

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

Dr Karen Douglas, Research and Policy Adviser, and
Steph Chiron, Organiser, Australian Services Union.

The CHAIR: Good morning. 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 I please ask you to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Karen DOUGLAS: Good morning. My name is Karen Douglas. I am the Research and Policy Adviser for the Victorian and Tasmanian Authorities and Services Branch of the Australian Services Union.

Steph CHIRON: I am Steph Chiron. I am an ECEC organiser for Australian Services Union Victoria.

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

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

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

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

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

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good morning. It is morning, still. Jacinta Ermacora here from Western Victoria Region. I am currently in Warrnambool.

The CHAIR: I would now like to invite you to make an opening statement, and just ask that you keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes so that we can have more time for discussion. Thank you very much.

Karen DOUGLAS: Thank you very much for the invitation to appear before this committee. As I said, my name is Karen Douglas, Research and Policy Adviser for Victoria and Tasmania ASU branch. Steph is here, and we are expecting another observer shortly. The ASU, with a focus on the ECEC sector – so we are Victoria's local government union. We have members across each of Victoria's 79 councils and our members work in almost every single role across councils in Victoria. Our submission today is grounded in our members' experiences of working in the early childhood education and care sector, which we will no doubt shorthand refer to as ECEC. It is also grounded in the union's long engagement advocating for local government workers across Victoria. Our focus is on the skilled and professional work undertaken by our ECEC professionals and the conditions under which they work.

Our ECEC members understand and build the operational context of their work environment. They are experts in advising how work can be undertaken without harm, and importantly their specialist knowledge contributes to safer working environments. Thirty of Victoria's 79 councils continue to provide ECEC services. Some councils have chosen to outsource these services because of economic costs; we say this is flawed thinking. Council ECEC services are a community and social necessity. Provision of high-quality services is an investment. Rate capping is regularly relied on by councils to rationalise outsourcing services. We say that is shortsighted and the education, support and care of children is not an economic burden. Councils provide

community services and community services require local, state and federal government funding and support, and our evidence reinforces the need for this investment.

So today our evidence will particularly address sections (a), (b), (d) and (e) of the terms of reference, and we have summarised those terms of reference sections into our recommendations. We say our first recommendation is to remove the artificial rate capping arrangement that influences local government outsourcing ECEC services, prioritise ongoing secure workforces as a first step towards improving child safety, and work with the Commonwealth government to fully fund ECEC services to meet service demand for minimum staffing ratios and staffing levels for children with additional needs. We also say there needs to be more enforcement around child safe standards to improve governance and managerial behaviour in relation to mandatory reporting and raising concerns about child safety and wellbeing.

The work of early childhood education and care professionals is unique, and I want to start by drawing on a statement from one of our members, and this is what our member says:

This industry needs to change. We have one of the hardest jobs in the world. Most people say they couldn't do it or that parenting is the hardest job, yet don't respect us who educate those children in massive numbers. People should never have to worry or feel concerned for their child's safety or wellbeing when leaving their children in daycare.

Our members, like the overwhelming majority of the community, are shattered by recent arrangements that have led us to this point, and we know that these workers – our members – are absolutely key to child safety. We know this because local government workforces are sought after. We know this by the waitlists that our members manage in local council, and we know this because of the parents who seek out our members who educated and supported them and now want their children to be educated and supported by those workers – our members – who have been in the sector for decades. We also know that communities have rallied to support and maintain council-run childcare centres, as the recent Port Phillip example demonstrates. The work of ECEC workers is complex, and it is complex in a range of really complex circumstances, including intervening and interacting with children to prevent harm between children; managing neurodiverse children; managing children who require additional support for developmental, behavioural or emotional needs; managing play with appropriate risk taking; assisting parents and carers to understand a child's behaviour; and managing parental and carer disputes. So this is the work of professionals, and this set of tasks outlines the importance of the continuity of care that decent and secure work provides.

Safety is underpinned by children, families and carers knowing their ECEC workers. Safety is also supported when workers can confidently attend their workplace understanding that policies, processes and workplace support are fundamental to their work experience. The rapid review acknowledges that the workforce is key and that the market has been left to respond to financial incentives, and this has resulted in suboptimal conditions for workers and for the sector. We also know the rapid review says that the workforce is called to delivering high-quality and safe standards for children. So the rate of insecure work then in this sector is problematic, and we understand the evidence is clear that safety is developed by achieving strong relationships within safe, stable and consistent work environments. By the nature of their employment category, casual and agency educators are not afforded the opportunity to build that rapport with children, families and carers. They are also denied, in our experience, the opportunity to access the same level of professional development as ongoing staff.

This leads us to our recommendations. Our first recommendation is to remove the rate-capping arrangements. We know that our workers have long-term commitment to the work – 47 per cent have 16 years or more of service, and that continuity of care and skills is critical to skill development. We know that since rate capping was introduced 10 years ago there has been an acceleration in outsourcing ECE services, which has created a higher demand on other areas, areas that the rapid review has highlighted as being problematic. So we say bringing ECE services back into local government, accompanied by secure work and proper oversight of managerial decision-making, creates better conditions for the safety of children and development of workforces.

Our second recommendation is prioritising ongoing secure workforce. The ECEC sector, as we have heard, is heavily reliant on casual and agency staff. Our survey acknowledges that about 80 per cent of respondents say every day there are casual and agency staff. These people are in themselves overwhelmingly decent people, but it is the lack of continuity and the oversight in developing those relationships that present problems in the sector. The high rates of insecure work also present three main problems for the ongoing workers. One is work

intensification. These workers are regularly inducting and training newer workers – casual and agency staff – in and out of the centre. There is the lack of investment in professional development of insecure workforces, and by the very nature of the employment category of casual and agency, those people are not afforded the opportunity to build rapport with children, families and carers.

Our third recommendation is for all levels of government to fully fund ECEC services to meet minimum staffing levels and staffing levels for children with additional needs. We have provided evidence that the under-the-roof line regime can be manipulated and that a simple count of numbers on staff does not equate to the services that are needed on the floor with the visibility that is required. We note that the federal minister has recently announced some action addressing the misuse of under-the-roof line ratios. We welcome this approach, and we will remain vigilant to seeing how that unfolds.

We also note in our submission the increased complexity of people coming into the sector, and this is just a reflection of life. Children and their families are presenting with complex social, financial and relational complexities, and long-term experience of the workers enables these experts to identify children and families that are struggling with everyday pressures. They will intervene early as a team to try and work with these families to get the skills and support that they need to parent well. With special needs children, we understand that there is an increase in diagnoses across the nation with children; 95 per cent of our participants advise that there are children who are not funded for the additional services. Say a child needs 8 hours of care, they might only be funded for 5 hours of additional support. What happens in the other 3 hours? This is when some of the problems arise.

Recommendation 4: enforce Child Safe Standards to improve governance and managerial behaviour. I heard the bell, so I will just wrap up there. I just want to conclude by saying in our opening statement that our members are committed to the children and families and carers they work with. We argue funding councils to deliver high-quality services, shifting internal cultures to address dangerous practices, erasing profit-making practices and making ECE services a public investment supports the achievement of quality care, educator support and wellbeing. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Ms Douglas. We appreciate that opening statement and would like to acknowledge all the educators who are members of your union and the dedication that they give to caring for children and safety every day in, like you described, complex situations. I am going to kickstart our questions. I just want to ask you, you mentioned about rate capping. Your members predominantly work in local government in long day care. How has rate capping damaged service provision in local government? You mentioned that in your submission. Can you expand a little bit on what you meant by that, what that damage looks like?

Karen DOUGLAS: Yes, thank you. Principally it is the outsourcing of early childhood services, and that creates a large profit –

The CHAIR: To for-profit providers?

Karen DOUGLAS: Well, to for-profit and not-for-profit providers. The corollary of that is the insecure work. Local government councils know exactly who is in the centre and when they are in those centres. The record keeping, as we have seen, not being kept over the last 12 months – that does not occur in local councils because they dedicate that time and energy to recording where people are and knowing who is in what room when. That is a funded mechanism of investing in child care.

The CHAIR: We have also heard from non-profit service providers that they spend a lot of their costs on staff retention to ensure they meet high-quality child safety needs. But obviously we have also been hearing evidence around for-profit models that prioritise profit over child safety. With regard to your members, your submission also mentioned that privatising child care fails children, their families and their community. Why do you feel so strongly about that?

Karen DOUGLAS: Our evidence demonstrates that ongoing workforces are the conduit to safety. When you have an investment in the workforce, the children, the families and the carers, you limit quite significantly the damage that can be done. We know that there are people out there who may want to do damage to children. That is something that we cannot prevent. But what we can do is have solid and secure workforces who understand children's development and who understand child engagement and behaviours that may then

indicate some sort of concern outside the childcare centre. In our experience, our members have long-term attachment to the childcare centres. They are known in their communities by the families. Child protection is a multilayered factorial system, and this is just one of the factors. An ongoing secure workforce is one of the factors that acts to reduce the risk to children's safety.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You spoke about professional development. We have just heard the previous witnesses talk about prevention of abuse and what that looks like with regard to grooming, behavioural standards and boundary settings. How much of that professional development goes into your workforce around identifying the early symptoms of grooming and abuse? Is that something that is core to your members' professional development?

Karen DOUGLAS: Ongoing workers have access to professional development. The rate of casual and agency staff does not enable that to occur. As I said, we do not say that all casual and agency staff people are bad people. But that mechanism stands in the way of that ongoing training and development because it becomes a cost unit exercise rather than an exercise in developing the skills and knowledge of people to identify those behaviours that you have identified. Steph, do you have a contribution there?

Steph CHIRON: Yes. Within most councils there is also a child safe team that works with the whole entire council. They can be looking at OSHC services, schools and early childhood, so you have a direct link with that. In our members' experience you often do the MARAM online training at the start of the year, and at the end of the year you do the council safe training as well. It is really embedded in everyday practice. We actually do professional development around this area twice a year.

The CHAIR: Does your union have communities of practice to ensure that this is really embedded in? Because MARAM is more for family violence workers, correct, not early childhood?

Steph CHIRON: Yes. There used to be the mandatory reporting one as well. So yes, it is a huge part of what our members talk about in terms of child safety. They feel a lot more enabled to protect children. You cannot not know the signs if you are consistently doing training twice a year.

The CHAIR: Just quickly before my time runs out – you said that your members represent 79 councils. Do you do any work around data collection? Are there certain councils that are dropping the ball where the risk is a lot higher with child safety issues?

Karen DOUGLAS: Thirty of Victoria's 79 councils still have ECEC services. In those centres, as Steph has described, there is ongoing training and there are higher rates of secure employment, so when those problems arise, there is a managerial structure and there is a team around the child and the centre to start developing responses to any of those problems that arise.

The CHAIR: Are there certain councils that are more problematic or more at risk than others according to your members?

Karen DOUGLAS: I can take that on notice. Nothing springs to mind. They actually are all really excelling in the provision of care.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. My time has unfortunately run out. Thank you, Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much for joining us today. You have spoken about the difference between not-for-profit or public and private sector, and we have heard a lot of evidence and seen evidence already to that effect. Your submission goes into a little bit more detail, though, drawing a contrast between larger scale enterprises and smaller scale private ones. Unless I am misreading it, I am taking from it that the smaller private operators tend to have better results, in your view. Could you talk me a little bit through more of what you see from the smaller end of the private market and how that compares to both bigger and also not-for-profit operators?

Karen DOUGLAS: When we surveyed our members – our members are all in local government and, as we have identified, in long day care – we asked people if they had had other experiences. So our evidentiary basis is on their experiences of working in those larger and smaller not-for-profits or privates. They are all looking to come into local government because of the better conditions, not just the ongoing work but the capacity to build

safer working environments for children and to contribute around how to build those operational contexts that provide safer working environments. That is the long answer. The short answer is we do not have that experience in the not-for-profits or privates. What we have is the experience of people having had their own experience and seeing the deleterious outcomes in, for instance, no-brand –

Michael GALEA: You had the Black & Gold example in there.

Karen DOUGLAS: Yes. No-brand food that goes into a childcare centre – that is not the case in a local government centre.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. You have spoken as well – as we heard from the other unions in the sector last week – very strongly about under the roof line and how that, I am going to say politely, is perhaps pushed to an extreme. Is that something that you observe in the local government run sector as well, or is it more something that you have seen from your members who have worked in other parts of the sector?

Karen DOUGLAS: Our evidence goes to some of that in local government as well. We asked a particular question, a very regular question. We said: if you have to go to the toilet, how do you maintain ratios? There were some positive examples of how local government does that, so it can be done. But there are more examples of how it is not being done and the manipulation of under the roof line. As we said in our opening statement, having two people on a roster does not tell the operational context of a nine-month-old that is teething, that is crying, where you have one worker trying to deal with that one child when the ratio is one to four. So there are good case examples out there of it working well, and that just needs to be the standard – not workers being exploited to meet an artificial line when care of children is what we are there to do.

Steph CHIRON: Can I just give an example? Also in local government there is less tendency to do under the roof line. Some of our services will base their grouping or their educator-to-child ratio on those specific needs of children. So if there are children with challenging behaviours, they will likely drop that group into a smaller group, which means those children get better care, more responsiveness from their educators. One example is a room in one of our metro councils that has dropped the group from 33 children to 15, with three educators, because of those challenging behaviours, so they can support those children. But it is very difficult for them to do that. That is running at a loss for the service.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Your submission also goes through to those and other workforce challenges. I may run out of time to ask you about casualisation, but I would love to if I get the chance. In terms of funding for the space, do you see the Commonwealth through the CCS having a much larger role to play in actually subsidising to a greater degree to provide that support for the sector?

Karen DOUGLAS: Taxpayers are invested in our most vulnerable being looked after, and children by nature of their age are some of our most vulnerable. So this is a tripartite approach to funding services and funding the professional skills that our workers, our members, provide. I went through a list in my opening presentation of just some of the complexities that our members are working with on a daily basis that just simply require a financial and an emotional investment in providing the best conditions for little people.

Michael GALEA: And dovetailed with that as well, the Productivity Commission has advocated for a specific inclusion fund for the ECC to be funded by the Commonwealth for those higher needs cases to provide that support. Is that something that you would be supportive of?

Karen DOUGLAS: We are certainly supportive of more funding going into the sector to identify kids early and making their path to adulthood much smoother.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. On casualisation, to what degree is that employed currently in the local government sector?

Karen DOUGLAS: Well, of our survey respondents, about 80 per cent said every day there is a casual or agency staff person there – illness, late for work, your kid is sick. I mean, that is part of the sector, but it does not have to be the whole of the sector.

Michael GALEA: That has not been used routinely for the majority of shifts, then, in the sector that you cover? Is that what you are saying?

Karen DOUGLAS: Respondents say every day there are casual and agency staff in their centres.

Michael GALEA: But as a minority or a majority of the workforce?

Karen DOUGLAS: Are you able to make a reference?

Steph CHIRON: A bit of both, really. Some services do rely really heavily on agency and casuals, and that is basically because of illness. That is probably the biggest factor; like, the educators catch everything. There is also a cohort of educators who have got their family responsibilities, so they need to drop down their hours for that reason. So there is, you know, a myriad of reasons why this is happening.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for being before us and for your submission. Your background – you represent 133,000 members from a range of industries. How many members in Victoria within the early education settings through the local government sector do you have?

Karen DOUGLAS: That is a national figure that you just quoted. In Victoria, as I said, 30 of the 79 councils have early childhood education care workers.

Georgie CROZIER: And how many workers would roughly be in those 30 council areas?

Steph CHIRON: There are maybe 3300 roughly, and about 900 and something are our members.

Georgie CROZIER: Okay, so out of those 3300, are they all full-time workers?

Karen DOUGLAS: We rely on local government annual reports to say that. We know that of the people that we survey, most of them are in ongoing work, and that might be full time or part time for the reasons Steph outlined earlier, but we also have casual and agency membership as well.

Georgie CROZIER: That is right. So you do have casual and agency, as other providers also have casual and agency. I just make these comments because you made some pretty sweeping remarks, I think, around casualisation. Of course continuity of care is incredibly important for any setting to get better outcomes – I think we all agree with that – but we are in an environment where that is difficult in multiple workforce environments where the casualisation of staff is not untoward. You spoke of the local government rate-capping issue, and you also spoke in your submission around the Commonwealth having a greater role in that to fully fund early education. Are you saying that they should step into this area, given the rate-capping environment and given the pressures on local government, as in Ms Bath's area where childcare deserts are there? It is not like metropolitan Melbourne, where there are multiple services around and people can have choice and ability. That does not happen in the country. I went to a local government kindergarten when I grew up, so I am familiar with that, and they did a great job. But that is not the case in 2026 in Victoria. We have got a very big population, very big needs and very different needs. I am just wondering where you are coming from with the rate capping, the Commonwealth environment and that workforce issue, which it is transient often, and the casualisation of staff.

Karen DOUGLAS: I just want to make the point that we were clear to say that the employment category of casualisation, or casual and agency, is the problem, not the people. Most people that are in the sector are good people, but it is the operational context that can create harms that are unnecessary. We know that the work is ongoing, so we need an ongoing workforce to build the rapport and the skills. We are very well aware of the Victoria University childcare desert research, which has been fantastic in making a great contribution to how we can resolve some of these pressing policy issues around the provision of childcare services. In terms of the Commonwealth investment, we say there is a role for all three levels of government to invest in childcare services. There was a third part to your question that has escaped me.

Georgie CROZIER: It was about the Commonwealth, but also the providers, in terms of what is happening in regional Victoria compared to metropolitan Melbourne, where there are greater choice and greater ability for people to access services. There are childcare deserts in the regions.

Karen DOUGLAS: The deserts – yes. Well, we find in the regional and rural settings – and it is consistent across child care and aged care as well – that those local government services are in demand, and those people live in their communities.

Georgie CROZIER: They do.

Karen DOUGLAS: They are known. When we talk about a multifactorial preventative measure to maintaining safety, whether it is child care and/or aged care, local people in local communities are known and they are trusted, and they can identify problematic behaviours pretty quickly.

Georgie CROZIER: Exactly. Not all private providers are at fault either. As you say, they have got very good workers who are very consistent, and they are ongoing and have permanent positions as well. We have been talking about the various inquiries that have been taking place in this country – the national royal commission into child abuse and the *Betrayal of Trust* that the Victorian Parliament did in 2011, which I was involved with. One of the recommendations – I want to know if you are aware of this – was that:

... the Victorian Government review the current Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ... procedures for responding to allegations of all forms of criminal child abuse within all Victorian schools and identifies a benchmark that could be applied more broadly to non-government schools.

That was identified 12 years ago, and we are having this inquiry now. On the working with children check, the Ombudsman made a recommendation in 2022. Can I just get your feedback around the systems that need to be in place so that these things are followed through with by government?

Karen DOUGLAS: The working with children check is one measure, but it is not the whole answer. A workforce and an operational environment that have sufficient skilled professional staff that are constantly having professional development to identify behaviours and building those relationships, not just with the children but with the families and carers, we say are really crucial to building that safe environment. The other part to your question I did not respond to was the rate capping. We are on record saying that we think this is a flawed approach.

Georgie CROZIER: What does the MAV say about your response to that?

Karen DOUGLAS: The MAV, as I understand from what they have on their website, are no fans of rate capping either because it places unnecessary pressure to find savings. Our perspective on that is that ongoing secure workers, particularly with vulnerable people but right across the sector, are really crucial to the provision of services for communities.

Georgie CROZIER: I am out of time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. Earlier you provided an example of a service in Melbourne that is a really good example of best practice when it comes to group sizes and staffing ratios, but you said that that service is running at a loss. Is there something broken with our funding model if providing best practice care is not sustainable?

Steph CHIRON: One big part is generally a service will apply for funding, and I do not know if you have discussed this much, but that is flawed purely because not only do you have to get the parent on board at the start, and they could say yes or no, but then you have got to go through all these loopholes to get just a little bit of funding to support a child. The thing is, that requires generally a diagnosis of the child or, I like to say, labelling the child, and it quite often falls short in the end. So our belief is that we need more funding just in general from, hopefully, federal government to make sure that children get that support regardless, so they do not need to be diagnosed; they could be just having a bad week. But that requires an extra educator to support that child in line with the EYLF and their particular needs. Especially under three, they need that connection with people to learn and to feel safe.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Based on the experience of your members, what are the features of the council-run ECECs that lead to some of those things you pointed out as positives, like greater retention and stability of the workforce, compared to perhaps non-local government provided ECECs?

Steph CHIRON: We negotiate their enterprise agreements. That tends to be about 20 per cent more than the award, which is one big factor of retention. Every single centre that you go to in local government will have at least one or two educators that have been there for 30, 40 years. I have worked with educators that have been doing it longer than I have been alive. They would have started off as a mothercraft nurse and they have continued on, and that is because the conditions and the pay are better.

Karen DOUGLAS: We also mentioned in our opening statement that parents who went to child care in certain settings are now bringing their children into those settings because they have that trust and confidence in the workforce, in the service that the local government provides and also in some of those early intervention issues that Steph has referenced. We have examples of councils where a child comes into the sector, the professionals in there observe them, they are with them on a regular basis – possibly five days a week – and they can identify when kids are not meeting their milestones and then they can use their knowledge. As that team – and Steph referred to some of those other professionals in the team – they can identify when kids are not doing that and intervene fairly early.

Steph CHIRON: Another point to make is most of our services have a child maternal health onsite, so that sort of reference is very quickly, easily actioned. You can say, ‘Hey, make an appointment,’ and they can walk out and make an appointment straightaway. So having it all in-house is really useful.

Sarah MANSFIELD: It sounds like some of the key things are that better pay and conditions for staff not only mean that they are more likely to stay – and that stability is directly good for the children – but also mean that staff are more likely to be well supported because there is more experience embedded in the service.

Steph CHIRON: That is right, and it attracts more educators as well.

Karen DOUGLAS: And that attraction and retention piece, as you said, is really crucial in this multifactorial way of identifying risk or children that are at risk of grooming or of abuse at home and then intervening early. We have a number of our members speak about their interaction with the child protection system, so they are key people in keeping those children safe – identifying kids that are coming with problematic behaviour or physical indications of abuse, getting in early and acting.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned in your opening statement as well that there can be challenges, or perhaps there may be challenges with managerial behaviour when it comes to mandatory reporting. Can you expand on what you meant by that? There was something to do with managerial behaviour that affects that mandatory reporting process.

Karen DOUGLAS: We say it is the system, not the people. If we have good systems, you can have a higher confidence in greater outcomes. When you underfund services, people are doing all sorts of different jobs, and they are not necessarily keeping their eye on the job that they can actually do. So the mandatory reporting is a crucial element of keeping children safe, but effectively we have also got to get that reportable conduct connection sorted as well, because if you have a complaint from someone – we have male members and male childcare workers, and they are fantastic people. Just simply being a male worker does not place you at risk or place a child at risk, but we deal with those things because we have men workers who are identified by other people as being a risk simply because of their physical characteristics. That is the sort of thing where we say that management need to be mature and have the time, the skills and the resources available to them to think through and step through how to deal with complaints and what those next steps might be.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. That is my time.

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

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for being here today. Can I just go back and do a metric? So of the 79 councils, 30 local governments provide services in early child care. At the start, you said some are outsourced, so are you talking about the other 49 being outsourced?

Karen DOUGLAS: Yes.

Melina BATH: Are you saying that of those 79, all 30 councils then provide a service? Is that right?

Karen DOUGLAS: That is right: 30 of the 79.

Melina BATH: 30.

Karen DOUGLAS: 30 do, the others have outsourced over a period of time.

Melina BATH: Thank you. That is good.

Karen DOUGLAS: We are talking about a cohort of 30.

Melina BATH: Beautiful. Then of that you have got 3300 workers and 900 are members.

Steph CHIRON: Approximately. I have not checked the figures today.

Melina BATH: That is right, give or take. Thank you, I just wanted to make that. You spoke about rate capping, and it has always been – I think when I first came into this place 11 years ago, we had a rate capping inquiry because it had just come in and there was an assessment there. There is a bill at the moment going through that is in between houses called the entities Bill. At the moment, in terms of rate capping, there is the essential services commissioner that has a say, has a review of the rate-capping space and the rate-capping setting and then provides information to government, to the minister. That Bill will take that away, and it will diminish the essential services commissioner oversight. Some say that that lacks transparency and therefore, you know, would affect communication and collaboration in the local government sector. Is that something that your union has been across or is this news to you in this space?

Karen DOUGLAS: I am not familiar with the intricacies of the bills that go back and forward. They happen fairly regularly in a healthy democracy. I do not know the specifics of that, so I would not be able to answer that other than to say that, with the broader issue of rate capping, we are on the record through various inquiries saying that we think it is a flawed policy approach. There has got to be accountability for people's rates. There are probably a few of us in the room that pay them. We want to make sure that rates are effective and transparent, but that should not stand in the way of providing community services.

Melina BATH: I guess it highlights in general, and we hear it in the regions – I come from Gippsland – the cost shifting onto local government. If you go and talk to any local government councillor, they just feel that cost shifting is occurring over that period of time. How is that playing out in the ability for councils then to provide that quality of care? You are saying it is very high in local government settings, but what do you see on the ground, or what do your 900 members see on the ground? Is that playing out?

Karen DOUGLAS: We see councils and communities across Victoria appreciate local government services. Just last week, again on the aged care matter, Raf Epstein had a lot of people calling in to his radio show about the importance of local government services. That was in the aged care space. It is replicated in the childcare space as well. So we have a tripartite governance arrangement in Australia. There is a role for local, state and federal governments to play and to fund these services, including childcare.

Melina BATH: Thank you. On early childhood intervention, our first speaker today Ms Moore spoke about the pre-school field officers and that they had been often based in the local government and that they have been cut over, I do not know what the period of time is, but they were funded for 15 hours and now they have been cut back. She was saying similar things that you have been saying: they were a trusted source, they were known by the community, they could identify children at risk or children with special needs and the like. Are you aware of those pre-school field officers? Have they been part of your members or involved?

Karen DOUGLAS: So I obviously do not know who Ms Moore is or what her evidence was, but in our submission we do, in case study 2, draw on a very complex set of circumstances where those people did come in to assist a very tricky circumstance of children with significant behaviours of concern and very unsettled home environments. They were engaged with other services across the community, and the pre-school officers were crucial to problem-solving through that, but there were not sufficient numbers of them to help the workers on the ground as well.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I just do not want to get the wrong impression and so clarify for me. I live in a regional town and my children went to the community-run, not-for-profit, community-based pre-school many years ago now. I do not want to read into what you are saying that they are not up to speed, per se. Is that what you are saying? Because I feel that those people who are in those community-run not-for-profits which have

been around, and this one, I think, has been operating for around 70 years and evolving, that they still can provide a very decent service, particularly where we have childcare deserts in regional Victoria.

Karen DOUGLAS: Yes. So we do not object to workers across sectors. What we have said is that child care should not be profit driven. It is an investment in young people. It is an investment in their education, their care and their support.

Melina BATH: I guess the thing with that is, though, so in my town as well, we have eight providers. Four of them are either not-for-profit council or not-for-profit community and four are for-profit. If you took out those for-profits, and this would be very similar across the board in regional Victoria, you are actually taking away half of the quantum of places when we have already got stretched services. I guess I am putting back to you that potentially it is the quality of the care and oversight and regulation that is the primary factor that should be there, rather than whether a business is making a profit or is a not-for-profit.

Karen DOUGLAS: Well, local government can be funded to provide those high-quality services. If that was the hypothetical, we would say fund local government childcare services that are in those regional areas and also within the smaller towns so that you can reduce the travel for people to –

Melina BATH: It also brings up a workforce capability issue as well, doesn't it?

Karen DOUGLAS: Well, there are numbers, but we also find that our members are often cert IV minimum, and so governments are investing in the education of childcare workers, so that needs to remain. But that service provision can be picked up by local governments who are investing in the community.

Melina BATH: If we take the rate cap off. Thank you. Thanks, Chair. Thanks for your commentary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. Thank you very much for submitting to the inquiry. I really enjoyed listening to your perspective from your members' experiences, which is great. I have got a bunch of little questions. We will just see how we go with them. You mentioned poor quality training courses. I just wonder if you could expand on that a little bit, about staff that are potentially not getting the training that they should. I am not quite sure what you were mentioning.

Karen DOUGLAS: Let me clarify that. We did not say that the training is poor quality. What we are saying is that casualised or agency or insecure workers do not have the same opportunities to access the ongoing training, by the very nature of their employment category. We would again make that differentiation, as we have in the last few moments, that it is not the people, it is the system where the breakage is. If people are casual and they are coming in this afternoon because someone has had a car accident right now on their way to work, who are you going to get to come in in the next hour and be that person caring for the children? It is going to be a casual or an agency person who is going to come in and go out again. That does not make that person a bad person. But what it means is that the system is not built to make sure that those people are funded to do the ongoing training that those people in secure work are subject to.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, there is certainly extra pressure on casuals to understand the particular system that they are working in and the procedures that are required to keep food allocated appropriately to each child, like the breast milk that actually belongs to the child is given to them and that kind of thing. There is enormous pressure on casuals to comply with all of that when they are just coming in at the last minute.

Karen DOUGLAS: I guess another corollary of that is that the manipulation of the under-the-roof line puts pressure on the ongoing workers. We talked about work intensification. The casuals come in and the toilets need to be cleaned, a child has vomited and the stock has to be done. The nappies, the cleaning arrangements, the gloves – all that needs to be done. That is part of the early childhood education and care worker's job in addition to all the complexities that we listed in our opening statement. Who does that work in a very busy circumstance? You almost end up deskilling the casual and the agency staff, because that is the person who is available who does not have the rapport with the child who needs comforting or needs their behaviour addressed one on one. This is not a good system. The insecure work in the system does not then enable people to enjoy their work as well. That is a barrier to getting good people in the system, and we need good people in the system and there are many out there.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I want to move to maybe a gendered question, I do not know. Historically, and I mean very historically and potentially even still today, there is a perception that child care is women's work. Maybe within the context of local government, state government and Commonwealth government it is traditionally difficult to get Treasury money for those spaces. But the childcare deserts have shown that there are many important economic outcomes for investing in child care. I just wonder if there is still a gendered space in terms of balancing those competing priorities that you mentioned from local government's perspective.

Karen DOUGLAS: Well, undoubtedly. We are running a gender-based undervaluation case in the Fair Work Commission at a national level now. These sectors, this 'women's work', are still infected by an undervaluation of the actual tasks that are undertaken. If I just think about those couple of tasks that I mentioned in our statement – managing neurodiverse children, managing parental and carer disputes – this is an everyday part of these workers' jobs. It is hard work, it is low-paid work and it is gendered. We are bringing in more and more migrant workers, who are great people themselves, to do this work because other people will not do it. When we think about reportable conduct and the risks that are in the sector, our members say to us that – and this is true – they will get more money stacking shelves in a supermarket than they will managing the complexities of a child. Even if the child does not have complex issues, they are still a three-year-old.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is still highly skilled work.

Karen DOUGLAS: It is still highly skilled work, and they are still a three-year-old who is tired and cranky and wants to play up. These are highly skilled jobs that are just simply not recognised in our system. We have been long-term advocates for correcting that terrible, terrible circumstance and we will continue to advocate for people. It is a sector that needs a whole heap of people with a whole heap of personal characteristics and a whole heap of skills and backgrounds, because we are a society. Once you get out of school you mix with a whole heap of people, and the sector should also be reflective of everyone in our community.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, a unique set of skills to work with a universal service. You mentioned market-gear responses to financial incentives. I guess that goes to the Commonwealth funding structure and sustainability of quality early childhood services. Are you supportive of or encouraging a review of the Commonwealth funding? You have obviously got that in recommendation 3 there. Is that what you are suggesting, a review of the structure of those services?

Karen DOUGLAS: As I said, there is a role for the local, state and federal governments to fund and support this sector. We say that investment in children is not a profit-driven focus, it is actually about investing in little people who will then go on to have the best start in life that they can.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Awesome. Again, thank you. I just realised my time is up and it is now our lunchbreak, sorry. Thank you very much for appearing.

The CHAIR: Thank you both, Ms Douglas and Ms Chiron. That brings our session to a close. We really appreciate your contribution to our inquiry today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week's time before it is published.

The committee is now going to take a break for lunch and will return at 1 o'clock. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.