GALEA:** Make themselves look bad.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Absolutely. I think that there is a risk that we lose transparency when that is the model, so that move to the independent regulator I think is very welcome.

**Michael GALEA:** Obviously we are focused on Victoria here, but previously the only state to have an independent regulator was South Australia, so now there are two. Was that something that you would advocate for nationwide as well?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Absolutely.

**Michael GALEA:** On that note – and you probably think that we are all honing in on this – the independent early childhood safety commissioner, I was also going to ask on that. Given the interplay between federal and state, is that a role that you think is best placed at the federal level to oversee the entire nation or to be done state by state? I am happy to hear from all three of you.

**Alice DOLIN:** I think there is potentially merit to both options. We have only discussed it here in the context of this inquiry and in the context of Victoria. I do not know – we could take that on notice, unless you have an opinion here.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** I do not have a strong opinion. Again, I see the benefits of both. I guess the challenge that I foresee with national is the different funding models, different regulations for the states and territories, so having state based I guess is going to be more targeted and specific to the needs and the way things are done in Victoria. That might be an on-notice.

**Michael GALEA:** I am happy for you to take that on notice or further. I apologise that we have all sort of concentrated on one part of it, but it is an interesting proposal. There are a lot of things that have already been touched on by other questions, but I did want to go to the question of how we best empower people to speak up, because I feel like that is the best way in which we can break some cycles. Obviously it is very hard, and I realise we have young people here, but you are not in early childhood; you are a long way off that. How do we empower the children, the parents and the staff to raise their voices? We have gone through, in the course of this inquiry, and extensively looked at training, regulation, working with children, mandatory training under the national law, all those things. What are we missing, if we are missing anything, to break that circuit?

**Taihan RAHMAN:** One thing that really comes to mind is the difference between compliance and culture, because we cannot expect children, young people or their families to actually understand all of the enforcement and compliance mechanisms that relate to ECEC. But I think one thing that really stands out to me is awareness, because how are these children and their families going to think about how to report or to address these concerns if they are not aware of the ways that they can actually go about doing that? So I think, like I mentioned before, culturally adaptive resources and actually going out to communities and explaining to them the ways in which they can do that. I think awareness is definitely one of the main barriers when it comes to addressing something like that.

**Michael GALEA:** And this touches on something that is in your submission as well about going specifically to different communities, especially perhaps newer migrant communities. Is it fair to say that that barrier is a lot more pronounced in those communities, and that lack of awareness, therefore –

**Taihan RAHMAN:** Yes.

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, absolutely.

**Michael GALEA:** What is the best way to do that? I have got a very multicultural electorate. On many different issues this interests me. We often see a lot of ways, and some things work very well, other things are very well intentioned but do not always get there. How do we effectively break through?

**Taihan RAHMAN:** Like I mentioned before, culturally adaptive ways and methods of connecting with the community. We cannot put out one way of reaching the community and expect that it is going to work for every different multicultural community. There are barriers to understanding: language, religion, culture. There are different ways that these families understand and interact with these kinds of ideas. So we really need to think about those differences and think about how we can make it easier for them to understand before actually going out and working with them.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes, not just translating a flyer into different languages and saying ‘Job done’.

**Alice DOLIN:** Yes. This is a different context, but this is what we keep saying about safety coming from relationships and strong trusting relationships. So in this case you want to go into these communities and find those trusted leaders, those multicultural organisations, the faith leaders of the community, who already are there interacting with the broader members of their community every day, every week, whatever it is. That is much less intimidating for a family to engage with compared to the government coming in and trying to find these solutions.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Another thing I found quite interesting was the discussion about transparency – I think that was with Dr Mansfield – in the things that you think these providers should be required to display. It was in the context obviously of private but it could reasonably apply to all providers in terms of ratios, which is a very good one, profit, shareholders, all that sort of stuff. As an example, one thing I noticed when we had some childcare providers in a couple of weeks ago was that there were some who were putting all sorts of great stories on their websites but they were not including their AQF ratings, or they were including them for their centres that met them but not for their centres that did not. Is that something that you would like to see more as part of a holistic thing, whether it is online, physical – on location – or both probably?

**Merrin SULOVSKI:** Yes, because that will help families to be able to make an informed decision as to where they send their child. I want to go back to the regional side of things just quickly, because it is all well and good to have that transparency, but if you are in a region that only has one childcare centre then you are stuck with that, whether they are working towards expectations – you do not have an option. So, yes, this is helpful, but also we know that in just trying to get a child into any centre, sometimes parents and caregivers are just picking whichever one will give them a place.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes, very good point. That is my time. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Deputy Chair. That brings our session to a close. I would like to say thank you to all of you for your contributions this afternoon – we really appreciate it – noting that you will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week’s time before it is published on the website and also noting that there are some questions on notice from my colleagues.

The committee will now close its hearings for today and reconvene tomorrow morning.

**Committee adjourned.**