

TRANSCRIPT

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

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 25 February 2026

MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESSES

Jason Kanoa, Chief Executive Officer,

Karen Heap, Board Chair (*via videoconference*), and

Laura Browne, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

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 the 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.

Jason KANOA: Jason Kanoa, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

Laura BROWNE: Laura Browne, Manager of Policy and Advocacy at the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

Karen HEAP: Karen Heap, CEO of the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative and Chairperson of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, all. 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, Member for South-Eastern Metro and 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, Member for Western Victoria.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria. I am in Gunditjmara country at the moment in Warnambool.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I would now like to invite you to make an opening statement and ask if it is possible to keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes, just to ensure that we have got plenty of time for discussion.

Jason KANOA: Thank you, Chair. I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are on today, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I honour their enduring cultures, traditions and knowledge as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As a proud Gunditjmara Boandik Bunitj man and as CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, I – we – participate in this hearing with respect and cultural accountability, reflecting the voices, aspirations and resilience of the Aboriginal communities we are privileged to represent. I would like to thank you for the opportunity for the alliance, or VACYPA, to make a submission to this inquiry and appear at today's hearing. The circumstances that led to this inquiry are disturbing, and the opportunity to contribute to shaping reform is welcome.

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance is a peak body that represents 15 Aboriginal community controlled organisations registered to deliver children and family services in Victoria under the Victorian *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*. VACYPA's members provide child and family services across 97.5 per cent of Victoria, primarily in regional Victoria, covering 75 per cent of Victoria's local government areas. They employ over 2000 staff and deliver a range of services, including family services such as family preservation, parenting support, Aboriginal family led decision-making, emergency relief, men's and women's groups and other services; care services such as kinship, foster and residential care services; cultural planning for children in care and leaving care programs; and finally children and youth services such as early childhood education and care, school support programs, homework clubs, art therapy, youth support services, sporting activities, counselling and other programs. A number of VACYPA members perform statutory child protection functions under the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program and the Community Protecting Boorais program, authorised under section 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act*.

Our organisation is member-controlled, with our board made up of CEOs of our member organisations. We provide program support to our members and undertake policy and advocacy work focused primarily on the children and family services work of most of our members. Most VACYPA members also deliver services in other sectors, including health services, and are represented separately in relation to that work. Our vision for Aboriginal children and young people is to have every opportunity to thrive and be raised safely in Aboriginal families and communities. We advocate for the sovereignty and self-determination of Victoria's Aboriginal communities, guided always by culture as the core of everything we do. Our submission to this inquiry focused on highlighting the models of care that VACYPA's members deliver and aspire to deliver that centre Aboriginal children within a culturally strong environment that fosters not only safety but a sense of identity and wellbeing. We believe this is the best early childhood education and care environment for Aboriginal children and families. As organisations who also work at the tertiary end of the system with children and families with child protection involvement, VACYPA's members see the link between children and families receiving safe, culturally strong and holistic support in the early years and the protection this provides for their future.

While not all of our members currently deliver early childhood education and care services, many aspire to move into this space to provide an opportunity for early support for their communities and to identify and connect families with the other support services the ACCO provides at the earliest possible opportunity. The ACCO model is, by its nature, community led and embedded deeply in its local environment. It is a not-for-profit model that prioritises the rights and wellbeing of children above profit, efficiencies or cost reduction. ACCO models embed culture as a core element rather than an optional extra and provide opportunities to link families with prevention and early intervention across the broad range of other services that ACCOs deliver. The design of ACCO programs is informed by community, and the ACCO will know if they are not meeting those needs. These elements promote holistic models of care that centre on the children's safety and wellbeing, and we would like to see more funding available for ACCOs to deliver integrated early education hubs across Victoria. Integrated hubs provide an opportunity to link early schooling with preventative supports for children and families, looking after families from a perspective of strength and wellbeing, wrapping them in culture and anchoring relationships with community members throughout their lives. The barriers that VACYPA's members have raised with us that impact their ability to effectively deliver these services include the competitive nature of funding opportunities, the need for workforce investment to support workforce availability and the need to simplify and clarify the regulatory environment and better resource risk management and compliance in not-for-profit providers to address the burden that overlapping and duplicative compliance and reporting requirements create, which often falls to frontline workers.

Our submission also highlighted some of the opportunities to improve safety for Aboriginal children in mainstream early childhood education and care settings and the quality of those services. While we strive for every Aboriginal child to have the opportunity to attend Aboriginal-led early education and care, the reality is that many Aboriginal children do not have access to do this. Nonetheless under Child Safe Standard 1 they still have the right to a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued. Quality cultural capability training for non-Aboriginal early childhood education and care workers is critical to meeting this standard, as is properly informed monitoring and assessment of compliance by Aboriginal community members. As we move into the treaty era, embedding local Aboriginal culture and language into mainstream early childhood education and care settings will ensure our children grow up with an understanding of the extraordinary cultures that have

thrived and survived in this region for tens of thousands of years. I thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement, and we are happy to take questions now.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Kanoa, for your opening statement – we really appreciate it. I want to start off with the same question that I posed to our witnesses from SNAICC. As the collective voice of Victorian Aboriginal communities working to influence the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – and like you said in your opening statement, moving into the treaty era – do you believe that as we move into this treaty era cultural safety will be something that governments of the day ensure is paramount when it comes to uplifting and I guess ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are able to flourish and access ACCOs in the early childhood space?

Jason KANO: Absolutely. I think it has been long called for by our past leaderships and the leaders of today around how essential it is for service providers to be culturally responsive to Aboriginal children and families, ensuring that they are accessing that wherever they may live and whatever circumstances they are under. The ability to participate in early education is critical to that need to make sure that the cultural safety of those providers is there first and foremost.

Laura BROWNE: I am happy to add to that. I think in Victoria cultural safety is in the Child Safe Standards, which is a good thing. I think what we heard from our members in consultation for this submission was that it is the implementation that requires more support and that there is not sufficient I guess training and resourcing to ensure that cultural safety is genuinely occurring in mainstream early childhood education and care settings – that when an Aboriginal child and family walk through that door they are receiving a culturally safe service even if it is not an Aboriginal-led service. I think ensuring that that implementation side of things follows the policy is a real concern for our members and making sure that – and I think this was discussed in SNAICC’s evidence as well – where compliance with cultural safety standards is being assessed, that compliance and assessment process is culturally safe in itself and that the people doing those assessments have the relevant skills and expertise. In our submission I think we highlighted that it should be Aboriginal people doing that assessment of whether a service is culturally safe.

The CHAIR: Ms Edwards in our previous session with SNAICC talked about the lack of representation of Aboriginal people as assessors and authorised officers. This was something that they recommended to ACECQA at the national level. What recommendations have you given to the Victorian government to ensure that if we are going to promote cultural safety we need adequate representation of Aboriginal people in the space to ensure that, like you said, it is being resourced and implemented in a safe way?

Laura BROWNE: I do not think we have made prior recommendations on this, but as I said, there is one in our submission in relation to making sure that it is Aboriginal people doing that assessment. I think what we heard from our members in consultation was that they have had experiences where assessors create culturally unsafe environments, even in an Aboriginal-led service, when they come in to assess against compliance standards. The example that was given was an assessor coming into a childcare centre and interrupting the children doing an Acknowledgement of Country, which was obviously a really important cultural element of the way that that service operated and supported their children to develop a strong cultural identity. Just small examples like that suggest that there is a need for reform in this space.

The CHAIR: If the Victorian government did reach out to you, you would be happy to work with them to ensure that cultural safety is a core element that is practised widely in the sector?

Jason KANO: Absolutely. As we mentioned, we have long heard from members that that is an ongoing challenge, and we are here to represent our members and make sure that their voice is heard wherever possible when it comes to reforming and shaping the way we deliver services to our communities. So yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Did any of your members attend the Victorian Aboriginal forum last October?

Jason KANO: The membership of the Aboriginal Children’s Forum is our membership.

The CHAIR: That particular forum was attended by department secretaries across various government departments – I believe DFFH and the Department of Education – and the Minister for Children was also there. How meaningful was that forum in terms of getting across these barriers and these issues that you speak about?

Jason KANOA: It was historic, to be frank. I think the opportunity to speak to secretaries from the Department of Education, the Department of Health and DFFH in one room, and to talk directly to the service providers, was a historic moment. I think we have some further conversations to be had around what we want to see next in regard to –

The CHAIR: What was that? What is it that you want to see next?

Jason KANOA: The focus of that ACF was around early intervention and prevention. We see that some of the data suggests that reporting, particularly from education, is quite substantial when it comes to Aboriginal children. So we want to address that as soon as practical. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Department of Education are now working together around Protect – I think that is the right terminology – which is being developed by the Department of Education around how they do their referrals moving forward. So there is some education that will happen amongst the schools and early childhood centres.

The CHAIR: That is great. Is there any commitment of funding for you all to ensure that you can – you are smiling. Is that a yes?

Jason KANOA: No. There was no commitment of funding to do that. As we know, we are in a fiscally tight environment – that is the feedback we always get when we ask for funding to do more and do the right thing.

The CHAIR: Just one quick question to finish off my time, because I have just run out. You spoke about integrated hubs. Was that something that was discussed at this forum?

Jason KANOA: Yes. It was.

The CHAIR: And what was the feedback? Are there ongoing discussions? Was there any kind of commitment to explore that further from the government?

Jason KANOA: Yes. One of the commitments that has been made is that the departments will come back to this forum to present on the work that comes out of the actions from the last forum. So I think we have got them earmarked to come the next –

Laura BROWNE: In July.

Jason KANOA: In July. So mid-2026.

The CHAIR: Is any of this publicly available? Do they publish the report?

Jason KANOA: We have a communiqué that goes out after the ACFs. So there will be some form of –

The CHAIR: Is there anything that you can provide to the committee?

Jason KANOA: Yes, certainly. We have got our hands on the communiqué, so yes.

The CHAIR: That would be great, if you could take that on notice. I would love to ask you more, but I have run out of time, so I will hand over to our Deputy Chair. Thank you. Oh, sorry – we are going to move to Ms Ermacora. Thank you.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you, Chair, and hello, Jason. It is good to see you again. I just want to acknowledge that we are in the treaty and self-determination era now and the recommendations of Yoorrook address leadership and control of services relevant to First Nations people. So I guess there is a process underway to transition in that space. I wanted to ask first about the regulatory environment, which is obviously not of your creation. Is it an eventual hope that you would be self-regulating in the context of self-determination – that you would be monitoring services for Aboriginal people yourselves?

Jason KANOA: I might hand that one over to our Chair.

Karen HEAP: Thanks.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello, Karen.

Karen HEAP: Hi. Look, I think, in the mind of self-determination, we would probably be looking to go down the path of self-regulation. But I also think, as a CEO of an organisation who has section 18s – so we have Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and I am the authorising officer for those children – it is just a wise thing to be able to have an independent regulator. I think everyone needs to be held to account for what they do, and I have no issues with the regulator that we are under at this stage. I think it is important to have a separate body. We want to do the right thing by our children. We want to make sure our children are safe at all times. Does that answer your question?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, awesome. I forgot my follow up question; it might come to me in a minute. I just want to move to Commonwealth funding at the moment. There was a discussion about block funding versus child-by-child funding in our previous conversation, and I just want to know if the ACCOs have had thoughts on that and whether or not the current structure and content of Commonwealth funding is adequate.

Karen HEAP: We have had conversations around block funding, but it has not been discussed in the children's arena. It has been discussed in the health arena. It always disturbs me a little bit when we talk about our children as a target, and that is a department term. I particularly do not like talking like that. It is as if you have got to get that target to be able to get that funding, and that is the wrong way of doing things. I think block funding would be good in this arena. I think that if we were given a block funding amount to actually be able to do the work that we want to do and be able to actually put the funding where it is needed, that is really important. The prevention end of things for us is very important because we would rather prevent the children going into care rather than what is happening at the moment, which is too many children going into care.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So would that perhaps suggest a recommendation from this inquiry for block funding?

Karen HEAP: Yes.

Laura BROWNE: Could I just add to that? Sorry, I just want to highlight that we have heard from our members that historically there have been some, I guess, limitations in the block funding model as well that would need to be considered, I think, in a new model just around the flexibility of using that model for innovative approaches and supporting families across the range of things that ACCOs do when we talk about that integrated hub model that they aspire to deliver with early learning as part of a broader service system. I think it is just important to make sure that where that type of funding model is being used it prioritises flexibility and the ability for local self-determined approaches, because that is really what our members want. Every community that our members support and every one of the ACCOs in our membership is in a different situation. There are different needs that their communities have, so having that flexibility to design and deliver a model that works for them in their local context is really critical in the funding space.

Jacinta ERMACORA: That is amazing feedback and applicable across the nation, I suspect. I remember my previous question, which was about capacity building and the fact that there are no authorised officers that are Aboriginal people to our knowledge and that it would be good for them to have a broader set of skills in understanding when they are visiting ACCOs. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Laura BROWNE: I think only to reiterate what I mentioned earlier, which is that we have recommended that first and foremost it should be Aboriginal people who are doing that cultural safety compliance assessment wherever possible. Again, I think that would need to be designed and implemented on a local level as to who the appropriate people are in a particular area to be able to do that assessment. If that extent is not possible, then absolutely, having that local really comprehensive cultural capability training for assessors to ensure that they are understanding what it is that they are enforcing is really critical and making sure that they both understand what it is that they are assessing and also how to behave in a culturally safe way in performing those assessments when they are in an ACCO and then how to how to assess it effectively in a mainstream organisation as well.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. I want to move to workforce and the difficulty in getting staff in the childcare sector in particular. I know in my own region we do not have a degree in early childhood offered in Warrnambool or anywhere, let alone the ability to say that they need to learn culturally safe practices as educators. Is there any kind of message you would have for the Commonwealth government in that space around early childhood education?

Laura BROWNE: I think we did have a recommendation as well in our submission around including cultural safety in tertiary education for early childhood workers, so we would absolutely say that that needs to be an element. I think it is probably the workforce challenges in this space, and particularly for many of our members who are regional. As you have mentioned, there is not a lot of good access to education in these areas, in regional areas, and those workforce challenges are exacerbated both in the early learning space and the other spaces that our ACCOs work in in children and families and health spaces as well. So there is a big need for a workforce strategy and investment to ensure that there is an appropriate pipeline of appropriately skilled people.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. My time is up.

Jason KANOA: Just to also add: I think we heard in the previous hearing around provisions that have been provided by an Aboriginal RTO in relation to that. We are in talks with that RTO about our regional workforces. So we are trying to see how we can access some of that training for regional and rural areas, because there is not a suite of early childhood training available across the state.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Would you say the Commonwealth ought to be involved in supporting that?

Jason KANOA: Absolutely, yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much for being here before us today. Could I just get an understanding: the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance – how long have you been in existence?

Jason KANOA: We have been in existence for just over a decade. Initially we were under the auspice of VACCHO, because we have the same membership. As of July last year we became independent – no, two years ago now. We have been independent for two years.

Melina BATH: So you have been around for a decade, and you are the peak body. I noticed before you said you had a historic moment last year when you got to talk to departmental heads et cetera. Was that the first time that you had spoken to them as your organisation?

Jason KANOA: As the Aboriginal Children's Forum? Yes.

Melina BATH: Yes, but previous to that in its different iteration, have you had a frank conversation with the secretary of the education department, for example?

Jason KANOA: No, that was the first time ever.

Melina BATH: I am just trying to think. For children with disability or the children's minister, you had not spoken to them in the past?

Jason KANOA: The children's minister, yes.

Melina BATH: Sorry. The secretary of that department as well?

Jason KANOA: DFFH, yes.

Melina BATH: Cool. I find it interesting. It is historic, but in the past 10 years I cannot understand why there would be any impediment and why there would not have been an interaction from the head of the education department to you as a peak body, whatever named hat you are wearing. Can you explain that?

Jason KANOA: I guess the historic nature was around the Aboriginal Children's Forum. We are a member of that forum, and we have always had DFFH or DHS or whatever term was used in the past 10 years at the table, and the secretary or the minister were involved in those conversations. But it was the first time ever –

Melina BATH: Directly with you?

Jason KANOA: Yes. It is a government initiative that the Aboriginal community are partners in, so that is the make-up of the Aboriginal Children's Forum. The involvement of the secretaries of both the departments of health and education – that was the first time ever. We usually have representatives from those departments, but just not at that senior executive level.

Melina BATH: I guess my point is, and I am not leading the witness, that you are really crucial to the investment, the care, the nurturing and the overall outcome of – I would say vulnerable children but all children are vulnerable – very, very important children, Victorian children. I feel like there have been silos in the past, and to be really frank, treaty is here. Unless there is any real initiative on a ground-by-ground, ACCO-by-ACCO basis, and in the regions specifically, then you may not get any better outcomes. I guess my commentary or request to or interest in you is: what will it look like on the ground for your organisations to be breaking down these silos and removing fragmented services? What will that look like for you, and what do you want from government to bring that about?

Jason KANOA: That is a big question, and it is a question that has always been grappled with by ACCOs. I think we have always wanted to work out how we can better do engagement across all the sectors that ACCOs are involved in, so I guess through a treaty we are hoping that can help facilitate that more.

Melina BATH: That has not happened in the past.

Jason KANOA: It has not happened in the past. There is some work that I know the First Peoples' Assembly have been doing in relation to engaging with ACCOs around what a better structure could look like in terms of engagement moving forward. So that is still in its process of figuring out what that model and structure could look like. That is probably the –

Melina BATH: Sure. My point is that there is no time a government minister could not have come and asked those same questions in the past decade or two decades; I will put it in that context. I want to move to prioritising ACCO procurement in the ECA space, the early childhood space. What would that look like? My understanding is that there is a sense that Aboriginal-led services should have the first right of reply; you should not have to be in the larger pool in terms of providing a service. What can that look like to better support the expansion of culturally grounded services? I talk about the regions; I know it is in Melbourne as well as across Victoria.

Jason KANOA: I might get Karen to speak to this one.

Karen HEAP: No problems. I will talk about Ballarat, of course. So in Ballarat, we do have early childhood care centres. We have two long day care centres in Ballarat for Aboriginal children but also mainstream. We run one in Ballan and we run one in Brown Hill in Ballarat. We also have two kinders. We run a kinder in Sebastopol for our Aboriginal community, and we have just opened a kinder in Gordon that is attached to the Gordon Primary School through the Department of Education. That initiative was purely on us; the two long day care centres were purely on us. We decided that –

Melina BATH: What do you mean by 'purely on us'?

Karen HEAP: Well, purely on the community controlled organisation, so we developed it ourselves and for our community but also for the broader community. They are heavily culturally centred, so the education is cultural education, particularly on the lands that they are on, which are Wathaurong lands. We did that because we wanted to ensure that culture was at that small, little level – at two, three, four, up into the primary schools. It also broadens the culture to the mainstream community as well. Hopefully outcomes like the referendum do not happen again. We have a broader education for everybody, because the parents are participating in the day care centres as well, and it is really lovely. So that is what we did, and it is quite successful, I think. We have a 95 per cent attendance.

Melina BATH: Could that be replicated? My time is nearly up, so I am jumping in with my last –

Karen HEAP: Yes, easily.

Melina BATH: Would you mind thinking about advising us how that could be replicated as recommendations for government? How could we roll that out in different locations? It has got to be bespoke for each location, because that is the very nature of ACCO community-led services.

Karen HEAP: Yes, that is right. We can give you some more information on that. We self-funded it, so it is generating funding through fees and such. So we self-fund that, and we lease the building. So it is sort of a business, but it is a not-for-profit business; money just goes straight back into the service.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

Karen HEAP: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for your submission and for your time today. I am interested – in your submission you state that without cultural safety in ECEC settings there can be no safety for Aboriginal children. Can you explain why that is so important to child safety?

Laura BROWNE: For us, I guess, the argument that we are making is that cultural safety and cultural identity are really core to Aboriginal children and families. When you look at the historical events that have happened in this country, the removal of culture from children has been a significant contributor to that. I think when we are talking about the safety of Aboriginal children in mainstream early childhood education and care settings, our argument is that cultural safety is a core aspect of their psychological safety and their wellbeing and that if that is not done right you jeopardise other aspects of the child's safety. For us it is really just reflecting that fundamental foundation that culture plays for an Aboriginal child and their wellbeing and that that should be appropriately reflected in the standards of care that are given in mainstream early childhood education and care. I am not sure if Jason or Karen want to add anything to that.

Karen HEAP: I will just add that the Aboriginal children that are attending our day cares and our kinders thrive there. The Aboriginal children are thriving. They are learning. They are excited to go to kinder but also school. They become stronger people in themselves, and they are able to combat what they need to combat in school when they get there. They are proud of who they are, and that is really important, because it is hard; it is a hard situation for Aboriginal children in school. The racism that follows them into schools is pretty heavy, so I think it is really important that we have cultural standards in all kinders and all schools.

Laura BROWNE: I will just add to that: I think that it has been acknowledged by governments as well that culture is that protective factor across a whole range of other systems that cost governments a lot of money. We see in our ACCOs and child protection space that having that strong cultural identity is a really strong protective factor for children. We see it, I guess, as an early intervention and prevention opportunity as well: if you if you raise Aboriginal children strong in culture, that provides protection for their life.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What barriers exist currently, do you think, in mainstream services for Aboriginal children and families in accessing those services or experiencing cultural safety in those services?

Jason KANOA: Right off the bat, I think the isolation that sometimes families and children may feel in entering spaces where they do not see the cousin or the family member that they usually engage with in those settings is quite confronting for Aboriginal people and young people. I think that is predominantly one of the main challenges that we feel that we need to help address: supporting those interactions the first time that they are entering those spaces so that they actually feel part of something. They are some of the long-term things that we have been discussing with members quite a bit – the accessibility for those safe spaces for our young people.

Laura BROWNE: I will just add that Jason mentioned earlier that the education sector is a higher reporter to child protection, and the data that we have indicates that around 69 per cent of those are closed at intake, which indicates that over-reporting is occurring of instances that do not reach the child protection threshold. I think through that there is an indication that for families who might historically have a fear of experiencing racism in the way that services treat them and might report things that might not be reported for other families it is probably going to be impacting their level of safety and comfort in attending mainstream services.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for that. You also said in your statement that too often the compliance requirements can feel tokenistic and transactional and they are focused more on protecting organisations than community members or the children themselves. What are the sorts of things in your view that keep children safe that are not being captured by some of these compliance measures and frameworks?

Laura BROWNE: I think Karen might be able to add to this from her experience in their setting. I will just say from the consultations that we did for this submission that I think it is the relationships that are most important. Obviously there are workers across the whole ECE sector who care deeply about children, but in ACCOs those workers are usually members of the same community. They may know their family, they may have known these children since they were born and they may know their parents, grandparents and other kin. For them there is an additional element of care and protection that goes into their work, as members of the same community who care about the wellbeing of their community's children. That and the relational approach that ACCOs take in the way that they do their work and in the way that they work with not only the child or the child's holistic needs but also the family's – those things – do add an extra layer of protection and safety. When you look at that compared to the tick-box exercise of some of the compliance, particularly when there is duplicative compliance where you are not getting any additional safety benefit from additional reporting, those were some of the things that our members noted. Karen, jump in if you have anything to add.

Karen HEAP: No, I am fine. You covered that beautifully.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for joining us today. I would like to touch on something that we spoke about in the previous hearing but also that you have drawn attention to in your submission. Specifically, page 8 talks about the way in which ACCO-led ECEC services are better placed to identify the early signs that a family might need extra support. Can you just develop this point a bit on the sorts of circumstances in which this may occur and any examples or evidence you can give as to the difference that makes?

Karen HEAP: I could probably answer this one, if you like. In our centre, I can give you an example without names. They have moved on to primary school now, but we did have two lovely little boys in our day care centre attending, Aboriginal boys, and they were very obese – extremely obese. They could not sit in the seats. The seats were just too small. We had to get special seats for them. We started talking to the family about this because we could see one of the little boys was really severely obese and was really having trouble interacting with other children, breathing and just talking and was always falling asleep – those sorts of issues. We started talking to the family. We pulled the family in and said, 'What can we do to help? What are the issues at home? Do we need to be looking at nutritionists, dietitians, doctors appointments?' It turned out that the father was in the same position and the mother was not and the two sisters were quite normal weights and everything else. So it was a hereditary problem.

We were able to intervene there quite early. We got them into nutritionists and got them into specialists, and the little fellas are now starting to lose weight. They are eating differently. They were not eating in a proper way as well – it was takeaway food and all that sort of stuff. So we have been able to help them, teach them what to buy and do all those sorts of things. For me that is a real preventative. Those children could have been seen as being neglected because of what was happening. Those children are very happy now. They have moved on to primary school and are doing very well. They still are not skinny kids, and I do not think they will ever be skinny kids, but they are doing better than what they were. So it is with those sorts of things that we can early intervene.

We have also had situations where we have noticed there are issues with children – like they have got a bruise or they have a burn. That is not normal, and we act on that straightaway and talk to the family. But also we will report where we need to report. Does that answer your question?

Michael GALEA: Thank you. It does. That is a very good example, and it is great to hear that those two boys are now doing well as a result of that intervention. We have spoken a bit over the past couple of days, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, about how early childhood education can really smooth out that runaway for a lot of kids who are having trouble coming into primary school and try to even the playing field a

bit, especially for those kids that have a bit of a disadvantage. To what degree, if any, do you believe that the rollout of universal three-year-old kinder, not just at the four-year-old level, contributes to the early childhood sector – in your case through ACCOs – being able to support those kids to get into primary school at the level that they need and want to be at?

Karen HEAP: For me, three-year-old kinder is really important. I have been working in ACCOs for 22 years now. When I first started the system for kinder and such, it was four-year-old kinder, and our children were really failing in that situation. Parents were unable to get their kids to kinder for a start. The children were way behind in their education, and that was sometimes due to lack of education in the house. So having three-year-old kinder and four-year-old kinder has been brilliant. The children are now starting to learn earlier and are able to achieve at school. Before, they were going to school behind and were not able to read or write. One-third of our Aboriginal children are on track at the age of five for being able to attend school appropriately. If we do not fix that and we do not continue to fix that, our children will stay behind, and that will travel through high school with them. You never get that back, and we see children failing in the school system. So early education is really, really important.

Michael GALEA: Is it fair to say the earlier the intervention, the higher the likelihood of success?

Karen HEAP: Absolutely. We have a program at the co-op that helps parents parent, and that means we sit down with a parent and say, 'Here's the book you should be reading them at this stage.' It is teaching people the steps that other people do not have to do because their parents were doing that when they were little kids. Some of our parents have not. They have got poor education themselves. It carries through the families, and it becomes a transgenerational situation, which is not good.

Michael GALEA: The earlier you can interfere with that cycle and turn it into a positive cycle the better.

Karen HEAP: Yes, absolutely.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I am just mindful of the very limited time I have left. I know a few of my colleagues have asked questions directly or indirectly in relation to treaty. If a potential future government were to walk back treaty in Victoria, would that be a helpful or a regressive step in your view?

Jason KANOA: In my view, regressive. I think this is something the Aboriginal community have called for and wanted for a long time. I think we have made progression to where we are today. The regression of a treaty would take us back a bit. That is certainly something that I think is going to be detrimental to a lot of things that Aboriginal people have wanted for a long time.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Thank you all.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you. Chair. Thank you very much, again, for your evidence. Mr Kanoa, the early evidence in this hearing was about the register coming on line on Friday. I think you said that everybody is willing to be part of that process. The working with children check has been a real problem in this state. The government ignored the recommendations from the Ombudsman. Did you have any concerns around the working with children check and any of your workers that you have come into contact with and children being at risk as a result of the working with children check?

Jason KANOA: Not necessarily. I think ACCOs are being very cautious around the working with children check.

Georgie CROZIER: What do you mean by 'cautious'?

Jason KANOA: Well, very, very conservative, I would say, around those working with children matters that have triggered a ping where it might be questionable about the potential candidate.

Georgie CROZIER: What happens then? If there is a ping, what does that mean?

Jason KANO: Well, that means that you obviously do not progress with that recruitment process of that individual. I have not heard anything where we have had issues around the working with children checks in relation to that.

Georgie CROZIER: No, that is a good thing. It is just that part of the reason for this inquiry is obviously the distressing and very serious issues that have arisen out of the early education sector. You also said that it is a shifting regulatory environment and there is duplication of compliance. Can you explain very quickly for me what you meant by that?

Jason KANO: So obviously there are the Commonwealth regulations and the state regulations that are challenging, I think, and quite conflicting with duplicating reporting requirements.

Georgie CROZIER: All right. Now, you have been in this role for two years as CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance. You were 12 years as a board member of VACCA. VACCA services include care services, community support, cultural strengthening, education and early years, family services, family violence and a number of other areas. Is this not just a duplication of what VACCA does, given the partnerships that they work with? The members that you have listed in your submission are working in partnership with VACCA. Isn't this just all duplication, or what is the difference?

Jason KANO: The difference is that we do not do service delivery. We represent the regional ACCOs. VACCA is not part of the membership. They are a partner of the alliance we work closely with. Not officially, but we work closely with VACCA. VACCA has its service provisions and delivers to the communities they serve. We represent the 15 ACCOs independently from the work that VACCA does.

Georgie CROZIER: I think Ms Bath was asking around the department and the role of that interaction, but what about the commissioner for children and young people? What interaction do you have with the commissioner in relation to delivery of services and those issues that you highlight?

Jason KANO: We have written many submissions to the children and young people's commission over the years, and we engage wherever possible, whenever possible.

Georgie CROZIER: What have the submissions been involved in, though? Are they concerns that you have raised?

Jason KANO: There have been concerns that we have raised and that ACCOs generally have raised, and also the inquiries that the children and young people's commission carries out as well. So we are always actively on the lookout and engaging through that mechanism as well.

Georgie CROZIER: So given VACCA's role, given the peak bodies that are the partners in it, there just seems to be a lot of duplication. You are saying you are not a service provider, but you are representing these peak bodies with these memberships. But isn't there some sort of delineation around the role that you do and what all these other various members have got? You are nodding no, but we have got the Commissioner for Children and Young People, we have got VACCA, we have got ACCOs, we have got all of these bodies, and yet you have been put together in the last two years. Why?

Jason KANO: Well, the last 10 years.

Georgie CROZIER: Last 10 years. I beg your pardon. You have been in the role for two years, my apologies.

Jason KANO: It was a request from the ACCOs themselves through VACCHO membership. They wanted to have a representative body to represent them on behalf of their children and families work that they do. They have VACCHO, which represents their health needs and health requirements. We are predominantly similar to what VACCHO's role is.

Georgie CROZIER: All right. Thank you. It is a very long submission and it is a very detailed submission, and you have made a lot of recommendations in your submission to the committee. What is the number one recommendation that is the priority, out of the recommendations?

Jason KANO: I think the first priority was the funding.

Georgie CROZIER: Funding.

Jason KANOA: Yes.

Georgie CROZIER: How much do you need?

Jason KANOA: We can get that figure to you, if you –

Georgie CROZIER: I think it is important because we have had a number of witnesses that have highlighted that funding is an issue. You have been in existence for 10 years. The government has – I mean, it is a little frustrating to come in here and say, ‘You’ve been in place for 10 years, you’ve been requesting all these things, and nothing’s done.’ Yet a question from Mr Galea about treaty: is that regressive? Well, how is it going to improve anything when you have been in place for 10 years and you have been speaking – all of these different groups that I have highlighted – and you have got nowhere?

Jason KANOA: I will say for the 10 years we have been in existence we have operated at a very minimum. We have basically had one to two workers throughout that 10-year period. We have only, to this point now, as I have come on board, expanded to 15 staff at the moment.

Georgie CROZIER: That is across the state?

Jason KANOA: Across the state, yes. So we are starting to find our feet and get our ability to actually influence and do more than what we have previously had to do. We have operated very minimally to date.

Georgie CROZIER: So it has taken you 10 years to find your feet.

Jason KANOA: No, to actually – as an independent body; we have been operating as an auspiced body.

Georgie CROZIER: Okay. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: That brings our session to a close. I want to thank you, Mr Kanoa, Ms Heap and Ms Browne, for the evidence and contribution that you have given to the committee today. It is really helpful. Your submission is important for the committee to ensure that we have a well-balanced view and also, more importantly, a First Nations lens in this work. So thank you for your time.

I also want to let you know that you will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week’s time before it is published on the website. Also, some of our requests for information on notice – if you could also attend to those in due course.

On that note, we will now break for lunch and be back at 1 o’clock.

Witnesses withdrew.