

Parliament of Victoria

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Meeting notes

Date and time: Monday 2 March 2026, 1 pm

Location: MS Teams/ Meeting Room G.5, 55 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne

Present	Ella George MP (Chair) Annabelle Cleeland MP (Deputy Chair) Chris Couzens MP	John Lister MP (via MS teams) Cindy McLeish MP Jackson Taylor MP
In attendance	Jackie Mead, Chief Executive Officer, Knowmore Legal Service Mardi Grivas, Managing Lawyer, Knowmore Legal Service	Committee Secretariat staff

Knowmore Legal Service

About Knowmore Legal Service

Knowmore was established in 2013. Their initial role was to support victims and survivors from across Australia to engage with the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. Following the establishment of the National Redress Scheme, Knowmore was funded by the Commonwealth Government to assist victims and survivors to explore their redress options, including under the Scheme. Knowmore is also funded to assist victims and survivors who experienced child sexual abuse in domestic, family and community settings and provides outreach across Australia.

Access to redress scheme and Royal Commission commentary

Reflecting on their experience, Knowmore consider that 'closed institutions' present some of the most challenging experiences they encounter when considering options for helping people access redress. In particular:

- There is difficulty getting 'closed institutions' to participate in the National Redress Scheme or to get governments to agree to be funders of last resort for these institutions under the Scheme.
- Most survivors do not think they will be eligible for support. Only a small portion of people affected come forward, even though the harm they experienced is significant.

While Knowmore do not have statistics on how many people from ‘closed institutions’ or ‘cults’ seek support, based on client experiences, Knowmore sees this client group as more likely to need additional support when engaging in justice seeking processes.

Coercive control impacts a person’s capacity to make strategic decisions and to have their experiences questioned, which can make engagement with support services challenging. The multidisciplinary nature of Knowmore’s service model means a person may be engaging with several support services before they are ready to begin any justice process. Often, the first support requirement is addressing safety and wellbeing, such as housing, financial counselling/support and other wellbeing-focused concerns.

Knowmore noted that the Royal Commission included a detailed case study on Jehovah’s Witnesses, outlining the components of what a cult is and examining how the organisation integrated into family life. The case study described how abuse, disclosure, and institutional failures impacted victims and survivors and should be considered when determining a survivor’s eligibility for redress under the National Redress Scheme. However, Knowmore consider that in practice, similar cases are not always being assessed in the same way by the Scheme.

Engagement with Knowmore

Legal systems are not set up in a way that supports people from ‘closed institutions’ to seek justice. Often the most valuable thing that Knowmore can provide is a space to be heard, understood and believed. Clients often begin the process knowing legal options are limited and the system is complex. Clients may be coming forward to prevent the abuse they experienced from happening to others.

A distrust of institutions or agencies is common. Knowmore relies on word-of-mouth to earn trust with individuals as this leads to referrals between the client cohort. Service delivery for this client cohort may differ as a result. For example:

- Some people prefer face to face engagement. The visibility of their experience is important to them.
- Some people need the comfort and safety of their home and prefer to engage by phone.

Knowmore’s approach is to start where the client wants and needs to; whilst also acknowledging that it is not the client’s responsibility to know what their avenues or options are before approaching Knowmore.

Who are the client cohort?

The vast majority of Knowmore’s clients have left their ‘closed institution’ and lack support, community, or family around them. There are generally two types of leavers, those who have planned to leave or those who left suddenly, taking an opportunity. The circumstances in which a person leaves a ‘closed institution’ influences the types of services Knowmore may provide, such as housing referrals or financial counselling. As the National Redress Scheme has progressed, Knowmore is more likely to be contacted by victims and survivors aged 30–45 years old.

Anecdotally most people engaging with Knowmore were not recruited in, but were born into the ‘closed institution’ or their parents were recruited when they were young.

Knowmore have found that when a ‘closed institution’ has been publicly accepted to be a ‘cult’ including through media, it is more likely that members leaving that institution are self-aware and create a community to help other people to leave. Similarly, once a ‘closed institution’ joins the National Redress Scheme, many more people from that institution come forward.

What clients are seeking and the barriers they face

Justice and redress: An offer of redress from the National Redress Scheme, may include a redress payment. However, engagement with the Scheme is equally about creating a record to help highlight patterns and prevent future harm to others.

Getting 'closed institutions' to participate in the National Redress Scheme is a common barrier. There is also significant difficulty establishing the abuse occurred.

For this client cohort, two legal issues often act as a barrier to accessing justice:

- If a client mentions the word 'cult' or describes a cultic experience, they are often not believed.
- If a client describes how involved the group was in family life and how this contributed to the harm, abuse that occurred within the family is often considered ineligible under the National Redress Scheme because it does not fit the definition for 'institutional abuse'.

In some groups, abuse was perpetrated within the family but was encouraged or accepted by the group's leadership. However, the abuse may only be considered eligible if it occurred in an environment or involved a perpetrator directly associated with the group. For example, within a building used by the group or perpetrated by a group leader.

For many people redress is not an option, so Knowmore may assist in pursuing other avenues, like the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme, although these options are less fulsome. Civil law remedies may not be a suitable option for everyone. Sometimes there is nothing the justice system can offer.

Understanding: A strong element of engagement is narrative therapy; helping people to understand what happened to them and make sense of it. A lot of clients experience shame and confusion, often asking themselves why they did not leave earlier or did not speak up. The sense making component is a valuable part of the help seeking process.

Protection: Seeking protection through legal process, to not be pulled back into the group, targeted or shunned. Knowmore stated that clients are often "looking for a way to hold onto what was good while dealing with something horrible".

Trauma informed responses to support survivors of abuse in 'closed institutions'

The wellbeing and safety of clients when they first engage with Knowmore is a priority. A trauma informed response involves dealing with the trauma first to get clients to a place where they feel comfortable to share their experience. Knowmore makes warm referrals to other existing services and supports clients until they are well established in those services before beginning any justice or redress processes or closing a client's matter.

Not all clients share their involvement in a 'closed institution' when presenting for support at Knowmore. Some people will self-identify that their harm occurred within a 'closed institution' themselves, while for others it may only become evident after engagement with a social worker or financial counsellor.

Knowmore made a number of recommendations to the Committee to consider how to improve trauma informed support for survivors.

How do we encourage support seeking?

- Promoting greater transparency of support systems is critical. While it may not be possible to legislate for safety within groups, Knowmore stated that there needs to be something "sending signals to survivors that we are waiting on the outside".

- Currently people are encouraged to seek support through word-of-mouth. Knowmore sees value in helping people heal, so that they can then help the next group of people seeking support.
- Language matters. Talking about it and labelling it without sensationalising it is important.
- Coercive control in relationships is currently addressed through the Respectful Relationships program within schools. Education and awareness could be extended to include where a whole community may be complicit or contributing to harm. For young people in these groups, it could give them the knowledge and ability to identify that their experiences are problematic.
- Providing greater recognition of lived experience and validating that their experiences are understood and seen.
- Acknowledge that healing is a journey and may require long-term support. For example, some people may need counselling and therapy beyond what can be achieved within the 10 sessions covered in a Medicare Mental Health Treatment Plan.

What does education and awareness look like?

- Leveraging the Respectful Relationships program in schools and increasing transparency over education that is provided by homeschooling or institution run education.
- A public health style campaign delivered through television media may not be the right approach because there is no way of knowing who is seeing it and how it is being interpreted.
- Consider education of nurses, general practitioners and maternal child health nurses to identify people in need, in the same way training is provided around family violence.
- Multi-disciplinary, holistic support for victims and survivors is also critical.

Other considerations

- A suggested model to support survivors is to centre people with lived experience. This approach has been used to support survivors of other harmful behaviours, including institutional or systemic harms. For example, culturally safe engagement with Stolen Generation survivors often includes having a fellow First Nations person walk alongside them.
- What justice looks like needs to be survivor-led, and the system needs to be able to respond to individual needs. Improved awareness and acceptance in society is necessary so that people are heard and believed.
- Shutting down groups may not be possible, and there needs to be considerations of the risks that this may drive groups deeper underground, making oversight or intervention harder.
- Knowmore have received feedback that some sexual assault services may look at the issue too narrowly. Some survivors indicated to Knowmore that the sexual abuse was not necessarily the most damaging thing that happened to them. However, it is one of the harms they can raise to access help.
- In some 'closed institutions', children and young people may participate in the abuse of other children (whilst simultaneously being victims themselves). This can have lifelong implications. Knowmore noted that the National Office for Child Safety is setting new standards at the end of the year that will focus on this issue.
- Sex and consent education is not regulated. Where a young person has not had adequate sex and consent education, it can be easier for abuse to occur when they do not know the language or what behaviours are unacceptable.

- People can be in a variety of housing situations, including very precarious arrangements such as 'couch surfing'. However, this is often not an appropriate or available option for people who have left a group and lost their community. Many clients are still living in unstable housing when they seek support. Knowmore indicated that many clients experienced homelessness in the 12 months before presenting at the service.
- In some cases, even where children attend public school, it may still not be a safe place to report harmful behaviour. This is because their 'closed community' may send all children to the same school. In many groups, children are taught to watch each other and report back if someone is not following the rules. This allows groups to remain insular and maintain control.