

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

WITNESS (via videoconference)

Georgie Dent, Chief Executive Officer, The Parenthood.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. 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.

Georgie DENT: Yes. My name is Georgie Dent, and I am the CEO of The Parenthood.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Dent. We are now going to go around and introduce ourselves. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio. I am an MP for Northern Metro and Chair of the select committee.

Michael GALEA: Hello. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro and Deputy Chair.

Georgie CROZIER: Hello. Georgie Crozier, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

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

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: And Ms Ermacora will be joining us very shortly. I would now like to invite you, Ms Dent, to make any opening statements or comments and just ask, please, if you could keep that to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes to ensure that we have got plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

Georgie DENT: Thank you so much. Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, and thank you for the opportunity to present today. My name is Georgie Dent, and I am the CEO of The Parenthood, Australia's largest parent advocacy organisation, representing more than 80,000 parents, carers and supporters across the country. Our mission is simple. It is to make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent and raise a child.

Fifteen years ago, when I was a new mum with an adorable toddler, I was shocked to discover that early childhood education and care in Australia was not reliably accessible, affordable or suitable. Since then I have dedicated my career to changing that, because every child and every family deserves the opportunity to access the early childhood education and care that their family requires. It is a privilege and a great responsibility to lead The Parenthood and this work, and I am grateful for the opportunity to be here today.

The revelations of abuse, neglect and mistreatment in early learning settings in Victoria have devastated families and eroded public confidence. For very many families the early childhood education and care system now feels unsafe, and that is intolerable. For the vast majority of households in Victoria, relying on some form of formal early childhood education and care is an economic necessity. It is rare these days for a household to be able to afford to have a parent out of the paid workforce for a long time. Because of that, affordable quality early childhood education and care is essential infrastructure. It enables parents to move between their families and the paid work their families and households depend on. In those circumstances it is unconscionable that parents would have to weigh their household's financial security against their child's safety and wellbeing. A system that is designed to nurture, educate and support the development of children must first and foremost protect them. The overwhelming evidence shows us that what has happened, not just in Victoria but in Victoria too, was not a series of isolated incidents, it was the symptom of a system that has grown rapidly without the coordinated, safety-first architecture that children deserve. While the vast majority of early childhood educators

and services work tirelessly and professionally with enormous care and dedication, the structures meant to uphold safety and quality are fragmented, under-resourced and inconsistent. We have a patchwork of overlapping regulators, long gaps between assessments, uneven training quality and a funding model that has rewarded expansion and profit over quality and safety.

Victoria now stands at a critical turning point. The rapid child safety review made 22 recommendations to strengthen oversight and child safety in early education and care settings, and the Victorian government's commitment to implement all of them is very welcome. But the next step is crucial: translating those commitments into consistent, practical action backed by funding and accountability. If we are serious about creating a system that is worthy of families' trust, we must do three things. First, we must establish a national early childhood commission, an independent body with the authority to oversee safety, quality, planning and data across all jurisdictions. Fragmentation is the enemy of prevention. A national body can coordinate information, close gaps between agencies and ensure accountability wherever a child participates in early education and care. Second, we need to ensure that Victoria's new independent regulator is properly resourced, transparent and empowered to act swiftly where safety or quality are at risk. Regulation must be proactive, not reactive. Third, we must strengthen and value the workforce. A safe early childhood education and care system cannot exist without skilled, stable and well-supported educators. Workforce shortages, burnout and low pay are not just industrial issues, they are child safety issues. When educators are undervalued and when they are overstretched, quality and vigilance suffer. The research is clear: children's outcomes, their safety, their learning, their development and their wellbeing are directly tied to the quality and stability of their educators and teachers.

Victoria has led the nation through its kindergarten reforms and its rapid response to the safety failures revealed in 2025. We believe it can lead again now by ensuring every service, whether it is public, private or community run, operates under the same high, transparent and enforceable standards. Every child in Victoria should be able to access a safe and high-quality early learning service that is as easy to enrol in as the local school – not compulsory, but available to every family who needs it. Child safety in early education and care is not an aspiration, it is the foundation of quality. Unless children are safe, they cannot thrive. Victoria has the opportunity to set a new national benchmark, a system built on safety, trust and equity, one that honours the responsibility families place in it every day. The Parenthood stands ready to work with you, with the Commonwealth, with other state and territory governments and with the sector to build the early childhood education and care system that children in Victoria and right around the country deserve. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Dent. I appreciate your opening statement. I would like to begin by asking you something, I guess, just taking your point around record investments in kindergarten here in Victoria. The sector also is overwhelmingly run by government and not-for-profit organisations. However, the long day care sector is dominated by for-profit providers: 69.4 per cent of long day care services are for profit, 30.6 per cent are not-for-profit and 99.6 per cent of standalone kindergartens are operated by not-for-profit providers. These are some of the statistics that were provided in the Victorian government commissioned rapid review.

The rapid growth of the sector and its dominance by private corporations, as you mentioned in your opening statement, creates perverse incentives. We heard yesterday from large chain operators like Affinity and G8 about some of the bonus structures that they offer their staff leaders and centre directors. What do you think are the dangers around this?

Georgie DENT: At The Parenthood, our view is that the childcare subsidy in its design has underpinned the exponential growth of the for-profit parts of the early childhood education and care system and that that has come at the expense of quality and safety. It has also come at the expense of the growth of not-for-profit and community-run organisations. We know that there are for-profit providers that deliver a really high-quality service – we know that. But we also know that in some of the larger for-profit chains, some of the biggest problems have been revealed.

We know that when the business model is interested in generating a profit, keeping the cost base low is a natural priority. Keeping the cost base low in early education and care largely comes down to how a service is staffed. When you have fewer staff, when you have fewer staff with higher qualifications and when you roster a service either right on ratio or even below ratio and rely on waivers – there are signs that has been the business

model in some services, to keep staff wages as low as possible – we know that places safety and quality at risk, because the evidence is very clear that the quality of an early education and care service is largely determined by the quality of the workforce and the conditions in which the workforce are expected to operate.

We are very concerned that we have seen over the last 15 years the exponential growth of the for-profit sector in early education and care. We believe that this expansion reflects the fact that the childcare subsidy incentivises providers to set up in places where parents have a greater capacity to pay high out-of-pocket costs. This has led us to the situation where we have got parts of the state that are deemed childcare deserts, where there is no provision, but we have also got areas of oversupply. There is oversupply in wealthier suburbs, for example, which is what we see, and that is consistent nationally. Oversupply is a risk to quality and safety as well, because when you have four or five services that are operating with less than optimal occupancy, providers have to reduce their costs. And as we know, reducing costs in early education and care is often linked with reducing the number of staff and the qualifications of staff. We know that a lot of the not-for-profits and a lot of the highest quality services are staffed well above the ratio, and that makes an enormous difference. So we have to be clear eyed about what the expansion of the for-profit part of early education and care has incentivised.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is really helpful. You also spoke about the new regulator that has come into force this year here in Victoria, VECRA, and said that it needs to be properly resourced and it needs to be transparent. Can you expand more on what that actually looks like, being properly resourced? Does that equate to adequate funding, authorised officers and more site inspections? Does that equal more reporting or public reporting? Could you just please explain to the committee what you meant by that?

Georgie DENT: When we talk about the regulator being properly resourced, it is really all of the above. Everything that you have said is important. We know that in too many instances a service has been assessed or rated, and then even in instances where that service was not deemed to be meeting the national standards, that service was then not looked at for a number of years. That is hugely problematic. The example that I often give is that if a hospital or a school is assessed and is not meeting the standards, you do not then walk away and come back in five, six, seven, eight, nine years and see what has happened. You have to work actively with that provider to address the issues, and if the issues cannot be addressed when it comes to the safety and quality of early education and care, those services need to be closed. We need to be in a position where we have regulators that are resourced to be able to do the inspections and assessments as –

The CHAIR: Just on that, Ms Dent, in your submission you said that in Victoria the average is 3½ years for assessment ratings visits. Surely, with the revelations of tragic circumstances that were uncovered last year, it has to be much shorter than that, right? What is the ideal? Is it a couple of times a year? What is the benchmark that Victoria should be aiming for?

Georgie DENT: I think we have to put ourselves in the shoes of a reasonable parent who is enrolling their very small children, who by definition of their age are quite literally the most vulnerable people in the community. We have to be realistic about the fact that assessing a service every 3½ years is not good enough. I think that looking at annual assessments is probably worthwhile, but I think it is also that if services are meeting high-quality standards, then the intervention that they are going to require is going to be different. But we believe that there has to be the functionality for a regulator to work with a service to see whether the issues uncovered can be addressed, and it should not be a case of – because even if we inspected services a couple of times a year, if we are inspecting them and things are not changing, then the inspections are not really worthwhile. We think that intervention piece is really important and that there needs to be almost an approved administrator that can step in when serious issues have been identified and that those services are then worked with to remediate the problems. As I said, if those problems cannot be addressed, the answer cannot be that that service continues operating as per usual.

I think that parents have an expectation that when they are putting their child into a service that is taxpayer-funded at great expense, and oftentimes parents are also paying exorbitant out-of-pocket fees, it is entirely reasonable for them to trust that the service they are entrusting their children to is being assessed regularly enough. I think annually would be a good place to start – potentially two years when there are not issues. But I think it is very reasonable for parents to expect that services are being watched and monitored and assessed, and not just assessed but worked with to improve quality. I think that is something that we have seen is missing in the current framework. We have got the Commonwealth government, which funds the childcare subsidy, and

we have got states and territories that are responsible for regulation, and it is clear that within the regulation there have been issues. But even without that we have not seen any single government or body that is responsible for driving quality. There is a difference between assessing a service and funding a service and driving quality –

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, Ms Dent, because my time has expired. Just very, very quickly before I hand over to our Deputy Chair, you do not believe ACECQA is a body that actually drives quality? You think the national childhood commission would be able to drive that work of quality?

Georgie DENT: ACECQA is responsible for overseeing the national quality framework, but it is not responsible, it is not funded and it is outside its remit to be taking action that will drive quality. For example – and I have laboured this point a lot because it is crucial – we know that how well qualified and paid educators are and how strong that workforce is has a direct impact on the quality of an early learning service, but no-one is actually responsible for saying, ‘For us to meet these quality standards, this is where we need our workforce to be, and this is how we’re going to fund the work to get there.’ That is outside the remit of ACECQA, and yet it is absolutely critical to lifting quality.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Dent, I appreciate that. Thank you, Deputy Chair.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for joining us, Ms Dent. I would just like to pick up on a few strands there. Firstly, in relation to your view on the role of the private market, I have got from your comments and from your submission quite a clear point of view there. The Productivity Commission estimates that around 89 per cent of the sector is currently run by the for-profit businesses. In an ideal system, what role do you see for-profit having? Is it a case of we should be trying to increase the not-for-profit sector? Is it a case of we need to be toughening regulation on the for-profit sector in particular? Should we be keeping things agnostic from a policy point of view, or should we be looking at other mechanisms?

Georgie DENT: It is our view that we need to be doing two of those things really intentionally. One of them is that we have to intentionally create conditions so that high-quality not-for-profit and community-run services can actually expand and grow. We also need to be tightening the regulation and standards so that providers that are less interested in child safety and quality than they are in profit are no longer incentivised to be in the sector. And as I said, there are high-quality for-profit providers. At the moment, as you said, we have got the overwhelming majority of early education and care delivered by a for-profit provider, so we have to be realistic that it would not be viable for us as a country, for our economy, for our communities and for our households to walk away from for-profit provision of early education. What we can do is say we have had a funding model that has inadvertently created a situation where we are now having around 75 per cent of all long day care in Australia funded by a for-profit provider. In circumstances where the evidence is clear about the higher quality ratings in general that not-for-profits deliver, we have to be explicit about rebalancing the proportion of providers that we have. I think that ultimately over the last 15 years we have let the market determine the shape and composition of early education and care. I think that there are limitations to what the market can do, and if we all look at what happened last year, it is clear that there are limitations to what the market can naturally deliver. We think it is entirely appropriate for there to be intervention to reshape early childhood education and care so that we are prioritising safety and quality.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Is there a particular international model that you would advise us to be considering? Is there an equivalent that we could look at, say, or is it really the case that we are a relatively unique market given our state and federal levels involved?

Georgie DENT: We are unique in that way. But I would say we are not worlds away from Canada, for example, which also has got different provinces and is also a Commonwealth country. We have definitely got similarities there, and they have had some success in looking at how early childhood education and care is delivered. It is our view at The Parenthood that the funding model needs to shift; that the childcare subsidy is not fit for purpose. I think there are examples in Canada where early childhood education and care is co-located with schools. In Canada they do have not-for-profit and they do have for-profit, but they also do have some public provision, and that is some of the early learning that is co-located on school grounds. Some of that is run by a third party, so it might be a not-for-profit provider, but there are other instances where that is actually run by the school and so that is effectively a public option. Very few families in Australia have got the luxury of their choice of service for their child, and we believe that puts parents in a really difficult position.

At The Parenthood we have been educating parents for the last 12 months really clearly on what the green flags are to look for in services. One of the green flags, we have said, is looking at retention of staff and looking at the business model. When there are staff that have been there for a long time and when it is a not-for-profit provider, they are green flags. We need to move to a place where parents are only seeing green flags. Certainly early childhood education and care, when it is delivered and funded more in line with how we fund education – and I often talk about that. If we are talking about what a universal early education and care system might look like, we want it to be as reliable as school is for parents – that they do not have to navigate complex systems. They can enrol their child in the local school. No-one will ask for their tax return, their income statement. No-one will ask how many hours they work. There is a position at the local school for every child. When early education and care is funded like that – in some of the Nordic countries, in Germany, for example – that is when you see a more consistent level of high quality but also genuine affordability.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Something you touched on piqued my attention as well: your comment about kinders on school sites, which, as you are probably aware, have been rolled out across Victoria – maybe not in every school, as much as we would like, but it is a significant program being rolled out. I have heard from my electorate that the expected benefit was the parents avoiding double drop-off, but we have actually heard about how it is good for the kinder students to go into prep feeling a bit safer, a bit more comfortable, seeing the same kids that they are playing side by side with. Is there a benefit too for child safety with kinders being co-located with schools, whether they are officially part of the school or not? In that broader oversight framework, is there a benefit that could be seen, perhaps through quality of care, through child safety, with co-located kinders as well?

Georgie DENT: That is definitely my understanding, but I can take that on notice and get specific evidence to that point. In Australia this has come up from time to time as a policy perspective, and in particular around the convenience for families. But I think what you are talking to is actually the familiarity and the continuity, which really matter for children, particularly young children. I know that this is an entirely anecdotal experience, but I know a lot of families have experienced what I have. That is, when our third child went to the local primary school, it was a much easier transition for her because she had been there multiple times a week for most of her life because her older sister had been there. So even though she had not actually been attending school, it was a familiar environment, and we know that that makes a difference. Early childhood education and care, when it is quality, it is rooted in that relationship, in the quality of that interaction. When children are more comfortable, when they feel safe, they are more likely to thrive and derive the benefits from that environment. So I think it is worthwhile considering that sort of benefit to children and families of having a familiar location, as well as it being potentially much more convenient for families if they only have one drop-off, as opposed to two different locations or even three, which we know some families navigate.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much, Ms Dent. Anything further you can provide on notice would be terrific, and I will pass back to the Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, Ms Dent. A very interesting discussion we are having this afternoon with your insights. Out of the 80,000 mums, dads and carers in The Parenthood, how many are in Victoria?

Georgie DENT: That is a good question that I cannot answer definitively right now.

Georgie CROZIER: That is all right. I just say it as a point of interest. Now, you have spoken a lot on quality and safety and the regulator in an answer to the Chair around the regulator being properly resourced. I am not sure if you are aware what has happened here in Victoria, but I am going to point it out to you, because I think this goes to the very heart of what you are saying and the non-accountability and the failures within this very system. Obviously you have made some recommendations. But what we know is that the regulator, QARD, which is within the Department of Education, were absolutely hopeless in what they were charged with doing and should have done. Since 2018 there has been a 45 per cent increase in complaints to the regulator but the enforcement action has declined by 67 per cent. So at that time there was around one enforcement action for every 20 complaints; by 2023, that figure was one for every 88 complaints. That goes to your point about the role the regulator has, surely, and also the responsibility – surely that has to be the responsibility of government for that failure. Would you agree?

Georgie DENT: I think it is really clear that children and families and educators have been failed.

Georgie CROZIER: They have been failed through that process – they have been failed. Again, I am not sure if you are aware, but the Ombudsman in Victoria made a recommendation in 2022 to strengthen the working with children checks. The government did nothing, and we have heard evidence throughout this inquiry to say that stakeholders were aware of that finding and they had been raising it. Even some of those private providers had been putting together their own databases around those workers so that they could track the people working within their system, and the government did nothing. So to go to your point, if anyone needs to take responsibility, surely it has to be government – for those failures and for ignoring the working with children check recommendation made by the Ombudsman to strengthen that and the regulator within the department.

Georgie DENT: Parents right around Australia and parents in Victoria are well within their rights to be furious with the way in which they and their children have been let down, and I think there is shared responsibility for those failures. I think that it has been clear from the royal commission in 2015, and it has been clear at a Commonwealth level and at every state and territory level, that the working with children check system needed to be overhauled.

Georgie CROZIER: You are being very diplomatic around not criticising the government. I understand that, but I put it to you that there are multiple examples of failures within the system that, as you said, somebody has got to be responsible for. They were your words. No-one has taken responsibility. I say to you, given what we know, that the government has failed, and given, as you have just highlighted, after the royal commission around the working with children check nothing was done in this state, quite rightly, parents feel they have been let down.

Can I draw you back to the comments you made around the exponential growth of private providers. In Victoria the rollout of three- and four-year-old kindergarten meant that these kids had to be educated somewhere and there were not enough facilities for it to happen, so the market did fill the gap in that situation. As you say, there are good providers and then there is decreased quality, and quality and safety should be above profit, in your words. But when government makes these announcements and say they are going to do it and then cannot fit that gap and the private system comes in to fill that gap, again, that is not a fault of the private market, is it?

Georgie DENT: No. As I said, we think that the design of the childcare subsidy has incentivised exactly what has occurred. I want to be really clear that The Parenthood has been unambiguous in our message to governments right around the country and the Commonwealth government that parents and children have been failed and that wholesale reform is needed to address these issues. I just want to say this, and I know I have said this a little bit, but one of the functions that we believe is critical for the early childhood commission – it is wild that there is not, at the moment, a genuine planning provision for how early education and care is supplied and where services can open. We have got stronger regulations about where pharmacies can open and not encroach on particular suburbs if there is already provision in that area. With early education and care, we do not have that. So we have got areas that are still being approved for new providers when the existing providers are saying, ‘We don’t have any more space here.’ But there has not been the capacity for the arms of government to be talking to each other and saying, ‘What are the needs of our population? Where are the children? Where are the children likely to be, and what are the services that those children are going to require?’ We have been saying that for a very long time, but it is absolutely critical to deliver on the message to parents that there is a position available if they need it.

Georgie CROZIER: I hear you. In terms of the population increase and the growth corridors, where for years there has just been a lack of planning or understanding of those needs, we constantly say: if you do not have the services in place, you cannot look after your communities properly. Just quickly and finally, the Productivity Commission and the *Rapid Child Safety Review* – they are all too late, I might add, given what this government has known and failed to do over many years – have recommended a national early childhood commission, and you take up that recommendation. Do you know where that is at?

Georgie DENT: I understand it is under consideration. Certainly from The Parenthood’s perspective, I have been speaking to the Commonwealth government, the Victorian government, the South Australian government and the New South Wales government about the need for this commission. I do believe it is under

consideration. There is near unanimous consensus on this in the sector that we need this function fulfilled. There are definitely different views on exactly how you would set it up, but we have made a submission to the Commonwealth government that it funds the work to set this up properly, because the function needs to be fulfilled and it has not been. Last year indicates the extent of those failures, because we have not had a steward, in effect, to actually put the guardrails around early childhood education and care in the way that we have needed.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for your submission and for appearing today. I just want to pick up on something you were discussing with Ms Crozier around the failure of planning for where early learning centres can be opened up. In terms of the level of government that should take responsibility for that, where do you see that responsibility best lying?

Georgie DENT: This is one of the chicken-and-egg dilemmas that we have. Part of the commission's role is to settle the roles and responsibilities of each layer of government about who is responsible for what, because at the moment shared responsibility has led to no accountability. Each arm of government is able to point to the other and say, 'Well, that's in your remit, and that's in your remit,' and they are both sort of true, but parents are not interested in that. They want to know what is being done to ensure families can access safe, high-quality and affordable early education and care near where they live.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you think there needs to be a higher bar or some other way of assessing providers prior to them being able to open up an early learning centre?

Georgie DENT: Yes, I do. One of the points that has been made to me a number of times is that some of the existing large providers, who have not had consistently high-quality ratings across their services, have been given licences to continue growing. I think, at a minimum level, one of the things we could say is, 'If your services are not all at a particular quality rating, you're not opening any more. Until you get the services to this level of quality, no more.'

Sarah MANSFIELD: Ms Gray-Barberio mentioned before an issue that we discussed a bit yesterday with some of the providers around financial incentives that are provided to centre managers or potentially even executives that are linked to things like the NQS rating of a centre, which they have said is a positive because it encourages them to meet a higher standard. Do you think there are risks involved with linking individual financial rewards to those systems? For example, could it encourage under-reporting in order to try and achieve a higher score for personal benefit?

Georgie DENT: Yes, I believe that is possible. I think there is evidence to suggest that has certainly happened in some services, to the detriment of quality, safety and transparency. I referenced this in my opening statement: we know that the vast majority of early childhood educators and teachers are doing this incredibly valuable, demanding skilled work for very little pay and they are doing the right thing. I think what is really difficult is to contemplate what environment educators are being put in, if the commercial context is 'We want to lift occupancy, we want to grow our profit', then incentivising the educators to somehow contribute to that bottom line, when actually what that context means is fewer staff, less support, less additional capacity in the centre on a daily basis. So it is almost like you are setting educators up to fail.

I know I have heard evidence that others have given that one of the things that we see often is when a new private provider opens in a particular area, it will offer incentives to educators. So they will do a sign-on bonus. They might do six weeks of no fees for parents. They do this as a way of getting people in the door, and then, in a lot of instances, the educators realise it is not an environment they can thrive in. They are being set up to fail effectively and they leave, and then parents are in that position and they are left realising, 'Actually I was enticed in.' And you can totally understand why parents take that incentive, because a lot of households in Australia feel like they are living on a tightrope, even in houses with two incomes. I hear from parents all the time. Just this week, a family in Melbourne with two parents, two small children, two reasonably well paid jobs, an average city mortgage and two kids in child care: basically their head feels like it is just beneath the surface. In that context you can see why parents are enticed in those situations, and I think we should have some guardrails around that sort of scenario, which is part of the picture of saying, 'Actually, if there are

already enough services in this particular postcode or this area, we're not opening any new ones,' because that will put at risk the quality and stability of the other services in that area.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You have mentioned previously childcare deserts, early learning deserts that exist in Victoria. How do you think that could be addressed? Because I think that is another part of the picture here when it comes to child safety and quality of education.

Georgie DENT: I think we have to be intentional about expanding service provision in those areas. One of the limitations of the childcare subsidy is that in some regional or rural areas – more regional areas – when there is not a guaranteed exact population of children to get to the optimal capacity, it is not viable for a service to set up there. So that is part of why even not-for-profit providers struggle to open in areas where there is not a particular population, because it just is not financially viable for them to do so. That is a reason in our view to be looking at what the funding model is, because just because there are not X amount of children in a particular community does not mean that community does not require quality early education and care, so what funding model would mean it is viable for there to be a service in that community?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Just in my last few seconds, going back to the Victorian government's response to the incidents that occurred last year, in your view, is the six-week rapid review adequate, or is there further work that needs to be done, given the extent and scale of the issues that have been uncovered?

Georgie DENT: What I would say is – and this is relevant in many contexts, but it is so apt here: we do not have a knowing problem, we have a doing problem. We have got so much evidence. There have been so many inquiries and commissions that have looked into it – the ACCC, the Productivity Commission, states and territories. The Productivity Commission has looked at early childhood education and care multiple times. We know so much of what keeps children safe in early education and care and what drives quality in early education and care. We need to do that. The reality is if the 22 recommendations in that rapid review were delivered on, we would meaningfully improve the quality, safety and outcomes of our early education and care system. It is about implementing and doing.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much for your very candid and clearly passionate presentation today. I just want to go back to something that Dr Mansfield said about thin markets and childcare deserts. I have a regional hat on, so I always want to talk about that lens. Does the Victorian government have enough information to understand where childcare deserts are in your opinion?

Georgie DENT: My instinct would be to say yes and/or that it would not be too difficult to get the information needed to make that assessment. At The Parenthood, for the last five years we have been particularly active in advocating for early education and care in regional, rural and remote communities. We have built a coalition of more than 70 organisations, including the farmers federation, the medical association, the CWA, a whole lot of local councils and GrainGrowers. There are all these organisations that are recognising that when communities do not have early education and care the impact is catastrophic, and not just for individual families. What I am trying to say is a lot of work has been done by individual communities and by individual parents that have been trying to put together solutions. Community Early Learning Australia does this work. There are organisations that can help on the ground to develop solutions, because we are realistic that not every rural community in Australia is going to have a population that necessarily supports a centre-based day care. We at The Parenthood absolutely support the expansion of fit-for-purpose, high-quality early learning services, recognising flexible modes of delivery are going to be needed for different communities. It is not beyond us to do that work and to actually implement it. I know of multiple organisations in Victoria who have got a lot of information at their fingertips that could help inform that.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I appreciate that very much. Without making work for you, is there any sort of distilled document that you have in The Parenthood that you could provide to the committee just to provide more clarity around that? Have a think about it; take it on notice. And I love the worry about the double drop-off. I say many regional parents would kill for a double drop-off, because it means you actually have the primary school and the day care service in the one town and one location. That is a comment. You can comment on it if you like.

Georgie DENT: Do you know what? I was presenting yesterday at the Commonwealth Senate inquiry into early education and care, and I explained how many parents feel stranded by the current system. I talked about families who live in regional or rural areas where there is no provision and families who have got children whose needs are deemed outside a service's capacity, so they are turned away. Those families are stranded. And then even the lucky families who live in city areas and do have positions feel stranded because the cost is so prohibitive. So I want to say I know parents feel so trapped in so many different ways, and for so many parents in regional and rural areas, the lack of provision is diabolical.

Melina BATH: Yes. Look, I do not want to go down a rabbit hole – I am not advocating this – but do you see a way for government to incentivise larger for-profits to go into the regions? How do we solve this? Government should open up centres – that is one. But what about other ideas? Should there be a capital grants program to refurbish community centres or something? Could I get you to take that on notice? Would you mind? Is that okay, just for feedback? Only because I have got another line of questioning. That is unfair of me. Can I ask you: in your membership group you talk about carers being part of your base. I want to focus on out-of-home care, foster carers and kinship carers in your membership. They do heavy lifting for government. They look after very vulnerable and often traumatised children. Can you talk to us about how the early childhood system in Victoria is ignoring them? What do they need more? What do your members in this space need more of?

Georgie DENT: I think I have to take that question on notice, because I cannot speak confidently to that.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. My other question in the last little bit goes to that we have got VECRA now and some would potentially say, 'We've got a new authority. The job is done.' You were concerned about certainly the regulator being inside the education department, and now it sits outside. What are some things that you want to see happen to make sure that there is independence, that there is transparency and that there is no informal departmental influence? What will make VECRA a successful entity going forward, and what are the key milestones of that?

Georgie DENT: That is another question I would take on notice because I am not equipped to speak to that off the top of my head.

Melina BATH: Okay. All right. Now that I have put those ones on record, do you want to go back and have a discussion around some of the childcare deserts and some of the things that government could do? If government is not opening its own services, what are some of the other levers that the government could present?

Georgie DENT: I think that the Commonwealth government's building fund, the Building Early Education Fund, is looking at a combination of those options and is looking at things like capital grants. Those funds are only being made available to not-for-profit providers. So that is one way. But as I referenced in a previous answer, because the childcare subsidy is the funding model, a lot of not-for-profits would not even apply for the building fund, because without there being some degree of top-up operational funding it is not viable for them to operate there. We need to be looking at this holistically. I would say part of the challenge is we need a better funding model that is more directly funding services, because then we would have greater capacity to overcome some of the financial challenges for some providers.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

Georgie DENT: Just one other thing I will say, and we know this, is there is a different risk and growth appetite in the for-profit and the not-for-profit sector, which is also partly why we have seen the rapid expansion of the for-profit, because there is greater willingness to take on debt, risk, buildings, capital money, whereas for not-for-profits, providing high-quality early education and care is actually very expensive, so those quality services are reinvesting in their operations and they do not have the capital available to say, 'We're going to expand.'

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. I am sorry I was not here at the start. I had a double booking. Georgie, I have really enjoyed listening to you. You are all over the issue, so I cannot wait to hear what you have got to say to my questions. One of the things that the Victorian government is doing is it has done an assessment of childcare deserts across the state and identified 50 of the most I guess extreme cases in need of child care and put in place a program of construction of early learning centres, which is child care, kindergarten, pre-prep, maternal and child health, various mixtures of that, at government-owned primary schools. Basically the Victorian government is investing in becoming a childcare deliverer itself. I have heard so much over the last two days about the difficulties with the private sector and what you are saying about a lack of profitability, that TAFE term of ‘thin markets’ in country communities and the notion of equity rather than equality – equality means everybody gets the same, and equity means some people in regional communities need more to get to the equal point. Would you say that is an appropriate strategy?

Georgie DENT: Yes, I would. I have said this previously. I think that there being direct intervention to shape the composition and options of early childhood education and care is critically important. We do see that in overseas countries it is more common for there to be public provision in addition to for-profit and not-for-profit providers. I think that it makes a lot of sense. I am often asked, ‘Why is child care so expensive for parents? Why are the fees so high?’ There are a couple of reasons for it, but predominantly it is because delivering early education and care does actually cost a lot of money. But the other comparison I give is: when I enrol my daughter in the local primary school, I do make a contribution, but I am not expected as a parent to shoulder the full wages bill for the teachers, for the support staff, for the librarians, for the building maintenance. As individual parents, it is not financially viable for us to uphold and support the financial viability of schools. In early education and care that is the model that we have had. I think it goes back to this distinction that we have had with – I think early education and care has been seen partly as a form of welfare and partly as education. And the truth is –

Jacinta ERMACORA: And partly as a woman’s role, historically.

Georgie DENT: Yes, definitely. We have got to recognise there is some pretty significant shifting ground there. Also of course, putting your judgement aside as to whether or not you believe women [Zoom dropout] workforce, the reality is most households now rely on two incomes just to meet the cost of living and therefore having access to early education and care is not a luxury. I often say early education and care and decent paid parental leave are the roads and bridges that parents need to be able to move between work and care. At the moment those roads and bridges for too many communities do not exist, and you have got individual parents that are stranded or scrambling to try and make that work. So we do need to look at it I think as essential community and economic infrastructure and in that context –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Like primary school education. You are making me think that the Commonwealth government rolling it into some kind of primary school structure eventually would be more sustainable, from what you are saying, than the individual parents paying.

Georgie DENT: Yes, I think that is right. But I think it is also really important that we make the distinction that for young children play-based learning is critically important and it is not school. So even though potentially having co-location on school grounds makes a lot of sense and would be great for children and families, we have to maintain that distinction, that play-based learning is so important for younger children.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It sounds like the Victorian model is about right. I must admit, I opened up the Murtoa early learning centre, a very small community just north of Horsham in my own region, and one down in Portland, at Portland South Primary School. So some really small communities are receiving these early learning centres, which is great. I just want to also ask about the national law. Now that the rapid review is finished, it recommended that children be paramount in the consideration of staff in childcare services. What is The Parenthood’s view on this change? I will leave it at that and see how you go.

Georgie DENT: We absolutely agree that the rights of the child should sit paramount in early education and care. I think the context has been difficult, and I am aware of this because I actually took a number of parents who had had a child abused in an early learning service to meet the education and the early education ministers last year in the wake of the scandal. One of those parents was from Victoria. Each of them had had different experiences, but in every case there had been very legitimate and serious red flags about the people who ended

up perpetrating the abuse and they were effectively protected because their privacy sat above sharing information that would have kept children far safer.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Are you saying that perhaps some of the traditional HR principles from every HR department we have ever known are cutting across some of the rights of children?

Georgie DENT: My understanding is – and this is a perspective I have had shared with me from a number of different providers – they have felt quite constrained in the information they are able to share and the information they are able to obtain about particular employees. That is my understanding, and I certainly know of families who have been caught up in that in the worst possible way, which was that red flags were raised and yet the next employer was not informed; the previous employer was not able to share with the next employer the extent of what had gone on, and that is just completely unacceptable.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. I think my time is up, Chair. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Thank you so much, Ms Dent, for your appearance, evidence and contribution to our hearing this afternoon. We really appreciate it. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week's time before it is published on the website. I also just want to remind you there are some requests for information on notice. When you can, could you please provide that to our secretariat in due course. Thank you so much for your time. It was lovely to have a chat.

We are now going to take a quick break to welcome and reset for our next witnesses. Thank you, Ms Dent.

Witness withdrew.