

T R A N S C R I P T

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

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 25 February 2026

MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESSES

John Burton, Executive Director, Policy and Research, and

Miranda Edwards, Director, Early Years Support, Western Australia, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care – National Voice for Our Children.

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.

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

All evidence is 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.

Miranda EDWARDS: Miranda Edwards, Director of Early Years Support, WA, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care – National Voice for Our Children.

John BURTON: John Burton. I am the Executive Director, Policy and Research, with SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children.

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

Michael GALEA: Good morning. Michael Galea, South-East Metro, Deputy Chair.

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

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

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I would now like to extend an invitation to you to make an opening statement and ask if you could please keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes so we can ensure we have got plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

Miranda EDWARDS: Thank you. SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children is the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled peak body, leading systemic and structural reform to protect and advance the rights, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities across Australia. Our work builds on more than 43 years of community leadership, grounded in over 65,000 years of care, nurture and cultural knowledge. Since 1981 we have worked to advance the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families and to support the self-determination of our communities, ensuring that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and young person has the opportunity to reach their full potential, growing up strong in culture, supported by strong families and thriving within self-determined communities.

In Victoria SNAICC provides an early years support – EYS – program which operates in eight sites and provides tailored support through needs-driven resource development, quality uplift projects, a community of practice and policy advocacy for the ACCO early years sector. We also engage with Victorian peaks on issues related to the Victorian ECE system. In preparation, we consulted with VACCA – the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency – the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association. We thank them for their guidance.

From running an Aboriginal early childhood centre, Lulla's Children and Family Centre in Shepparton, for 15 years I know that services like ACCOs work. We raise, we nurture, and we support all Aboriginal children and families to give them strong identity and culture, and when we have got teachers saying that our children are school-ready, we know that spaces like Lulla's and Yappera, just to name a couple, work because dedicated Aboriginal early childhood educators in this space are looking after our children. We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive when support begins with culture, identity, connection to country, family and belonging; this is what ACCO ECE services provide.

The Victorian inquiry into ECE is an opportunity to reform and improve developmental outcomes for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but only if it strengthens the ACCO ECE system. The Victorian inquiry into ECE is particularly important for what it represents: a chance to shift away from a largely market-driven model to one that is focused on producing the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. A successful reform of the Victorian ECE sector will depend on strong leadership from the Victorian government. It can do this by engaging in genuine partnership and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – in particular Gellung Warl; VACYPA, the Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance; and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, VAEAI – and ensuring that all actions and new legislation arising from the inquiry are aligned and are consistent with our national agreement on Closing the Gap and adopting leadership across states and territories in relation to the ECE system. Forums such as the early childhood care and development policy partnership and the early childhood policy group provide important opportunities to showcase reform occurring at the state level.

The latest AEDC data shows that only 35.8 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria commencing school were assessed as being developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains in 2024. While this is slightly above the national average, it shows limited improvement based on progress from the baseline, and there remains significantly more work to do. The critical need for improved access to ACCO ECE services is reflected in the ongoing gap in early developmental statistics like the Australian Early Development Census. Closing the Gap target 4 aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the AEDC to 55 per cent by 2031. ACCOs know what contributes to keeping children safe and families confident: early childhood services governed by and embedded in communities with skilled staff who are connected to families and communities. There is a need for investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in a way that prioritises community-controlled child and family centred practice, relationships and trust. Holistic child development is essential to building quality and safety into Victoria's ECE system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Regulatory responses, while important, will not on their own produce a high-quality safe ECE system. To achieve high-quality and culturally safe ECE services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, much deeper structural change is required. We acknowledge that the Victorian government has accepted and will implement 22 recommendations from the recent *Rapid Child Safety Review* to strengthen the safety standards in early childhood education and care and has committed to establishing a new and strengthened independent authority enabled by the new standalone Act with responsibility for regulating early childhood services under the national law. We urge the Victorian government to undertake community consultation each step of the way. Leaders such as Aunty Lisa from Bubup Wilam, for example, have expressed concerns about cameras used in centres. We recommend that the Victorian government undertake comprehensive, good-faith consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to shape reforms supported by a transparent and culturally appropriate communication plan. This will ensure the additional regulatory compliance costs are all covered by government.

Funding reform: we are enabling funding models that allow self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to provide culturally appropriate ECE services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that improve developmental outcomes. Workforce and training is valuing early education professionals, improving pay and career pathways and a building strong pipeline for our future professionals. Cultural safety: this requires greater resourcing and further system-wide measures to effectively embed culturally safe practice across all aspects of ECE systems. Data sovereignty requires ensuring that all data practices of the Victorian ECE system uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to data sovereignty. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Ms Edwards. I appreciate the presentation that you have made to the committee. I would like to begin. As the national body representing interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, do you believe Australia's early childhood regulatory framework treats cultural safety as a core child protection issue or as a secondary quality consideration?

Miranda EDWARDS: Secondary. Why I say that is I find – the regulatory is obviously state and territory legislation, and this is me talking when I was running a service – we are running a service by regulatory national quality frameworks. When I was running a service, particularly my service that I was running, it was under the old multifunctional Aboriginal – and we were exempt from the national quality framework. So when the Victorian state regulator would come in and assess me, I was under the old regs even though when we were being trained or when the educators would be doing any professional development it was all under the national quality framework, which is where we should be wanting to be, at that level.

So for a service like mine, which was underfunded or not funded at times, it was really hard to make sure that we were doing the right thing when we were not funded for that area. We were under the old reg, so we would keep to that and make sure that we were doing the right thing. But when I look at the way the assessment process is in place now for our services, I think that would give a great opportunity to be able to see the quality that our ACCOs are actually providing and being able to be supported in. I think in Victoria there needs to be some real support around supporting our ACCOs, which are exempt, so they are able to thrive, because you will find that probably all of them can be assessed and be proven to be quality and up to standard, but under the legislation they cannot be.

John BURTON: I might just add, on that question, that a lot of the feedback we have had nationally from the sector has been that the national quality framework as it currently stands does not recognise and reflect the extent or quality provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander providers. You have got quite a few Aboriginal services across the country that are exceeding and doing really well against the quality framework. You have Bubup Wilam here in Melbourne as a great example of a service that is rated 'excellent'. Despite some of those successes, services are recognising that that framework is not measuring a lot of the things that they do that are most important to getting outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Some of the reforms that we have called for nationally are to take a collaborative approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and peaks to develop those standards of quality that reflect the practice that is going to have the best outcomes for their families, children and communities. That is definitely a change that we would like to see in the system overall.

The CHAIR: That is really important, and that leads to my next question around what you mentioned in your opening statement: good-faith consultation. We have just had statewide treaty pass here – very historic for Victoria, which is fantastic. That will allow Victorian governments of the day to engage in good-faith consultation. For the committee here, what does that even look like, good-faith consultation? Obviously there have been times when we have had a lot of legislation come through as a result and as an outcome of horrific stories of abuse happening in the sector. Have you been engaged in good faith over the rapid review that was commissioned by the government? What kind of engagement have you had with the Victorian government, speaking about strong leadership?

John BURTON: I cannot speak in detail to the rapid review as a national –

The CHAIR: Were you or any of the ACCOs engaged at any time over the course of the rapid review, the six weeks?

John BURTON: Not that I am aware of, but we would have to seek further information to see if there were any invitations.

The CHAIR: Can you take that on notice, please?

John BURTON: I can take that on notice. I would say good-faith consultation, as a starting point for these kinds of reforms, involves not having predetermined priority outcomes and changes. It means going and learning from communities and the sector first. It means speaking directly to those Aboriginal organisations and services who understand what creates quality and safety in their communities, hearing that from their perspective. It involves working collaboratively with organisations like SNAICC and the state-based peaks that work with the sector and represent their interests and needs and have a good understanding of that to design

reforms that are going to work. As, Miranda, you were referring to in terms of particular people bringing up concerns about particular initiatives to create safety, I think that reflects that some of the responses at times have been narrowly focused on a particular regulation or a particular oversight rather than having that conversation about what are some of those fundamentals that make a difference to a quality service in each community.

The CHAIR: Have SNAICC or the ACCOs that you work with here in Victoria had a lot of interaction with the new regulator in terms of bringing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lived experience and lenses and in terms of closing the gap in early childhood accessibility?

Miranda EDWARDS: We would again have to take that on notice and actually go out and ask. I would like to think they have, but I do not have the answer right now. But what I do want to share with you as well is that SNAICC did a piece of work with ACECQA on the regulatory officers that attend our services in every state and territory, and one of the recommendations that we made was around cultural safety and the assessors being trained in cultural awareness, because a lot of our services –

The CHAIR: Are they?

Miranda EDWARDS: No.

The CHAIR: So the authorised officers coming out to conduct assessments on approved providers are not given any kind of cultural competency?

Miranda EDWARDS: Well, we have given the recommendations. I am unsure if they have been put into place. I would have to go back to ACECQA and ask if they have –

The CHAIR: Is that public knowledge?

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, the *Shaping Our Future* document. It is one of the 22 recommendations – 22 or 21, I would have to check. Was it 21 recommendations?

John BURTON: Yes.

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, 21 recommendations were made, and SNAICC was a part of the ACECQA recommendations on their model for when their assessors are going out to our services and what work needs to be done. So I gather –

The CHAIR: Is there a concern that could compromise approved providers with regard to meeting national quality standards if they do not understand those cultural components?

Miranda EDWARDS: Definitely. That is why we wanted to sit with them and explain the importance of an assessor understanding culture and cultural aspects of all of our ACCO services – or just understanding the ACCO space. We know that they are unique and different. Yes, we know our services are different, and they are run differently because we know the way we want our child to grow up and nurture them and make sure they are strong on identity. Yes, we do things differently, and it is really based around identity and culture. Obviously, speaking from experience, the assessor was coming in very regulatorily, which is their job, but we need them to understand. With things like calling the educators ‘Aunty’ or ‘Nan’, there is that real cultural aspect of it, and that is just one cultural aspect. But yes, we know with the recommendations that SNAICC gave them that if they can implement them we will see a difference in our ACCOs.

Again, we have got a couple of services that are rated as ‘excellent’ – you know, let us look at that. One here in Victoria, Bubup, is doing amazingly. Credit to Aunty Lisa and the model that they have developed. They have even got an RTO established there that is culturally safe, has students graduating at the diploma level and is Aboriginal, and 21 students graduated last year. Aunty Lisa has developed this model to ensure that educators are seeking everything across the board to be able to understand what it takes to run an Aboriginal early childhood centre.

The CHAIR: I really appreciate that. My time has run out. I would have liked to explore that further, but I will hand over to our Deputy Chair. Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, both of you. I would actually like to continue in a similar vein with how ACCOs are best supported to provide culturally appropriate care. Noting that the Commonwealth is responsible for payment of the childcare subsidy, what support does the Commonwealth government provide ACCOs to deliver early childhood education and care in a culturally safe manner?

John BURTON: I mean, there is not a great deal of support provided directly by the Commonwealth government. Certainly a positive initiative that is happening is the funding that SNAICC does get from the Commonwealth government for providing its early years support service. That has been operating for a few years now in Victoria, in Western Australia and in New South Wales and is slowly moving out into other jurisdictions and seeking funding to expand after some really strong and positive evaluation of how that works. What that looks like is having SNAICC staff on the ground with those services. When we talk about quality assessment, they are not in that kind of assessment–compliance role. They are having a positive support conversation, which I think is at least as equally important or probably more important in terms of how you improve quality in a service. They have a tool they administer with the services to get their perspective on where they are at in terms of different quality standards development and then tailor individual support alongside that service to build the systems and processes that they want to build to best support their children and families. That is support around workforce development, around program and policy development and around networking and sharing information between services so everyone is learning from the best things that are happening across the sector and uplifting practice overall. So that is something that is a positive contribution from the Commonwealth, and we are certainly hoping to see continued increase so that those services can grow and develop.

Michael GALEA: Indeed. That sounds like very valuable work that you are able to do. What sort of funding do you get to do that program?

John BURTON: I would have to come back to you on the exact funding amount. The staff team in Victoria would be around four people – is that correct – who are working to support the sector. There are 13 ACCOs in the child care, preschool, kindergarten space here in Victoria. So they are working across that, which is great.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. Thank you. And any other data on notice please feel free to provide. Outside of the funding to SNAICC, then, there is no other Commonwealth subsidy or support to ACCO childcare centres beyond – is there anything else?

Miranda EDWARDS: No, not that I can think of. They would have just received their childcare subsidy system. If we can just reflect on that, that model did not suit ACCOs, meaning – obviously I ran one. When that first was brought in I went from having a 45-place centre and a waiting list to seven children attending. And I share this story very often: I actually thank COVID for happening because the government gave money to us for the amount of children I was licensed for. So in that period of COVID happening I went out and knocked on the doors of all the children that were not attending and asked them why they were not attending and why they were not attending was because the system was not allowing these Aboriginal children and families to be able to attend because they could not afford the fee that I would have had to put on, which was about \$70 a day. So we went from being funded under the budget-based funded program – that was years ago – that we were under before the childcare subsidy system came in. We used to be able to charge our families \$10 a day, which they could afford, and provide so much more for \$10. Anyway, while this came in, families just were like, ‘No, we are so scared of that, now that child protection will be involved.’ They just had this view. They were misled and there was misinformation about the whole thing. So I had to go out and knock on the door and say, ‘Let me work through each of your circumstances,’ while it was free, while COVID funding was available. So I ended up coming back and being, again, full while COVID happened. I also was not worried about wages because the current system – also, I would have to have 21 children in a day to be able to cover my ratio of covered staff. So there was a real impact on that with our ACCOs, and I was not the only service that would share many different stories around that. So I think the advocacy that SNAICC has played around the hours that families can access now is really, really important. But it is really important that they are listening to the families that need day care, need long day care, need kindergarten. So that is what our services provide.

Michael GALEA: Yes.

John BURTON: There are probably just a couple of Commonwealth programs we could note that provide a level of support. There is obviously the Community Child Care Fund, which is provided to a number of the

ACCO providers in Victoria and elsewhere. I think generally the feedback we get from the sector is that that is only to an extent adequate or not enough to be able to provide the basic level of childcare service and some additional supports to families but not the range of services that they would want to provide.

Michael GALEA: How much more would be required?

John BURTON: Substantially more in terms of providing a holistic model of care. I think certainly the ambition and the goal of ACCOs is to be able to wrap supports around families and children, to be able to do more than just provide education and to be able to do outreach to families and engage the community around a whole range of activities that support. That requires funding for more integrated services for children and families. We have seen some good funding initiatives in other jurisdictions. In New South Wales, for example, Aboriginal child and family centres are funded in such a way that they access not just the childcare subsidy funding but get a package of funding from the state government that allows them to provide the additional supports to families, which are quite substantial. There are nine of those across New South Wales and they are currently establishing six more, so there is an expansion of that integrated support. I think that is the kind of initiative.

Michael GALEA: You have got the state government in New South Wales stepping in to fill the Commonwealth void, effectively, to bring it up to that standard.

John BURTON: That is the role the state government is playing in terms of funding those other types of supports alongside the Commonwealth, yes.

Michael GALEA: I have many more questions, but as you have heard, my time is up. I will pass back to the Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, Chair; and thank you for being here today. This is really important. There are some tremendous ECECs out there, and you have demonstrated to us your passion, commitment and quality. I have had the privilege of going and talking to some of them, though certainly not all of them. It has highlighted some I guess gaps in the current system and areas where there could be improvements. I think they align to some of the content of your recommendations. For example, in the north – and I will not identify which one, but I have had some good discussions with some in the north of Victoria – there is an integrated hub model. You have got an early childhood education centre, and it is aligned with the maternal and child health centre. There is I think the term is a ‘warm handover’ so that the child, from infancy, is known in that hub, and when there is a transfer it is an easy transfer, it is a gentle transfer and it is a comfortable one for family and child. My understanding is that because of those integrated hubs there has been greater success with kids – young kids, but I will say the word ‘kids’ – moving from that early centre into the childcare centre. Can you talk to that? Do you agree with that model? Have you seen it working in other jurisdictions? How could that be integrated in a wider context if you agree with it?

Miranda EDWARDS: When I first started as the CEO of Lullas Children and Family Centre, that was something that our board strived to be. We actually were two services that amalgamated together. We were Lidje MACS childcare centre and Batdja preschool, so the elders of that community said they would like to amalgamate the two and have that model of the maternal health nurse come in – but again, it was not funded. The centre was obviously funded; there was a beautiful building to bring them together. It had an office for the maternal health nurse. But it was my role as the CEO to seek all of that and any allied health service to come in, but at a cost. Over time, when you are just getting the limited funding to run your service and pay wages, you are not funded for food and you are not funded for the bus. I think there are some amazing models out there and I am aware of a couple, though not so much in Victoria in the ACCOs space, but it is something that our services do have extended allied services coming into their services to provide. We know that our community, when they are attending our ACCOs space, feel culturally safe. It is about building those relationships up. I did have a maternal health nurse that would come in at Lullas when I was there, but again, it was not funded and not provided as something that should be embedded into the program from the start. So I do agree with you.

John BURTON: There are a couple of examples I could give you from interstate to look towards. One is the Aboriginal child and family centres in New South Wales I mentioned earlier, which apply that integrated model. Early years places in Queensland are definitely worth looking at and considering too, where there is

substantial funding to Aboriginal orgs to provide a holistic response service. SNAICC has done some work at the national level, working with the states and territories and the Commonwealth to develop a funding model for ACCO-integrated early years services. That funding model describes how services could be funded properly for all it takes to be able to provide that range of supports to families, including having the people you need to build those relationships, referral processes and connections to have social workers embedded in the service and have those allied health services as part of your offering. We have been calling really strongly for that model to be adopted. That was considered recently by education ministers nationally, and while there has been positive support for the model, we have not seen the concrete steps to actually put that funding in place or reform how ACCOs are supported.

Melina BATH: I have got 70 questions and 2½ minutes. And that one was an ACCO.

Miranda EDWARDS: Oh, was it?

Melina BATH: Yes – really fantastic – and all of my examples are. But what governance role should the ACCOs have in terms of guaranteeing – if we are going to do a joint commissioning, so take away the silos of funding and actually have joint and ongoing funding, what role do you see ACCOs playing in that integrated system? Just good communication – we will say good-faith collaboration?

Miranda EDWARDS: Consultation is definitely the key. They are the backbone; they know their community. That is their business, their day to day – they know their community.

John BURTON: And it looks different in each community; I think that is something we would say. What role each ACCO plays and what role different organisations play in providing that service to a family, each community is going to have a different way of working, but as long as they are involved in that design process –

Melina BATH: Bespoke from the particular area.

Miranda EDWARDS: A clear example is that even two Aboriginal early childhood centres here in Victoria definitely are very different –

Melina BATH: Yes – different location, different community, different kinship groups.

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, that is right. Different locations, even though they are situated in metro, definitely have different family groups that you have to be respectful of in the way that they do business.

Melina BATH: Yes. Good. I want to talk about Indigenous data sovereignty, and again I am using an example from an ACCO in the north of the state. The education department tracks attendance. That is its metric. So I am going to talk to you about metrics and how they do not, from my understanding, seem to serve that cultural connection and long-term stability that can be created from good kinship groups. What needs to change in terms of culturally safe services? We have seen an example where kids, because of that wraparound community, actually had better attendance at the centre. But it is not recognised in education department data. On the ownership of that data about that community and how important that is, because really the community best understands their children, what needs to change from an education department siloed point of view in terms of data sovereignty and ownership? What can you share with us about that?

Miranda EDWARDS: I think there is no system in place to be able to collect that data, for starters, or the system that is in place for that service is not taken anywhere. So I think there needs to be support and funding for centres to be able to collect that data for it to be used. Again, maybe you want to do a bit more on it, but yes, it is not in place. I am not sure what the answer is, but I am aware of it, obviously.

John BURTON: I think there needs to be a level of consultation with communities and services about what data is most important to collect, to give them the opportunity to define those systems of data collection from their own perspective. At the same time I think there is a gap in access for communities to the data that already exists. It is a two-way –

Melina BATH: Yes. The flow – it is a one-way flow down; it is not a two-way system.

John BURTON: That is right.

Melina BATH: To share that data – overall you want the net improvement for the children in that community, don't you?

John BURTON: Yes.

Melina BATH: There seems to be siloed working.

John BURTON: That is right. Only communities and services know what data they want and need, but they cannot always get access to it.

Melina BATH: There has been a resistance.

John BURTON: It sits in government systems – it is not publicly available; it is not easily findable or accessible. Those systems need a lot of work to connect with communities, I think.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thank you, Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for your submission and for appearing today. The Aboriginal Children's Forum took place in October last year, and it was attended by the Minister for Children and department secretaries. Are you aware of any commitments that were made coming out of that forum to ensure that ACCOs have what they need to deliver ECEC, or to build on some of the things that you have been calling for?

John BURTON: I definitely cannot speak to anything specific coming out of that forum. SNAICC is not a member of the Aboriginal Children's Forum in Victoria, so I might not be speaking about the same thing as you are referring to. We know there has been a bit of positive change in terms of kindergarten funding for ACCOs, so that is something we did want to highlight – that there is new investment of \$5.3 million over four years to see more flexible funding to ACCOs in kinder that streamlines the funding increases. It gives a base level for 18 places for ACCOs, gives them a bit of sustainability and security and recognises their broader role. So that is a positive development, but that might be different to the broader commitment you might be referring to.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, okay. Thank you. We have had a bit of discussion about funding and funding models and how they can be challenging. I am quite familiar with some of the challenges faced by ACCOs in the health space and just having to apply to lots of different pools of funding that are often administered by different departments. I guess the other aspect of that is accounting for that spending and all the different compliance and all the paperwork basically involved in accounting for all of those different funding pools. Is that an issue in the ECEC space as well?

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, definitely. I think you will find that with the shortage of educators or staffing, there is no funding for admin roles or someone dedicated to just be that. So we are either seeking extra support – and I suppose a clear example is our VIC EYS at the moment being able to provide that outside support because SNAICC is funded for it. But when I was running a service, yes, we did not have anyone to do that, so it was either me – and sometimes you do not apply for funding because you just do not have time to even open your emails. I will give you an example. One day when the kindergarten teacher was off, I was actually the kindergarten teacher, the bus driver and the cook, sometimes all in one day. I hear across the nation that that is a recurring thing, that due to the staffing shortages and underpaid wages that currently they are on there is a real shortage. So your example of having all of that paperwork – it is an administration burden on our sector. The amount of reporting that has to happen is definitely something that our sector is constantly telling us about.

John BURTON: That kinder reform I referred to is positive in that it is streamlining I think four or five funding streams into one, which should make that a bit easier, but it is only in kinder. So you have still got the long day care funding and you have still got any other integrated service support funding often coming through in multiple streams from multiple governments, and that creates a lot of burden on the services. We really would like to see that brought together in some way that makes it administratively easier for services so they can focus on what they need to do.

Sarah MANSFIELD: It is not really fit for purpose for a holistic kind of model of early childhood education either that you are providing through the ACCOs, which, as you said, integrates a whole lot of other things that are not necessarily confined to that.

John BURTON: That is right – having to go hunting for bits and pieces of funding to try and make up the full picture of a holistic response rather than getting funded to provide a holistic response.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. I wonder if you can speak to the impact that the proliferation of a lot of the private providers and I suppose some of those bigger for-profit providers of early childhood education have had on ACCO-led early childhood education. Has there been any sort of impact that you are aware of?

John BURTON: I am not sure that it is a direct impact on the individual ACCO providers, but I guess it creates a competitive space where the system has prioritised the growth of those kinds of providers and not provided the same opportunity for ACCOs to build those services, expand, because the communities they are supporting and serving are not necessarily meeting the profit goals that are incentivised by the system. I think in that respect we have seen the ACCOs sector not grow and develop to the extent it could have if we were going to achieve the goals set out in Closing the Gap and get the level of support to Aboriginal communities that we would like to see.

Miranda EDWARDS: I think affordability plays a big part in today's world around what a family can afford. I think that in the ACCOs space we all know and we all share that we try our best to keep the fees as low as we can, because we know that this is the best place for them.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Absolutely. Are you aware of any barriers to accessing non-ACCO services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children?

Miranda EDWARDS: Not that I am aware of through our advocacy at SNAICC, but when I was running a service in Shepparton, one of the things was about when we were full. I had obviously worked closely with the maternal health nurse there and she was asking me about Aboriginal children being born, and if they could not go to the centre I was running, where could they go? I said that maybe in partnership we can speak to all the early childhood centres in Shepparton. I got a small bit of funding to go around and consult with all the childcare centres and just talk to them about what it takes for an Aboriginal person to walk through their door and how they are meant to feel. This was 10 years ago. I am unsure of the work that has been happening, but what I would like to think is that they took on board having an Aboriginal flag, having a welcome, making you feel comfortable, speaking to the family, doing all the things that we would do at our centre so that if an Aboriginal family walked in that they would feel culturally safe. Sorry, that was 10 years ago.

John BURTON: It plays out in the national data around the reduced usage of CCS-approved services for Aboriginal children, which is substantially below – I think about a third below – the general population. That I think does reflect that there is a lack of cultural safety and effective engagement with Aboriginal communities for them to participate in those services, whereas we see really strong engagement in the ACCO services where they exist and where they have those connections with community.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much. Can I just follow on from that line of questioning from Dr Mansfield? How many Indigenous children attend ACCO services?

Miranda EDWARDS: In Victoria?

Georgie CROZIER: Yes. You referenced the 10 years. I am just keen to see what the figures are. You were saying 10 years ago you were working on these areas. So what numbers are we looking at?

Miranda EDWARDS: That was me personally when I ran a service. I am not sure, but we would have to take that on notice to find out the numbers.

John BURTON: There are around 13 ACCO services in Victoria. I do not know if we would have immediately the average numbers in each service, for example.

Georgie CROZIER: You can take it on notice. I am just interested to see what the numbers are now, what they were 10 years ago and what those trends are. To go to the point around the integration in other private providers, Ms Bath referenced a service in the north; certainly I have visited some of these, and they provide very good support or attempt to provide very good support. You referenced funding, and Mr Burton, you talked about the models of New South Wales and Queensland. You referenced those models. I am keen for you to just explain to the committee a little bit more about those models compared to what is happening here in Victoria.

John BURTON: Those models provide essentially a block-based funding component to the ACCO services that provides them the opportunity to provide things like family support services to allied health to do –

Georgie CROZIER: Is it more of a holistic approach?

John BURTON: It is. That is right.

Georgie CROZIER: Do you think that is a better way to look at this?

John BURTON: Absolutely. That is the key way that SNAICC promotes – the early childhood education and care sector is a key sector to bring families into a range of holistic supports that can meet the whole needs of the family and the community and I think address those experiences of disadvantage for children. That also plays a key role, for example, in preventing things like child protection intervention by making sure families get support when they need it.

Georgie CROZIER: I was wondering about that, because you said the figures are very impressive and that 100 per cent of Indigenous children are attending 3- to 4-year-old kinder here in Victoria. Given we know the child protection issues as well, are those children under child protection getting that support in attending early childhood education?

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, they are, because they we have found that for Aboriginal children, whether they are in the system or potentially in cases, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kindergarten is a space where the family and the child feel comfortable, even children that are being removed and being placed outside of family. In Victoria there was a recommendation that they be put in our ACCO spaces so that they are still able to have their cultural identities looked after.

Georgie CROZIER: So you are confident that is happening?

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, very – definitely.

Georgie CROZIER: Good. Excellent.

Miranda EDWARDS: It is very supported. Andrew Jackomos, when he was the commissioner – it came out very strongly at that point that Aboriginal children being removed from their families still have a connection to their community and an ACCO early childhood –

Georgie CROZIER: As a priority.

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes.

Georgie CROZIER: Good. Can I just go back – I sort of interrupted you there – a bit to around that block funding model. Over the last 10 years we have not really progressed very much in Victoria, then, in providing that wraparound service to the community.

John BURTON: No, that is right. I think that we have not seen that funding that goes alongside the education and care services to provide those additional supports. There have been smaller programs and small inputs but not a significant block of sustainable funding to do that work.

Georgie CROZIER: Have you done modelling on what that looks like, and how much that would be?

John BURTON: We have done modelling nationally on what that looks like, including what a base level of funding for a service is and how you then do adjustments to the need of the community, to geography – like

extra costs for remoteness and those sorts of things. So we have a model that describes what the costs would be. I cannot –

Georgie CROZIER: Can you provide that to the committee, the modelling?

John BURTON: Yes. We can provide that funding model to the committee.

Georgie CROZIER: All right. Thank you very much. That is all I have got. Thank you, Chair.

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

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. It is Jacinta here from Gunditjmara land. I just want to acknowledge the Gunditj Mirring people and the Eastern Maar organisations. Thanks for appearing and thanks for your contribution. I want to flip the whole conversation around, if that is all right. We are in the treaty era now, and we need to look at things from a self-determination perspective. I have been listening to you just now trying to find ways to get Aboriginal families' needs met through what is a generationally colonial regulatory system and funding system, and I thank you for your engagement in that.

I just want to ask you – there are some recommendations from Yoorrook here that talk about Aboriginal people taking a leadership role, elevating First Peoples from a consultative to a leadership role in education, and also establishing a First Peoples education council to oversee and ensure accountability for First Peoples schooling and education. Then there is also recommendation 61: decision-making power over curriculum, pedagogy, governance and resource allocation. Now, these things feel like a long way away, but they are the values and principles that have been signed off in treaty and are underpinned by self-determination. I just want to ask, in the context of self-determination and Gellung Warl: would Aboriginal childcare be regulated differently if the principle of self-determination was already embedded? Would you build a different regulation system for your own community? I know it is a leap, but we need to go there.

John BURTON: I do not think it is too big a leap. I think that is actually very much in line with what the sector SNAICC represents have been calling for a long time. They have a really good understanding of what is needed to support families and children in their communities and know what quality looks like in that context. There have been really strong calls for a collective approach to both defining what quality looks like and then setting up the system that oversees that and takes that supportive approach that we were talking about too, not just being the regulator that is there doing spot checks and making people feel afraid that they are going to have their funding pulled. They are looking at really building the relationship with the community, and even better if that support is part of the community and led by the community because it reflects and has the representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on it. That would I think substantially change the system of regulation and see it move in a better way towards strong and quality services that have what they need, so I am definitely supportive of those kinds of recommendations.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I was interested in Ms Crozier's question around block funding that provided more flexibility to build and to monitor what was more culturally appropriate. Have I interpreted that correctly?

John BURTON: Yes, I think that is the model we talked about.

Miranda EDWARDS: If I can reflect on the budget-based funding before the childcare subsidy came in, that was block funding. You would get this amount of money and you would work with it. I never had any issues when I was getting that block funding. We were able to work with that and able to provide everything that we needed, and then I felt, when the childcare subsidy system came in, it really took away all that holistic approach that was envisioned by our elders for why these services are being provided in our communities.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And almost the subsidy was a piece-by-piece kind of funding that sets up for the private sector.

Miranda EDWARDS: Well, it made me feel, as a director, I was looking at kids with dollar signs because if that child could come in I could afford staff an extra day. It really took away why, like I said, our elders wanted these services provided in our communities from 50 years ago. We have got centres in Victoria that are celebrating 40 years, 50 years and why they started. The childcare subsidy system came in, and it really took away – it is a business model, and that is not what our services are about. We are not about making money.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is fascinating, what you have said there, Miranda, because we have been listening to a range of different regulators that have perhaps been trying to find ways to avoid that kind of thinking around the child as a dollar sign: you know, 'If I get this kid in, I'll get more money.'

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes. Well, that is how I had to do it to actually afford staff. In the end it reflected personally that I did not really want to work in this space anymore. I am in a position now where I can advocate for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and educators.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. So would you suggest that committee could recommend more of a block funding approach? That is one of the recommendations of this inquiry.

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, definitely.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I think it is an awesome highlight, and I have learned a lot. So, acknowledging that we are in a transition and that the existing regulatory environments still apply to First Nations services, what particular improvements would you like to see from the early childhood regulator? Would it be increased resources but also more appropriateness and consciousness around cultural safety and appropriateness for First Nations child care?

Miranda EDWARDS: I would like to see more Aboriginal people be assessors. I think that is really important. I do not think we have any, and I am not sure – I would not have a clue if there is one, so sorry if there is. But I would like to see more Aboriginal people be trained up to be assessors in our services. Being, knowing and doing is obviously what Aboriginal people work with. If I think back to what I would have liked to see when I was being spot-checked under the old regulatory requirements to now seeing services being assessed, there is this model of preinformation being sent to the assessor which tells a story – the quality improvement plans that are in place. Currently under the services that are exempt from this, they do not get all that preinformation, so it does not really tell a story about how beautiful our services are and the quality that they are providing. I think what I would like to see is that our assessors, if the centres are to stay exempt, are building a relationship up with our services to understand the model that they are providing and the care that they are providing.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. I know my time is up. Would you say that perhaps there are a lot of individual regulations and that quality feedback and description, some quality input, would also be useful to describe the kinds of characteristics that you are saying the regulators do not measure?

Miranda EDWARDS: Yes, definitely. When I first started running the centre I had an assessor that had a really beautiful relationship with all the staff and educators because she made that effort to come in when she was not assessing to build that up. When she would assess us she would give us advice. Obviously she retired, that lady, and then the new assessors we just found very difficult to build a relationship up with, because they were just doing spot checks. That was their role in this current state legislation of being exempt.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you very much for the work that you are doing, and all power to you.

The CHAIR: That brings our very quick session – I feel like it has flown – to an end. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you, Ms Edwards and Mr Burton, for your contribution and your evidence today. I think we have all found it really insightful but also really important. I just want to let you know that a copy of the transcript will be available for review in about a week's time before it is published on the website. Noting also that there were some questions on notice for you, could you please see to those.

In the meantime we are going to take a quick break for a reset to welcome our next witnesses. Thank you again for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.