

# **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 – Monday 25 May 2026

#### **MEMBERS**

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESS**

Lizzie Blandthorn, Minister for Children.

**The CHAIR:** We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my deep respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee and welcome any members of the public in the gallery or watching via the live broadcast.

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.

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For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Lizzie Blandthorn, Minister for Children.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will now go around and introduce ourselves and then I will invite you to make an opening statement. I am Anasina Gray-Barberio, Member for Northern Metro.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Good afternoon, Minister. Georgie Crozier, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

**Melina BATH:** Good afternoon, Minister. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all. You have 10 minutes for your opening statement, Minister. Thank you very much.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today and pay my respects to elders past and present. Can I acknowledge that Aboriginal people were the first parents, the first carers, the first children and indeed the first educators and teachers on these lands. We still have much to learn from Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing when it comes to teaching and educating our children and caring for our families.

The horrific incidents of abuse involving the accused last year have impacted children, families and communities and they have sickened us all. My thoughts remain with those directly and indirectly impacted. I also want to acknowledge that for our early childhood education workforce the past 12 months have been a particularly difficult time in the profession. These incidents and the discussions we are having in this forum are not a reflection on the dedicated work you do each and every day to support children right across this state. I thank and appreciate you for your work.

At the outset I want to be clear that early childhood education and care is a national system. It is regulated under a National Law and national quality standards, and in relation to significant portions of the sector, such as long day care, includes for-profit provision driven through the Commonwealth childcare subsidy. Education ministers around the country were actively working to address many of the issues that our rapid review

canvassed and I know this committee is interested in talking about today, but I do want to stress that we operate in a federated system.

Chair, when these allegations came to light last year, despite this national work underway, we took action that was available within our jurisdiction. We were able to implement a workforce register and a personal device ban in early education settings. We also established a rapid child safety review led by Jay Weatherill AO and Pam White PSM, who I know you have had the opportunity to speak with on this committee. We established the rapid review as we knew we had to act with urgency. From the report provided, we committed to implementing all 22 recommendations and 40 subrecommendations of the review. Importantly, in line with Victoria operating in a federated system, the report had 19 recommendations which required Victoria to advocate to the Commonwealth for national reforms to the system. I am very pleased to confirm that, as at this month, of the 40 subrecommendations, 31 are complete and there are just nine subrecommendations that remain underway. These are all on track to be delivered in the timeframe specified in our government's response to the rapid review, and we are providing the funding that is needed to implement these recommendations.

Through the budget update last year, we provided an initial \$137 million investment. This funding allowed us to establish the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, VECRA, the new independent regulator, and ensure it was provided with the resources it needs, including additional authorised officers and regulatory staff, to implement a 12-month unannounced visit schedule. It also supported enhancements to the working with children check as well as the Social Services Regulator's expanded functions. Through the 2026–27 budget we are providing a further \$26.2 million to continue to strengthen the early independent childhood regulator, including funding for frontline regulatory resourcing, to turn more visits into enforcement action to improve the safety and quality of the sector. We are also investing \$16.8 million to support the Social Services Regulator to continue delivering worker screening checks, and a further \$5.1 million will support child safety through improvements to the collection and management of data relating to the reportable conduct scheme.

Chair, it is important to outline the real difference that these reforms are delivering across our state. To start with the working with children check, as this committee may be aware, responsibility for the check moved into my responsibility through a change to the general order on 1 September 2025. This change, as supported by the rapid review, brings together key child safeguarding schemes such as the Child Safe Standards and the reportable conduct scheme to enhance the safeguards available to children. It also transferred to me as minister the opportunity to fully equip the Victorian Ombudsman's investigation into a former youth worker's unauthorised access to private information about children from 2022. As I had previously outlined in Parliament, the two recommendations to DFFH had already been implemented, and with the change to the general order I had the ability, as the then responsible minister, to change the law and fully implement the outstanding recommendation. We achieved this through the passage of the Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Bill 2025. The Social Services Regulator can now take immediate action to respond to child safety risks through strengthened powers to suspend, refuse or revoke working with children checks for those who pose an unjustifiable risk to children's safety, including by acting on unsubstantiated allegations and intelligence.

But, Chair, we recognise the need to go further than the Ombudsman's recommendation and we did this through the legislation bringing the reportable conduct scheme and Child Safe Standards under the one roof in the Social Services Regulator, creating a requirement that all working with children check applicants undergo child safety training and testing as part of the application process, requiring organisations to verify when they have engaged a working with children clearance holder to ensure the status of a person's working with children check can be monitored when people move between roles and employment, and replacing VCAT appeal rights with a dedicated internal review process undertaken by decision-makers trained to understand child safety risks. Recognising the transformation to the working with children check in our state delivered by this reform, they are being progressively delivered across the year. For the early childhood sector specifically, there have been significant enhancements since our immediate responses to the allegations. As I stated earlier, we have established the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority as an independent regulator with more powers and resources, including strengthening deterrence through tougher penalties for providers and increasing transparency for families.

I want to thank Mr Adam Fennessy for the work he has done as the interim regulator, a position that he was extremely well qualified for and which he has undertaken with great leadership and expertise in this important

role. Today we have announced that Wendy Steendam will lead the regulator from 1 July this year. For those who may not be aware, Ms Steendam was a former deputy commissioner of Victoria Police for over 10 years. She is a member of the Order of Australia and an Australian Police Medal recipient as well as being on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. Ms Steendam, at Victoria Police, worked in portfolios responsible for family violence, child abuse and sexual assault and will take this significant experience to her new role as regulator. We have given Ms Steendam and VECRA the powers they need to keep children safe. We did this through the passage of the *Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Child Safety) Act 2025*. As a result, these reforms make the safety, rights and best interests of children paramount in the national law. Personal device bans in ECEC services are now enshrined in the national law, following Victoria leading the way in our response to the allegations last year. Services must now be more transparent about compliance, and the Starting Blocks website now publishes regulatory actions and shows providers' corporate ownership links, giving families the information they need to make an informed choice for their child.

Victoria led the nation through our rollout of an early childhood worker register last year, and this is now adopted nationally with the national early childhood worker register. As a result there are now over 200,000 Victorian worker records. The register now provides the most comprehensive picture of the ECEC workforce we have ever had. Reforms also require mandatory child safety training for all ECEC staff and volunteers, with more than 58,000 Victorian workers having completed the training so far.

To conclude, Chair, we need to highlight the state of the sector today. Since 2015 in Victoria the number of long day care services has grown by 60 per cent. The rapid review also confirmed that of the new long day care services in Victoria since 2015, 94 per cent are operated by for-profit providers. The rapid growth of for-profit providers in the sector has expanded the number of ECEC services, but it has also created a number of challenges for the operation and regulation of the system. Through evidence by the Department of Education at this parliamentary inquiry, what we know is that for-profit services are less likely to exceed the national quality standard relative to not-for-profits; 9.7 per cent of for-profit services exceed the national quality standard, where 42.8 per cent of not-for-profits exceed the national quality standard, a point also made clear by the rapid review. This differential must be explored by this committee, including what action the Commonwealth is taking as the funder of the Commonwealth childcare subsidy. I welcome the discussion with this committee on how we can ensure that every service in this state is delivering safe, high-quality care. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. We are now going to take turns in asking you some questions and having that discussion with you, and I will start. Minister, I will just take you back. Before the rapid review my office had been notified by concerned educators and parents about the potential scale of systemic issues that were happening in the early childhood education sector. Then on 18 June in Parliament I requested some documents from the government related to safety in early childhood education services. These documents were not released till December. The government moved pretty quickly when allegations came to light regarding the accused, Mr Brown. Why did it take your government so long to produce these documents regarding the safety in early childhood education services?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** The document request that your question relates to, Ms Gray-Barberio, relates to more than 1 million documents, is our advice. Tranche 1 of those documents has been released. Further work is underway regarding subsequent documents, but I do want to stress that the documents that you have indeed requested include personal and critical information that relates to individual children, their families and their services, and so the appropriate care needs to be taken to assess those documents before they can be released. If you would like to reform the scope of your request, then that may indeed make that quicker, but as it stands there are more than 1 million documents in question.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to move on, but I will say that that motion was delicately worded to protect individuals, especially children, and their identities. Today we have heard from VECRA and we have also heard from the Department of Education. Minister, were you aware at any time that staff from QARD were going to be all moved across to VECRA, the new regulator? Are you concerned at all about the systemic issues that were going on in QARD that led to the failings and that there is a risk of that being repeated in VECRA in terms of picking up and ensuring that safety benchmarks are upheld, enforced and given the care that is required?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** At the outset, I would reject the premise of your question. QARD was operating in accordance with the national law as it stood at the time and was using the resources available to it to hold the

system to account and to fulfil its regulatory functions. Indeed many of the enforcement actions that were reported at the time were evidence that QARD was responding to issues that needed to be responded to. In relation to the establishment of an independent regulatory authority, this was a piece of work that, prior to the allegations that relate to the accused to which you referred, I had already requested of the department, quite separate to the incidents of the accused, on the basis that we were setting up Early Learning Victoria. Prior to us setting up Early Learning Victoria the government did not own or operate any early learning facilities, and so the regulator, being within the Department of Education, did not present a conflict of interest in that it was not regulating its own services. But the need for an independent regulator arose at the point at which we actually set up Early Learning Victoria, and so that work was underway. The rapid review then also recommended the establishment of an independent regulator, which is what has given rise to VECRA. As is appropriate, the functions of regulation that sat in the Department of Education were transferred out of the Department of Education to the independent regulator and now are a matter operationally for the independent regulator, and I would leave it to them to comment on that.

**The CHAIR:** The independent regulator does report to you, correct?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** The independent regulator is appointed by me and has a statement of expectations, as I know Mr Galea put to the regulator I think earlier this morning. I set clear expectations for the independent regulator, but the Parliament has decided the independent regulator should be independent and operationally is the responsibility of the regulator.

**The CHAIR:** Did you express any concerns about the fact that a whole bunch of staff – we were told today over 180 – are just being moved across to VECRA, the new regulator? Did you express any concerns when you were made aware that that was what was happening about whether it might be good to bring in some new blood, so to speak, around ensuring that there is independence in terms of the systems and the protocols and processes? The safety review also highlighted that QARD at the time was not properly resourced. Do you have some comments on that, Minister?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** There are a number of questions in there, Ms Gray-Barberio, but if I go back to your principal one first, the Parliament decided that an independent regulator should be established. It established the independent regulator. It also made the decisions it did in relation to the Social Services Regulator. So in a range of instances the appropriate resources that were working towards the regulation of services, for example, or oversight functions were moved into those regulators, as is appropriate. The statement of expectations I set for the regulator make government's view clear about what the regulator's job is. We do not interfere in the operations of the regulator, and how the regulator determines how those resources work is a matter for the regulator.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, the CCTV trials – are they going to be a permanent fixture in the sector?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** The CCTV trials are part of the national work that is underway, and that is a piece of work being led by the Commonwealth. My latest advice is that there are 52 Victorian services that will participate in the CCTV trials.

**The CHAIR:** We heard there was a media release by VECRA regarding a faith leader who was exempt from needing to have a working with children check. Have you been made aware of any other cases where people that are working with children are exempt from having a working with children check?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** I think the case you refer to is not a matter for VECRA but a matter for the Social Services Regulator. The Social Services Regulator has issued media comment and a public statement about that. The Social Services Regulator has made it very clear that nobody can provide an exemption, and the Social Services Regulator is investigating that matter. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask you about workforce shortages in the sector. The industrial action is coming up in July, and also G8 is reported to be closing 12 early childhood centres in Victoria alone. What kind of planning is your department putting in place to respond to this?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Again, I think there are a range of issues that you have raised in relation to that question, but if I take the first points about workforce strategy, the government has invested more than \$370 million in a workforce strategy for the Best Start, Best Life reforms. We recognise that in our

government's initiative to provide free three-year-old kinder and free four-year-old kinder to – is that your clock, Ms Gray-Barberio?

**The CHAIR:** That is okay. You can finish your sentence.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** In providing free kinder and extended hours of four-year-old kinder in the year before school it is important that we provide a workforce strategy that will provide for the extra teachers and educators that we need to fulfil that. That \$370 million strategy includes a range of initiatives that go towards that, and I know the Department of Education spoke to that earlier.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Deputy Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, just to start with, we heard earlier from VECRA about the work it is currently doing to bring in new authorised officers and the time and resources it takes to train them. If VECRA had had a blanket ban on any QARD officials moving over to them, would they be able to do their job right now?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** No, Mr Galea. It is a good point that I think you seek to make there. Obviously in transferring and setting up a new independent regulator it is appropriate that they be adequately resourced to do that. It is also important that, for example, all of those authorised officers who have already been trained and are experienced in conducting the work of authorised officers have access to all of those resources from the outset.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. In your opening statement you talked about the working with children check, which came into your responsibility on 1 September last year. Can you talk through what changes have been made to that system in that time?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you, Mr Galea. I appreciate the question and the opportunity. We have undertaken significant reform to the working with children check since it came into my ministerial responsibility on 1 September last year. I would say at the outset I sought this additional responsibility. Traditionally it had been the responsibility of the Attorney-General, and indeed around the country it has been the responsibility of attorneys-general, by and large. But it is a responsibility I sought following the rapid child safety review because I wanted to be able to link those key safeguarding aspects of it to the work of children.

Since it became my responsibility we have passed the Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Bill 2025, and it implemented important reforms – namely, removing the discretion for the Commission for Children and Young People, now the Social Services Regulator, not to share a substantiated reportable conduct finding with the worker screening unit – to be clear, those decisions not to share that were a matter for CCYP previously; enabling the Commission for Children and Young People, now the Social Services Regulator, to share additional information with the worker screening unit about a substantiated allegation; recognising the findings of a reportable conduct investigation in another state or territory which relates to the same reportable allegation – that is a critical function; responsibility for the working with children check and the NDIS worker screening check; and the reportable conduct scheme and Child Safe Standards all coming under one roof in the Social Services Regulator – that is critical to us from an information-sharing perspective.

The regulator now have access to a broader range of unsubstantiated child safety information to inform the use of those powers that they now have to trigger the reconsideration, suspension, refusing or revoking of somebody's working with children check clearance without having to wait for formal outcomes, such as charges to be laid, which again had previously been a feature of the system. Through our \$137 million in the budget update last year, we have provided VECRA and the Social Services Regulator, as I said in my opening statement, with the resourcing that they need to deliver this reform. Also, for the Social Services Regulator, this has included funding for ITs who bring together the child safety risk information, a critical part of that as well, and funding for additional staff as well as those that were already on board for the worker screening unit and the reportable conduct scheme. I would say I am disturbed – as I think we discussed in PAEC last week, Mr Galea – to see that all of this is at risk because the Social Services Regulator was reported as one of the government entities that the opposition intend to cut resources from. But at this stage I sit here being able to tell you as a committee that we have increased their resources to do that important work.

**Michael GALEA:** Definitely important work. Thank you, Minister. The 2022 Ombudsman report into the investigation into a former youth worker's unauthorised access to private information about children has been discussed a few times in this inquiry. Minister, have the recommendations from that Ombudsman's report been acquitted as part of those changes?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes, they have all now been acquitted, Mr Galea. As I have said a number of times now, at the time at which I had responsibility, the DFFH recommendations were well underway, and they have been acquitted. But I can also take you through the additional recommendations which were related to the working with children check – clearance, as it is actually known. The first one is:

obtain and consider any information that may be relevant to an applicant's suitability to work with children

This recommendation is acquitted. The legislation we passed last year will enable the Social Services Regulator to receive and consider any information that represents a risk to the safety of children, including yet-to-be substantiated allegations, and take decisive action to grant or to refuse a working with children clearance.

- b. refuse an application for a Working with Children Check if reasonably satisfied the applicant poses an unjustifiable risk to the safety of children (including where no criminal or disciplinary history exists)

This was also acquitted, again, when we passed the child safety legislation last year.

- c. reassess a person's suitability to hold a Working with Children clearance on the Secretary's own initiative, and without need for notification of a criminal charge or disciplinary outcome

Again, this was acquitted with the same reforms.

- d. pending determination of a reassessment, suspend a person's Working with Children clearance where the Secretary reasonably suspects the person poses an unjustifiable risk to the safety of children

This recommendation is acquitted. While it was contentious for some members of the Parliament, the legislation we passed enables the Social Services Regulator, pending a reassessment, to immediately suspend a person's working with children's clearance if the regulator receives or becomes aware of any information that represents a risk to the safety of children and it is in the interests of child safety to do so.

- e. revoke a person's Working with Children clearance following reassessment, where reasonably satisfied the person poses an unjustifiable risk to the safety of children (including where no criminal or disciplinary history exists).

That was also acquitted through the reforms passed in the Parliament last year. We did indeed recognise the need to go further. I want to be clear that the legislation we passed was not just in relation to the Ombudsman's report, but we went further by legislating functions that we are progressively implementing this year, including requiring working with children check applicants to undergo child safety training and testing as part of the application process, requiring organisations to verify when they have engaged a working with children's clearance holder their status so a person's working with children check can be monitored when people move between roles and employment, and replacing the VCAT appeals rights with a dedicated internal review process undertaken by decision-makers trained to understand child safety risks. So as you can see, Mr Galea, we have implemented all of those recommendations and indeed have gone further.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. The legislation obviously passed last year, but can you speak to any impact that amendments which were proposed could have had, potentially interfering with the Ombudsman's recommendations?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. There were a lot of amendments proposed to the legislation last year. One in particular I wish to point out was the Legalise Cannabis Party's proposal for a new section 91A providing a show-cause process before a working with children check could be suspended. This amendment would have allowed people like Ron Marks to continue holding a working with children check without the ability for the regulator to take immediate action. I appreciate that the majority of the Parliament supported us in making sure that that was not able to be the case.

**Michael GALEA:** It would not be putting child safety paramount, would it?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Ms Crozier.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, Mr Fennessy confirmed to the committee that he left his federal position last year, that your government approached him in October and that he left with a \$900,000 payout. How much was he paid for the six months of work that he has done for the state?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Firstly, I would say that I heard Mr Fennessy's evidence earlier today, and his Commonwealth employment and departure I would say is a matter for the Commonwealth. I think Mr Fennessy dealt with that, and it would not be appropriate for me here to talk to Mr Fennessy's individual employment matters.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, does the taxpayer have a right to know?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Mr Fennessy has performed with expertise and great experience the role that he was asked to undertake here in Victoria, the state in which he has spent most of his time, as secretary of the department twice, as the Victorian public service commissioner and in a range of other roles. He is very experienced as a regulator and the important task he has undertaken for us in bringing that expertise to set up an independent regulator has been critical, and I will not be canvassing in this forum his individual employment arrangements.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, I am not questioning Mr Fennessy's experience. I just asked the question, which you refused to answer. Will Ms Steendam be paid equivalently to what Mr Fennessy was paid?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Again, I will not be discussing people's individual employment contracts here in this committee hearing.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Does the taxpayer not have a right to understand the band that these people are being paid in?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** I refer you to my earlier answer, Ms Crozier.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, again, it is just disappointing that the government is lacking transparency in this. I think the taxpayer would want to know, given Mr Fennessy was paid out \$900,000 for not finishing the contract with the federal government. This is taxpayer money, and I think it is disappointing that you refuse to provide that answer, Minister.

Minister, in a couple of your comments in your opening remarks you said there are a number of challenges for the for-profit system. Do you support the for-profit sector in the early childcare space?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** I support a mixed sector, Ms Crozier, but fundamentally what has to be and what has been encouraging to see that Victoria has led the way in is that we have a sector that puts as paramount, as first and foremost, the safety, the wellbeing and the best interests of children, and we need a system and individual services that go to that end.

**Georgie CROZIER:** What does the mix look like?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** The mix, Ms Crozier, is a matter for the sector. From –

**Georgie CROZIER:** Isn't it a matter for government, given that you have a role to play?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Well, the Commonwealth government – as we have explained here and as I have heard previous witnesses explain, we have a national system that is governed by national law, national quality standards and national regulations and very much influenced by a Commonwealth childcare subsidy. I was very pleased to have a discussion with Minister Clare recently about the need – and I know this is an issue the Greens have been particularly interested in as well. The Greens political party have been particularly interested in some of the Productivity Commission recommendations that go to exactly this issue.

**Georgie CROZIER:** What about the Allan government?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Ms Crozier, can I finish answering your question?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Yes, but I have only got 4 minutes, and I need you to answer the question, if you would not mind, Minister.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Well, I am seeking to answer your question, Ms Crozier. It is a complicated system. It is a national system governed by national law.

**Georgie CROZIER:** It was very simple: do you support it, and what does the mix look like?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Ms Crozier, if I may, the child safety review that was undertaken last year by Jay Weatherill and Pam White spoke to the rapid growth of the sector and the fact that there has –

**Georgie CROZIER:** Minister, we will move on, because you have not answered the question.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Ms Crozier, I am attempting –

**Georgie CROZIER:** No, you have not answered.

**Michael GALEA:** Can you allow her to actually answer, please?

**Georgie CROZIER:** She is not answering. She has had 2 minutes, so I am going to go to the next question. In light of regulatory changes and increasing compliance obligations across the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria, concerns are growing about the operational pressures being placed on providers. Can the minister guarantee that no additional childcare centres in Victoria will be forced to close as a result of the increased regulatory fees and compliance costs imposed by your government?

**Michael GALEA:** You do not support child safety being paramount?

**Georgie CROZIER:** That is not what –

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Hang on, everybody. Just stop. Have you finished?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Chair. It is about providing services in a safe and quality manner, Deputy Chair. But my question is to the minister: can she guarantee that no additional childcare centres will close as a result?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you, Ms Crozier. Indeed what I was trying to say in relation to your previous question – and this question is indeed related – was that our rapid review said that what needs to happen is that there needs to be greater stewardship of the market. And in greater stewardship of the market there also needs to be a rethink of how we support the early childhood sector to both respond to the demand but with the absolute best interests, safety and wellbeing of children being the paramount considerations. As a government – and certainly I know I speak in unison with education ministers around the country – our first obligation is absolutely to the children and that we have a safe environment and that we set the conditions that provide for a safe environment. That does indeed mean greater financial penalties where centres and services do the wrong thing. It also means increased regulatory fees, and it means that services do need to do the other things that we have put in place to make sure we keep children safe: device bans and registering their employees so that we know exactly who is working in what centres and when. All of those things are part of delivering quality and safe services and ultimately a sector that is of high quality and safe standard. If services are unable to do that, then they may need to indeed reconsider whether or not it is the right business for them, because ultimately it is a service for children that should, at its first and most important point, have the safety and the wellbeing of children at heart.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Nobody is questioning the safety of children – nobody on this committee, nobody out there in the community – Minister. But what I am not convinced by is your answer in relation to that mix of the private sector, which has been continuously demonised in this committee by some witnesses – I am not saying you. Some witnesses have demonised the private sector, and I think that is shameful because there are very good services provided in the for-profit sector too. Could I just go to your response around the fees that are

being applied in Victoria? Where is that in comparison to other states, given the discussions you are having at a national level?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** There was a decision taken nationally about increased fees, and then there was also a recognition in New South Wales and in Victoria in particular that fees are needed to meet the complexity of the Victorian and the New South Wales markets. But in the last decade in Victoria the provision has increased dramatically, at around 60 per cent, and around 94 per cent of that has been the for-profit market.

**Georgie CROZIER:** So Victoria would be higher than anywhere else? Will Victoria be higher than anywhere else? Is that your understanding?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Victoria and New South Wales have the highest, and when we say ‘the highest’ it is around 16 cents to \$1.23 per week per child. Even the largest increase, which is 11 times, remains relatively small as a share of the revenue of some of these ASX or private equity companies, and I know that the Secretary explored that issue with you earlier today.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today, Minister. I am interested in the 2026–27 performance statement as part of the budget papers, which sets a target for assessing and rating only 25 per cent of services. I understand that while this is a target and it may well be exceeded, I am curious as to why it was only set at 25 per cent, particularly in the current context where there is so much concern about child safety and compliance with standards by early childhood education services.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Dr Mansfield, correct me if I am wrong, but I think you are going to the frequency of assessments more broadly. In 2025 30.27 per cent, which was 1474 of approved eligible services, were assessed and rated, the output performance measure target being the 25 per cent measured over the 2025 calendar year. In 2025 education ministers around the country committed to improving the time between assessments and ratings so that services are assessed and rated on average every three years, and the Victorian government’s investment in VECRA will enable VECRA to deliver on that commitment. That is a shared commitment across the country. I would say that Victoria has the lowest proportion of services of any state or territory rated as working towards the national quality standards – 4 per cent of services compared to the national average of 8 per cent – and all jurisdictions other than New South Wales are actually above 10 per cent. I think, again, the Department of Education spoke to that earlier. I certainly also heard VECRA speaking to the employment of those authorised officers that they are recruiting to continue to do that work. I would also say that, as part of the rapid review, as committed by government, VECRA will progressively increase the unannounced compliance visits to every service so that by August of next year – 2027 – each service receives an unannounced visit at least once every 12 months. There are a range of methods and whatnot that I can talk you through, although I suspect you have got other questions to go to, so I will leave it there.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you, yes. Just on that, from what you are saying, effectively that performance target – if we are going to do an assessment and rating every three years of each service – should really lift to 33 to 34 per cent if you are going to achieve that. I guess I will just put that there. At the moment it is still 25 per cent, that target, in the papers. I totally accept that that target might be achieved and has been achieved, but it just seems still quite low in the current context. Further to that, I was going to ask about the unannounced visits. Currently the performance statement sets a target of 70 per cent of services within a calendar year, but from what you are saying that will increase to 100 per cent under VECRA.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes. Again I just reiterate that the average of three-yearly assessments is a nationally agreed metric, if you like. But certainly also on top of that our rapid review recommended every service every 12 months, and we agreed to meet that, hence our investment in VECRA as a new entity. The previous resources plus all of the new ones that we have given it are designed for VECRA to be able to meet that KPI.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Can we expect in future budget papers, then, the performance statement targets to reflect that?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Certainly that would be something that we would continue to consider so that it is, yes, reflective of the most up-to-date national law.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. Just to change tack, we have heard throughout the hearings about significant workforce shortages throughout the sector. Also, it appears that there has been a decrease in the number of enrolments for early childhood education programs under the free TAFE program, potentially a reduction of 1600 enrolments in that sector. What are you doing to ensure that that workforce issue is being addressed and that we do have more people being trained as early childhood educators?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you for that question. Firstly, I would say that since 2019 the number of occupied teacher and educator roles delivering our funded kindergarten programs has increased by more than 60 per cent, and the Victorian Institute of Teaching data shows the growth across the early childhood teaching workforce is continuing. The number of fully registered early childhood teachers increased by 11.5 per cent from 6060 in 2024 to 6757 in 2025, I am advised, and the number of fully registered teachers holding dual registration, which is both early childhood and primary teaching, has increased by 13.1 per cent from 3732 to 4222 over the same 12-month period. But as I was saying earlier in response to Ms Crozier, I believe – but correct me if I am wrong; it might have been Ms Gray-Barberio – we do have a \$370 million workforce strategy fund. I was about to go on then to explain that that includes scholarships of up to \$25,000 for Victorians studying to become an early childhood teacher, with recent program changes providing even further financial support for bachelor students during their study period and up to \$7000 for educators to upskill from a certificate III to a diploma qualification in addition to free TAFE. There are scholarships of up to \$34,000 to assist Aboriginal Victorians to become early childhood teachers and educators; partnerships with tertiary providers to support more Victorians to gain early childhood qualifications; grants for all Victorian TAFEs who are delivering early childhood courses so that they can better support students to complete their studies; targeted financial incentives to attract quality teachers to join the Victorian early childhood sector and to move to the hardest-to-staff locations; and a range of free career supports, including mentoring and professional development, to support the retention and capability of existing early childhood professionals, because it is not just about recruitment and training but retention and supporting people to do that work.

There has been strong uptake in the department's attraction programs. For example, more than 5800 scholarships have been awarded since 2018. Over 800 educators have received financial support to upskill from the certificate III to the diploma qualification. Up to 2000 students are being supported to complete educator and teacher qualifications through those early childhood tertiary partnerships with vocational and tertiary providers, and this builds on the 1700 places that remain available to diploma-qualified educators to upskill in the early childhood teaching qualification through the innovative initial teacher education program. So there has been a strong take-up of those programs, and it is indeed making a difference. The \$370 million investment in workforce strategies is what is ultimately delivering that 60 per cent increase since 2019, and we have done that because we know we need to do it to deliver on our free kinder and other early learning Best Start, Best Life reforms.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I would be interested in understanding why then, despite all those incentives, there has been that drop-off in enrolments in the TAFE program in early childhood education, because it seems like a significant decrease in enrolments. But given time – and you have given quite a substantial answer to that – I might move on to –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Am I out of time?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it has just expired – apologies.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sorry. I cannot see the timer from here.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks for being here, Minister. VECRA is a Victorian government statutory entity, and in that regard there will be an annual report. I am presuming that that will include all the usual things, like workforce and salary reporting, in the appropriate way. Is that accurate?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes, that is right.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. I just want to go to educator wellbeing, retention and service quality. Are you able to explain a bit to the committee about the types of workforce supports that you are providing to ensure that there is a well-trained pipeline?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you very much, Ms Ermacora, for your question. It goes very much to what we were just talking about with Dr Mansfield. It is really a critical focus of government. We know that to deliver on the Best Start, Best Life reforms we need over the decade of those reforms around an additional 10,000 staff. As I said, we have seen a 60 per cent increase in the number of teacher and educator roles since delivering funded kindergarten programs, and when you grow the workforce by this size it really is critical that you keep an eye to the wellbeing of the workforce. As I was just saying in response to Dr Mansfield, it is not just about how we attract and recruit new workers but also how we retain them, upskill them and support them to do what is a really critical job but at times a really difficult job, and indeed the last year very much speaks to that. Attracting and retaining a highly skilled workforce across Victoria is of course a continuing challenge, especially in the context of workforce supply across the country and our care economy just continuing to grow. It is about how we continue to attract the share of workers that we need in the early education setting. While we have seen significant growth in the kindergarten workforce since we commenced the implementation of three-year-old kinder, we know there remain locations, particularly in some parts of rural and regional Victoria, where challenges can be more complex. We have set out a comprehensive plan to address both the quality and also the supply, and the fair supply, of workforce across the state.

The Best Start, Best Life workforce strategy, which was released in December 2023, is underpinned by that \$370 million I have mentioned a couple of times now. But that really does speak to growing the workforce, and growing it where we need it. It includes those initiatives like the tertiary partnerships, the upskilling certificate IIIs, further qualifications and diploma qualifications, and the statewide induction supports to improve the experience of graduate teachers in particular, making sure that people when they come into the role are well equipped for what it is that they are coming into. These initiatives build on our range of existing programs, including early childhood teaching scholarships – and as I said to Dr Mansfield, more than 5800 have been awarded since 2019 – and of course free TAFE, financial incentives and recruitment support. This comprehensive package has resulted in an 11.5 per cent increase in fully registered early childhood teachers from 2023 to 2024–25 and a 54.5 per cent increase in provisionally registered teachers over the same period, which highlights the success of that investment. As I said, we acknowledge the challenge in rural and regional Victoria for workforce, and that is why services in rural and regional areas can benefit from our financial incentives, in particular the program for early childhood teachers and educators. The incentives programs encourage qualified early childhood teachers and educators to take up a role in a funded kindergarten program, with a particular focus on supporting services in those hard-to-staff locations.

I would also say that despite this enormous growth in our workforce, the latest report on government services data shows that Victoria has the highest proportion of services meeting or exceeding the national quality standards and one of the lowest rates of serious incidents at ECEC services, which again speaks to the skill and the support that have been given to those workers. The report on government services also shows that Victoria has the largest proportion – I think it is 82.1 per cent – of any state or territory of paid primary contact staff in CCS-approved childcare services with a relevant formal qualification and three or more years of relevant experience. That is well above the national average of 75 per cent. So not only are we meeting the workforce demand, but we are also ensuring that they are high quality and therefore delivering high-quality service.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Very good. Those are some very good figures there. I just want to go to correcting the record here. I just want to refer to Body Safety Australia's evidence at this committee. They had emailed you and did not get a response. I just want to give you a right of reply in that space.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. I was concerned to hear that evidence, and I am advised, as appropriate when it comes to these types of matters, that the Department of Education reached out to this organisation on my behalf following their correspondence. For the committee's information, I was further advised that the department not only reached out to this organisation but met with them in October 2025, and I am advised that Body Safety Australia provided feedback about changes they were observing in the sector, including increased demand on their services. The department reported this back to my office, and I am

advised that the department undertook to consider this feedback as part of work on the school readiness funding menu, as well as mandatory child safety training that was being worked on for implementation this year.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. Also, just in relation to disability services, in evidence to this committee Dr Liz Hudson from Children and Young People with Disability Australia stated that she had made a special note about the issue, because children with disability, as we have mentioned, ‘face elevated risk of sexual abuse and other harm in institutional contexts due to the dependence on adults for intimate care.’ That is a quote there. Can you let us know what the reforms have been in support of children with disability and legislation following the rapid review, basically?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes, sure. Thank you. Following those recommendations of the rapid review we sought to provide expanded powers to the Social Services Regulator for children and adults with disability. This was something with both of my ministerial hats on I was particularly committed to. We in short sought to ensure the power to ensure that dodgy workers could be prohibited from ever working with people with disability or children again, ensuring that there is greater intelligence and information sharing to inform a reassessment of an NDIS worker screening check, and established dedicated complaints functions so we have greater intelligence to act earlier.

I would say that the opposition, the Greens and Legalise Cannabis opposed those additional safeguards, which was really disappointing because they would have sought to ensure that there was a simplified disability regulation, creating a one-stop shop for users of state-funded disability services, including a dedicated complaints function that would have continually been progressively expanded to encompass all social services that are registered under the SSR; expanding the powers of the SSR to ensure greater protection for children and adults with disability; and bringing together, aligning and strengthening the two existing worker regulation schemes for out-of-home care and disability workers. These reforms would have contributed to the regulator’s ability to really collect intelligence and generate system-wide insights, and they would have resulted in the regulator having access to a greater range of intelligence, giving it further flexibility to decide whether a complaint should be managed as a complaint or, for example, a breach of the Child Safe Standards or social service standards or a worker prohibition matter. Additionally, the reforms would have supported the Social Services Regulator to collect and share intelligence across disability social services and NDIS worker screening functions, enabling it to act earlier to safeguard children wherever it is that they are learning or playing or being cared for.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you.

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, for being here with us today. I would like to go back. Ms Gray-Barberio at the start had a couple of questions to do with the closure of G8 and a lot of the centres there. I think that there are 12 centres from Bayswater, Epping, Blackburn, Horsham, Point Cook, Mount Clear, Scoresby, Chelsea, Parkville, Springvale and Cranbourne. So there is a whole range of them. When did the minister –

**Michael GALEA:** I think there is a reason they are closing the Point Cook one. That is appalling – why did you bring that up?

**Melina BATH:** Excuse me.

**Michael GALEA:** Sorry, this is literally the centre at the heart of these allegations.

**The CHAIR:** I would just ask you to pause for a second, Ms Bath. Mr Galea, do you have a point of order?

**Michael GALEA:** Sorry. My point of order was just perhaps my shock at one of the centres at the very heart of these awful allegations now being brought up as a case study by Ms Bath.

**The CHAIR:** This is public information, so I will let you continue, Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. When was the Victorian government – when were you, Minister – first made aware of these issues contributing to these closures, and what specific actions were taken at the time to prevent or mitigate this outcome?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Again, I guess a bit like Mr Galea, I am shocked that you ask it, but indeed as I said to Mr Pesutto when he asked the same question at PAEC last week, I am more than happy to table a letter in relation to this that I have also received from Mr Rowswell. As I think Mr Galea was pointing out, the very centres that are in the list that you have just read out include the centres that the alleged paedophile worked at. So what I said at PAEC – I will say it again here, and I think it has been clear in my earlier remarks – is we make no apology for supporting changes to the national law through education ministers, being indeed in Victoria here the host of the national law and having the opportunity to increase national law standards and regulations that are about keeping children safe, higher penalties –

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Minister. That was not my question.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** I am attempting to answer your question, Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** My question was: when were you first made aware? And if you are going to table it to PAEC, we would really appreciate if you could provide the same content that you are tabling to this committee.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** What I tabled at PAEC was the letter from Mr Brad Rowswell. I am happy to again table it here, and I do so accordingly. What I was about to go on to say, Ms Bath, is that what has happened since those allegations, indeed at some of those very G8 centres that you have just listed off, is that we have had a rapid review that has made a number of recommendations that we and indeed the opposition and I think everyone agreed to enact to the fullest extent. The recommendations go to the paramountcy of children's safety and wellbeing – that that be the first principle and that for all who operate any education and care services, be they for-profit or not-for-profit, to go to Ms Crozier's question earlier, the first and most fundamental is the paramountcy principle of child safety and wellbeing. I make no apology. If any of these increased regulations make it more difficult for services to operate, then they should not be operating.

**Melina BATH:** We are not asking you to make an apology, Minister. I am asking what specific actions – that is the point. I think, Chair, we need to move on because the minister seems to be refusing to answer.

**Michael GALEA:** She is not. She is actually answering your question.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** I am more than happy to talk about the increased safety regulation that we have put in place to keep children safe. Ms Bath, you are the person who is raising the very services that are at the heart of the allegations that I thought this committee was concerned with.

**Melina BATH:** The reason why we are actually at this inquiry is to try to delve into the dramas, the dangers and the risks to children. I am not making an apology, I am sorry, for asking the pointy questions that you need to be able to respond to.

Minister, in relation to a very good submission – submission 50 – that somebody may have read, one of the comments that they make is:

Staffing remains an issue for us. We are extremely 'fussy' about who we employ and constantly look at candidates' experience and areas such as who they completed their training with. Many providers are offering short course degrees.

It goes on to say:

Many times, we have hosted students that, when completed, will be qualified to teach in our programs.

In the centre.

These teaching students are often lacking basic skills to interact with children and families. The students, along with Universities, often pressure our educators to pass them ...

She goes on to say:

We choose not to employ and reduce the number of places offered over employing someone –

**The CHAIR:** We have lost power.

**Hearing suspended.**

Welcome back. We will be resuming the committee's public hearings for the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector. We have just had a short break due to lighting issues, but we will resume with Ms Bath and her questioning. Thank you.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Chair. Yes, there was a power outage. Minister, I hope that you had heard that I was reading into Hansard one of the submissions. The key concern for many in making submissions is in relation to the quality of graduates entering into the ECEC workforce. I am interested to understand how you can, in your role, address those concerns, because as we have all decided and discussed, workforce shortages are critical. How do we not have more of them? So how can you address some of those issues?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Yes, thank you, Ms Bath, for the question. At the outset, I would say that the national regulator, ACECQA, is responsible for setting the national requirements for early childhood teaching programs as well as assessing and accrediting individual qualifications. I would also say that in July 2025, HumanAbility, the jobs and skills council for the care and support sector, commenced a review of the national VET training package for ECEC, which includes certificate III and diploma qualifications in ECEC. That review is being informed by extensive sector consultations. They will no doubt consult widely, including potentially with – at the start of your question, you referred to evidence given in particular. It will seek to ensure that ECEC qualifications continue to meet those current and, as well, emerging needs of the sector and in particular, legislative and regulatory changes and quality standards, including in key areas particularly of interest to this committee, such as their work in child safety. That public consultation is currently underway, with an endorsement of the new training package expected in April 2027. But it is also fair to say that out of our *Rapid Child Safety Review* last year, including recommendation 19, which spoke to stronger action on poor-quality training, Victoria has been advocating for the Commonwealth to implement nationally focused recommendations from the *Rapid Child Safety Review*. That includes a submission to the national inquiry into the quality and safety of Australia's ECEC system and advocating for action to improve ECEC training to ensure that there are adequate placements and to strengthen ACECQA's powers to address poor-quality RTOs, which potentially give rise to what you are speaking to.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I am not for a moment saying that it is a particular RTO or RTOs only. And I note that the submission talked about universities. How do you ensure that real pressures on childcare centres to fill vacancies do not result in lowering those standards around graduates? The graduate may have the qualification; it does not mean, as we have seen, they are actually fit to be in with those kids to a high standard.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** The child safety standards make it very clear. Indeed, we have spoken to this significantly over the past year. But ultimately the responsibility is on the employers to do the pre-employment checks and to make sure that they are adequately informed as to the competency of the people that they select to work in their services. But we also need to do that work to make sure that the training that they receive is sufficient.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** That brings our hearing to a close. Thank you, Minister, for your time, and thank you for persevering with the power outage.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**