



Australian Government
Productivity Commission

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE INQUIRY

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TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

TUESDAY 19 MARCH 2024

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to today's public hearing for the Productivity Commission inquiry into early childhood education and care. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the lands on which those of us in the room here today are meeting on, and to pay my respects to elders past and present. My name is Deb Brennan, and I'm a Commissioner with the Productivity Commission, and today I'm with fellow Commissioners, Lisa Gropp and Martin Stokie, and we're also joined by Lou Will, Assistant Commissioner on the team, and Grace Tang, one of our team members. And we welcome anybody who is joining us online as well.

Just a couple of preliminaries before we hear from our first participant. I think it's pretty obvious that the purpose of the hearings is to get feedback and comment on our draft report. We're well into the hearings now. This week is going to be our last week of public hearings. And we'll be presenting our final report to government at the end of June. We do like to conduct these hearings in an informal way, but I just do need to remind everybody that although participants are not required to take an oath, everybody is required to be truthful in their remarks under the Productivity Commission Act.

Also need to advise people that, although I don't think we're aware of any media, media are able to, obviously, to observe the proceedings and to engage in commentary on social media, so you do need to know that that is possible. The hearings are available to the public online, and in real time so it's another general issue to bear in mind. So as each participant joins us today, I will ask that person to – or those people to introduce themselves, and name the organisation that they come from, and that's because proceedings are being transcribed, and we want to have a full and accurate record of our proceedings. And the transcript of today's hearings, and all the other public hearings that we've had will also be made available on the Productivity Commission website.

With all of that, I would like first up to welcome Sylvana. (Indistinct) Sylvana.

MS MAHMIC: I'm so sorry.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: (Indistinct). There she is.

MS MAHMIC: I didn't realise I didn't have my camera on. Hello, everybody.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It's lovely to see you, and we all were just recalling our visit to you and to Plumtree, and it made a big impression on us, and we're looking forward to hearing from you this morning, Sylvana. I

think you know the set up. We invite you to make some opening comments, and then we'll just move into a general conversation with you.

5 MS MAHMIC: Thank you. I'm Sylvana Mahmic, the CEO of Plumtree Children's Services which is based in New South Wales. Plumtree is a child and family service encompassing an inclusive preschool, and specialist supports for children with development delays or disabilities and their families. I'm talking to you today from my home in Kamay which is known as Botany Bay in Sydney. Patchy internet at work I thought I'd better play it safe and join you from home, but my workplace, as I said, is based in 10 Midjumburi which is in Marrickville in the inner west of Sydney. A very thriving, vibrant, culturally diverse part of Sydney.

15 Thank you again for the opportunity to share my insights into the challenges, and opportunities, and ensuring equitable access for children with developmental delays and disabilities, and their families into quality early childhood education and care. My perspective focuses on the importance of accessible ECEC services because these play a vital role in children's development, especially those with developmental delays and disabilities, 20 and also their families. Inclusion is beneficial for all children's development, particularly for children with developmental delays or disabilities for whom it is also a valuable early intervention strategy in its own right.

25 My personal experience has deeply informed my work. My first son, who is now 34 years old, was enrolled in a KU preschool long ago with his younger brother and cousin at the same time, they joined together. And early childhood was a wonderful time for him learning in a supported and inclusive environment with his sibling and cousin, enjoying the experiences that are a part of quality ECEC settings. He was welcomed, he had fun, he made 30 friends, and he was supported by the KU specialist teacher who was assigned to his centre for a couple of hours on each day that he attended, and his transition to preschool was supported by an educator from our early intervention team. She helped to train the centre staff, ensure that my son was able to join in play activities, and communicated with me about his day.

35 I was uncertain of how staff and families and other children would feel because of my son's disability. It is significant; however, all of us were welcomed to the centre, including myself, and it was a wonderful experience considering it was the early 1990s. And one particular mum, Gabi, who is 40 the wife of the late Fred Hollows, also attended the centre, and I remember her being so particularly warm and welcoming. I was the only Muslim in that area at the time, and Karim had a significant disability, and I remember her kindness and, sort of, welcoming me and helping me feel very welcome. It played a very big part to making me feel a part of that local community.

45 In the late 1990s after experiencing that quality family centred early childhood intervention experience, and the inclusive preschool, I was

working to transition the organisation I'm with right now, into – you know, they had a – we had a segregated preschool which was located within the Grosvenor Institution, into the community. My first task was how do we get this preschool from the institution out into the community, and through a process of reverse integration, we set the preschool on its transformative journey, paving the way for it to evolve into the thriving, inclusive community-based preschool that it is today.

We are a one-unit preschool for 25 children a day. Ten out of the 47 children enrolled over the week are considered under the Equity Guidelines, including children who have developmental delays or disability, and over 90 per cent of the children are from a culturally diverse background. Our staff ratios are one to five, which we achieve through the additional funding and support that we provide as a not-for-profit organisation. Fast track to 2024, inclusion is more common, there is a greater awareness of disability in the broader community, and overall there is a better understanding in the early childhood education and care sector that children with developmental delays or disabilities have rights under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.

And in particular, articles 23, 28 and 29 really refer to children having the right to good quality education and supports to learn and develop their talents and abilities. And that strength focus is what really shines, I think, in the convention in relation to children with disabilities and their families. However, there still is a long way to go for children with disabilities to have equitable access in ECEC services, and my perspectives will focus today on the main enablers and barriers as we see them. And thank you to the Commission for your work in this area. I will use the abbreviation 'children with disabilities', instead of adding the developmental delays part, but I am sure that the Commission understands the nuances around developmental delay, and that most children under the age of 7 would not have necessarily a diagnosis of disability unless it is clearly articulated and diagnosed, that most children, if there are concerns about development, would be considered to have developmental delay until they are around that age when they are assessed with having, if necessary, a permanent and life-long disability by which then that it's referred to intellectual disability or other terms.

What's working well? In New South Wales, the higher learning support needs funding is providing centres with funding that is enabling them to employ additional staff. Not only our experience in our preschool, but we hear for many preschools in New South Wales who work with us for some of our specialist services that this funding really is what enables them to practically feel confident and able to enrol a child who has a disability in their centre. KU sector support provides helpful individualised and external support to centres through providing training, support, and help through the funding application process. Which, in many cases for most mainstream services, is an incredibly difficult and onerous task, confusing task, and one

that puts them off including the child, or enrolling a child in the first place, but perhaps even from – if they are enrolled, from even bothering to get some additional supports because they just can't understand the funding application process.

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Sector support services such as these really do do a lot of positive work on the ground to help people and centres who are doing this for the first time. Overall, we observe that inclusion of children with disabilities is better in the community-based sector than in the for-profit sector. And, of course, there are some excellent pockets of good practice in the private sector, and we appreciate and recognise that; however, overall our experiences, as we see them through our staff visiting many services in the inner west and southeastern areas of Sydney, as well as hearing from families who we connect through our specialist services and our preschool services, is that supports and inclusion for children with disabilities is better in the community not-for-profit based sector.

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One of the major challenges I know – I won't be addressing any what I consider to be broader pieces of feedback. I'm trying to limit my feedback relating to specifically children with disabilities, but I do appreciate that the Commission has already identified staffing challenges as being a major issue in the ECEC sector. As it relates to children with disabilities, the main problem is that even with funding, centres report that they find it difficult to employ additional staff, let alone additional trained staff. They comment that pathways to training staff to support children with disabilities and their families could be improved.

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And I – and I want to just highlight that when a child is enrolled into an ECEC centre, families are often coming with, you know, a lot of things going on around them in relation to their child's diagnosis. Perhaps they are aware of that. Perhaps they aren't aware. Perhaps they're in the process of diagnosis. Perhaps they've just received it. We hear a lot from centres to say we are just not equipped to deal with the range of needs that there are in terms of family support. I'll touch on that in my final point. Staff, as I said, are trained to support children, but there needs to be some more understanding of the need to support the families, and for there to be some supports for staff who are in the mainstream to support families better.

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There are some good examples of good practice from the past and that, sort of, are still being refreshed and current, and just wanted to single out a few of those, because I think it is good to look at what we have had in the past, and if it's still relevant, let's use it. Some of the helpful training includes a module called 'Does This Child Need Help', which was developed by Early Childhood Intervention Australia, New South Wales/ACT chapter quite a long time ago actually now, and that training package has been refreshed, and is now available online in a self-paced format. It is a fee for service.

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Perhaps, you know, that is a barrier to some centres, but the self-paced format does enable staff to be able to undertake that training when they're off the floor in their own time, you know, after hours, you know, in their relief from face-to-face time. Whatever works with centres, because we do, of course, appreciate that finding time to relieve and pay staff to do training is also an issue. Another really important helpful resource is the Working Together Agreement which is a process that includes a range of documents to support the coordinated approach to inclusion.

And this relates to my earlier, sort of, personal experience of when Karim was making the transition to his preschool environment, the early intervention team at Macquarie University was quite innovative back then, they had an educator supporting us to make the transition and Kareem to make the transition. And that involved meetings with the parents, us to help discuss what, you know, what we felt and what our plans were, and how the experience was going to go, as well as preparing Karim for the transition and preparing the preschool and the staff for the transition.

And so back then this Working Together Agreement didn't exist. But it is a very useful document that helps build collaboration and support coordination between any specialist services, any other agencies involved, whether that could be Child Protection et cetera, and the centre staff. And so this Working Together Agreement is being refreshed at the moment by KU New South Wales/ACT Inclusion Agency.

They're, you know, there are some concerns, I believe about how such an approach would work in a system under the NDIS because now with the market-based approach for the NDIS, it seems that any specialist services to attend a coordination meeting, in the past, that was done for free, and it was a part of the wrap-around service. However, now under the NDIS, specialist services that may be involved with a child and their family wouldn't be able to attend one of these working together collaboration meetings because they would have to be paid for that. And we understand that families are very reluctant to pay for coordination and wrap-around services, that they prioritise individual therapeutic services for their children over coordination and collaboration which is, you know, the direct impact, the positive impact on their children is not immediately understood by the parents until sometime later.

There are also other workshops provided by different organisations, such as the workshop called Sharing Sensitive News. We often don't realise that staff at centres don't have training or experience in understanding how to talk to families about their concerns. So some of those kind of conversations are dealt with in the Does This Child Need Help training, but that is a sort of an online six-hour module self-paced approach. Whereas workshops like Sharing Sensitive News are sort of a one-off couple of hours workshop where staff can really be upskilled in thinking through all of the issues that they

might need to consider when considering talking to a family about, 'I'm concerned about your child's development. How do we take the next steps?'

5 So there are some good examples of practice from the past. I tried to, kind of, give the Commission some examples of what possibly could be built on and drawn on from the past rather than just telling you the obvious thing, which I'm sure that you've heard, which is that there are staffing challenges and training staff is also a challenge. I hope those have been a couple of useful ideas.

10 In terms of enrolment challenges, that's probably the next biggest thing that we hear that is a major issue. There aren't enough centres willing, qualified or prepared to enrol children with disabilities in their centre. Many families report to us that it is challenging to secure enrolment for their child, and this is a problem faced by many families, of course, because, you know, many families experience difficulties and challenge finding a great centre for their child. But this is one problem which is much more difficult for families of children with disabilities. The numbers of rejections families may face, the no callbacks, the unhelpful questions they, sort of, ask, the starts at centres and the, sort of, ending of enrolment, you know, through all sorts of unhelpful means but sometimes even discriminatory means, mean that, anecdotally, we report and our staff report that enrolment is still very challenging.

25 Even though there have been many many gains in the last 25 to 30 years in inclusion and community attitudes are changing the, sort of, the attitudes in the community does vary. And where there is, sort of, a primary motivation of running an organisation that is a for-profit business, often the decision about not enrolling a child with a disability comes down to the fact that it will require more time and money and their ratios are already stretched. So that is even more challenging in the for-profit sector, more prevalent.

35 In particular, in the long daycare centre, where we hear regularly from families that there is much more gatekeeping going on. The situation as I mentioned earlier is better in preschools compared to long daycare, and in long daycare centres that are community-run, it seems to be better. However, in some community – even in some community centres where we expect it to be better, there is often still a lack of understanding of how funding is used, and this may result in discriminatory practices. For example, limiting the hours of children's attendance to the funded hours. And this isn't because people are being intentionally bad or difficult, it's because people genuinely don't understand what is the responsibility of their centre in terms of the child's enrolment, perhaps they don't even understand that limiting the child's attendance to the hours of the funding is discriminatory, it just hasn't occurred even to many people. So that's, I think, down to attitude and education which, of course, could be supported with, sort of, campaigns to – and, you know, other mechanisms, regulatory mechanisms as well.

5 Every centre should be including children with disabilities and have fundings supports available if needed. And it sounds like a motherhood statement, but in talking to my team about the opportunity to speak to you today, that was a point that really came out strongly, is that people felt passionately, that why isn't every centre including children with disabilities? And, you know, why doesn't every centre understand the funding application process and the supports that may be available to them? So I think that's the prevailing message that we'd like to leave you with.

10 In New South Wales preschools, there is – 75 per cent of them are accessing higher learning support needs funding, which we think is an incredible achievement, 75 per cent of preschools. There's still some way to go, of course, you know between 25 and 30 per cent of centres not applying for that funding. But that is an amazing achievement, and I think one really good success story that perhaps the Commission has already learned from and heard from. But we do see that as being a wonderful area of success.

20 Nevertheless, you know, you have to wonder whether those 25 to 30 per cent of centres not applying, is it because they're not, you know, don't have children enrolled with developmental delay or disability, or is it because they don't understand it, is it because it's too hard? Certainly, they're the kinds of things that we're hearing from centre staff, you know, people, sort of, still not understanding the early NDIS, early childhood pathway. So there's a lot of confusion around – we've identified a child, we've had the conversation, we send the parent to the local speech pathologist, from here they get an assessment and then somehow or another they may make their way to the early childhood partner.

30 There's just a lack of understanding about what the pathway is in terms of accessing supports if you already have a child enrolled in your centre and they haven't been – the parents are not aware that there's a delay or concern. Even if you do overcome the next steps of talking to the family, which can be a very difficult process and one which can break down very quickly. But even in those instances, you know, understanding what is available and applying can be very confusing.

40 And we hear some staff just say, 'It's not worth our while,' which is very disappointing to hear, that there is support available and that some staff are saying – and some centres are making the decision not to apply because it's too difficult. So there could be some improvement there.

45 Where enrolment does work well – I would like to end on a positive note – is when leadership attitudes are positive and welcoming to children of, you know, all kinds of development delay and cultural diversity, and that principle of leadership and positive welcoming attitude really makes a difference in places where there are very few resources. But the can-do

attitude and the welcoming attitude and the community-based attitude of that environment, that centre, really pull together to help families and their children feel welcome. And it shows us that while in many cases, supports are absolutely necessary, in many cases, also, they're not necessary.

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But the biggest obstacle is community attitude and centre's leadership feeling – leading from the top and from the front, and really showing the rest of their team that it can be done. Nevertheless, you know, there, of course, are many children who do need that extra hands-on support and the extra special technical support would be helpful, but it does go a long way.

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In terms of cultural diversity, I'd like to highlight that the intersectional needs of children with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds is a significant issue and must be addressed. These families and their children face additional challenges, they've got a disability, or a delay and they speak another language, no English, no English from the child, no English from the family, you know, people's visa status, et cetera. So there are all sorts of, you know, examples, a child has a delay or disability and the parent has a disability, so there are all sorts of cultural intersectional needs that could be supported better to ensure that children are not missing out and falling through the gaps.

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Centres could be better supported by cultural support workers, in New South Wales we have a wonderful service called the Ethnic Community Services Cooperative, I wonder if they've made a submission or if they've spoken to you. I can only speak so highly of their bi-cultural support worker pool, which I know that they've been doing – it must feel like 20 years, I don't know how they've hung onto that with the, you know, the challenges of different government funding, and ceasing of funding, and reducing of funding.

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But it is still in operation, and I think such a model is an important example of how children from a culturally diverse background, and to have a disability, can be supported by time-limited bi-cultural workers who can come to a centre and support the staff, and the support the family, support the child. And such services could be better funded.

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The impact of the NDIS is the next point that I'd like to discuss. While the introduction of the NDIS has been a great achievement for Australia, the NDIS review recognises that it has – itself, that it has not met the needs of young children with developmental delay and disabilities and their families. And recommendations of the review handed down in early December 2023, include the development of foundational supports, which is absolutely critical, and the good news that the states and the federal government will share the responsibility for funding these 50-50. And also a big recommendation from the review is the need for the mainstream services to step up in terms of inclusion - - -

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5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sylvana, sorry, when we get to the discussion bit, I think those issues are ones that we'll be really – well, all of the issues that – we're certainly reflecting a lot on the NDIS review and its recommendations. I'm sure we'll be keen to discuss that, amongst other things - - -

MS MAHMIC: Thank you.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: - - - with you.

MS MAHMIC: This is my second last point, and the last one is briefer. So this one is a little bit more meatier. So I think the biggest thing that we're seeing is over and underserving is a big problem. Both are problems, sadly.

15 The resources need – and support need to be spread much more equitably. Enrolling centres who have a number of children or may even, indeed, many children who have disabilities in their centres, those centres, you know, each child is coming with an individual therapist or group of therapists, and this is creating significant challenges in early childhood education and care centres ironically. And there is inconsistent, often, understanding of therapeutic approaches by therapists coming into ECEC services. And an example of this is, for example, that withdrawing children from play environments to provide treatment to children away from other children, and away from the everyday play activities that are planned in the centre. That's just an example.

20 The risks associated with many therapists visiting some centres has been recognised. For example, in our own preschool, last year we had about 14 or 30 15 children with disabilities enrolled out of 47, 50 children, and the impact of the many many therapists externally visiting our centre and then the rotation of services because there's an extremely high turnover and churn in the therapy industry at the moment. So the churn of those staff within, you know, that engage with those families and children meant that it was so disruptive that we made the decision, that in 2024 that only therapists from our organisation would provide support to children, and staff and families that were enrolled in our preschool. And the reason for this was to foster consistency and harmony among the families, staff and children, as well as reduce risks. So we really identified that there were risks that we could not manage when we had that number of external staff visiting our preschool. I'll leave it there and we can talk about the NDIS if that's something that you'd like to explore a bit more.

45 And my final point is – am I on time? My final point is peer support and well-being. Many parents experience stress which affects their well-being. As I said, parents may find this experience of their child's delay or disability as very difficult. They might be dealing with rejections, it's already a time

when for many families their worried and concerned, especially when their children have significant health issues. And some centres are not equipped to manage children's significant health issues, so families are, sort of, managing this very carefully and it creates stress.

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In New South Wales, the Department of Education funds some community organisations with Start Strong funding, and these organisations provide a range of supports for families to understand and value early childhood education, as well as to support and connect families who are not already engaged in early childhood education and care to find a centre. Centres do this through workshops, supported playgroups, one-to-one support, transition support and a range of online resources to support early childhood education in care learning and play.

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So I'd like to highlight that parent peer-led services and organisations are also working continuously to raise awareness among other parents about the values of early childhood education and care, and they are also providing support to families on inclusion/exclusion problems, et cetera. So thank you for your time and for listening. I hope I didn't go long. I'm sorry I lost - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No. That's okay.

MS MAHMIC: - - - track of watching my clock.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No. Thank you very much. And I think, what you bring to the discussion as a parent and as a service leader is very valuable to us. I only picked out the NDIS review. We're interested in everything you told us, and I'll leave it to my fellow Commissioners to identify what issues they want to pick up. But I mentioned the NDIS review because, obviously, it hadn't been published at the time we put out our draft report. And it does seem to presage some pretty fundamental changes in the way families whose children are experiencing disability and/or developmental delay are going to be engaging with the services.

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And so, really keen to hear your thoughts on how you think the – hard for all of us to have a very clear picture yet of what's going to emerge – but I'd like to know your thoughts and especially anything about impacts on services, for example you mentioned training issues and so on. So any further reflections on that, if you could.

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MS MAHMIC: I think – I'm part of the Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention Network, this is a network of, at the moment, 20 non-government, not-for-profit early childhood intervention providers. Some of them like us have got a preschool attached, others like SDN have got, you know, a range of, you know, a number of centres across the state here, as well as offering a specialist team for families who have got NDIS funding, and have, traditionally, always had that kind of area of specialised support.

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5 And one thing that as a network that we have observed is that we're delighted
firstly that the NDIS review recommendations have concluded that the NDIS
is not working for children and families. We're delighted that they've heard
that message from the community. It is – the NDIS has taken early
10 childhood intervention and family-centred practice back decades. I'm not as
confident that it can – we can actually bring it back, but I'm perhaps being a
little bit cynical, you know, compared to my usual Pollyanna self, but some
of my colleagues believe that there is, you know, a way forward, and that we
can rebuild.

15 In terms of what the review is recommending, our recommendations as a
group would be that it is best for community – for foundational supports to be
place-based and situated in local communities with local trusted
organisations. So there is going to be a, of course, in due course, a discussion
about foundational supports, what it constitutes, you know, who is going to
be providing it, what will be funded, what won't be funded by the NDIS, or
the ILC, or whatever iteration it's going to be in, what will be funded by the
state governments?

20 But our view is that the community-based, not-for-profit organisations, where
they exist across the country, should be the first port of call. These
organisations have got a trusted footprint in their local community,
understand their communities, and can support their communities in
25 responsive ways, given the resources and sometimes even given the lack of
resources. So many of these organisations are very resourceful, but it doesn't
mean that they can do everything for nothing, but they just know how to
stretch the dollar, if you know what I mean.

30 So that, I guess, where those, you know, that base of the community-based
not-for-profit sector does not exist, as I understand it doesn't in some states,
then it is going to be important for the review and for the NDIA to look at
what actually does exist on the ground that is similar. For example, in the
Northern Territory and South Australia, are a range of Aboriginal-led child
35 and family and community services, or child – early childhood centres would
be the obvious place to start. In others where those don't exist, perhaps the
local council may be where some of these services are based. Importantly,
what we're suggesting is that local knowledge, local conditions, trusted
organisations are to be the ones who are going to be providing these
40 foundational supports.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right. Thank you, very much, Sylvana.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you. This is very detailed and relevant
to the things that we're grappling with. So I appreciate your comments. I
particularly liked the examples you gave around supporting staff and
development. And one of the challenges we see is that there might be a

pocket of good behaviour, or program, et cetera, in one jurisdiction, that's not really rolled out across Australia. So that's – you know, when you first started talking, (indistinct) needs more focus, particularly around stuff, and I'm thinking, 'Well, what?' And then you proceeded to give about three or
5 four examples of specific training, specific programs, or materials that are online, and that's incredibly helpful for us, we'll go back and have a look at it. And then will have a think about, well, how can you take, you know, that pocket and sort of scale that up across the board? That's fantastic.

10 I did have a question, and it may not be possible to answer, but you raised anecdotally something that we've heard a couple of times, I'm just wondering if there's any specific data that you're aware of which relates to the number of families and children who are turned away, and who – as you were
15 indicating, perhaps because of their disability or the needs, and it's in the too hard basket, or the organisation is already stretched, and services are already stretched. And we hear this, but I'm just wondering since, you know, you've worked at the coalface in some of these. But is there anything we can point to to reflect on this? (Indistinct) - - -

20 MS MAHMIC: Yes. Yes. Yes, there is - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: - - - (indistinct) to us.

25 MS MAHMIC: Yes, fortunately Martin. The - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: - - - okay. Good.

MS MAHMIC: - - - Association for Children with Disabilities, the Victorian chapter, I'm not certain whether or not they have made a submission or if
30 they've spoken. But my understanding is that I think, last year - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I don't think so.

MS MAHMIC: Okay. Last year or the year before, I recall they did a survey
35 – they regularly survey parents – and with the introduction of the NDIS, they have actually noted that the type of support that they're being requested for, that has increased, has been around exclusion in mainstream early childhood education and schooling environments. So I will reach out to my colleague CEO Karen Dimmock at the Association for Children with Disabilities in
40 Victoria. There is also a Tasmanian chapter, I'll just pop them an email as well and just ask them if they've got the data for you at their fingertips. There is no doubt some other evidence, which I'm happy to just talk to a few of my colleagues in the inclusion field to be able to demonstrate that for you, and I'll get that to you as soon as I can.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: That would be really helpful. We're equally concerned about the challenge, and then thinking about, well, how do you

5 address that? So one is actually going (indistinct) or seeing how extensive it is. And then the other is, well, what needs to be done in terms of engagement with the services, engagement with the community, raising the expectations, who monitors that on what basis? Et cetera. So they're – I suppose they're things that got through my mind.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. I really appreciated you mentioning the Ethnic – I see it's now called the Ethnic Community Services Cooperative, as you said. Is that the old Ethnic Community Childcare Development Unit?

MS MAHMIC: Yes. They had a name change to - - -

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct.)

MS MAHMIC: - - - to reduce the acronym - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Wow.

20 MS MAHMIC: - - - they changed the - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

25 MS MAHMIC: They're based in Addison Road in Marrickville and they're in New South Wales (indistinct) - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, Marrickville is a hotbed of - - -

30 MS MAHMIC: It really is - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: - - - (indistinct).

35 MS MAHMIC: - - - hotbed – yes, it has been. And they're an excellent organisation. Yes.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, I'm pleased you mentioned them. We've not had any, you know, direct engagement with them, but I think – but we have – we are certainly thinking about the intersectional issues that you raised. So I appreciate that as a contact and a resource for us. Did you want to ask anything?

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes. Thanks, Deb. Hi Sylvana, it's Lisa here, hi. I wanted to ask you about the Inclusion Support Program, I presume you could access that program, you mention that you get some sort of, perhaps, navigational or glue, I think that's support to access that. So how much do you rely on that?

And my – second part of my questions is, we've made some recommendations to try and make the ISP, to expand it, if you like, to make it – and to make it more accessible to smooth the pathway, and to make it more flexible in its operation. I just wanted to get your thoughts around – I don't
5 know whether you looked at our recommendations – but do you think that's – that would be helpful? I also sense that you think, that for other providers, that it's more than just – that might be part of the solution, but it's also about, sort of, attitude and attitudinal change as well - - -

10 MS MAHMIC: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: - - - just getting your thoughts on that.

15 MS MAHMIC: Yes. Thank you. Firstly, as a preschool that already has a good specialist team behind it, that our preschool staff can draw on, our preschool team and director still uses – for us the provider is KU Inclusion Support.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MS MAHMIC: The reason is they are experts and educators, our – in education – our team, our specialist team has lost all of our educators, they were completely whacked out by the introduction of the NDIS because the NDIS only recognises a therapeutic approach and undervalues and
25 undermines the role of an educator. In my little story in the beginning, the reason I highlighted that was because the people that helped us in our son's early intervention experience were educators in the early intervention group, and the person who helped the transition was an educator, and the person employed by KU for a few hours a day to help the preschool understand how
30 to support Karim was an educator.

So that has completely been thrown out with the introduction of the NDIS and with a favouring of therapists. And I'm not making a complete generalisation, but most therapists favour a therapeutic approach and don't
35 fully appreciate a developmental and educational approach, in the same way that early childhood teachers and other early educators are trained in.

So in terms of why our team would be using those KU Inclusion Supports is because while we're rebuilding the educators in our team, that's been a gap
40 that's a consequence of the NDIS, and the preschool staff want real-life examples from teachers about you make inclusion work, rather than just therapeutic strategies that may or may not be able to be implemented in an everyday play environment.

45 You know, some – as I mentioned, there's also exclusion, children are being segregated off into another room or another corner when therapists come. The therapists don't understand that that's not appropriate, centres have to

deal with this, and instead of the staff being helpful, now they have to, kind of, deal with, kind of, liaising with the family and the specialist about, this is not on, it doesn't work in a mainstream environment.

5 So where those supports are intended to be helpful, suddenly they're not helpful, and it's people like the inclusion support that come with that educator focus who really understand what is going to work in an early childhood environment, and in a – the rhythm of an early childhood day, in a way that many therapists don't quite understand. So that's why we use them.

10

Now, another part of your question is – the second part, I sorted it into three parts – the second part was, is it enough for other centres? For many of them, it won't be enough because they've never done it before, so there is a perception that we need more hands-on time, and I understand that because if there are child and safety needs, in particular with the increase of children enrolled in centres who have got autism, children who have got challenging behaviours that are either harming themselves or others. We all know that children bite, hit, et cetera, you know, when – it's a part of the early childhood experience, centres have got policies and procedures.

20

But where children have a developmental delay or a disability, that may be happening in an increased, you know, number of instances and the staff's existing strategies, policies, procedures may not be enough. So those people do need some modelling about what is and isn't right. For example, most centres wouldn't understand what a restrictive practice is in the context of a child with a developmental disability or delay, that's a gap in training. So our specialist team in positive behaviour supports called Back on Track see this when they go out into centres is that centres are kind of making do with what could be deemed either a restrictive practice or on the way to a restrictive practice not realising. It's not through being, you know, intending to do the wrong thing, it's just that they don't understand. And so for these reasons, that extra hands-on help is also needed in addition to the inclusion support.

35 And your last question, which was your recommendation in terms of expanding the Inclusion Support Program. Yes, I do agree with that. I think it's being done differently across the country, and there could be some elements of learning. My understanding was that, I think, one of the big four, it could have been Deloitte, were doing a big review of the ISP. I believe I was interviewed for that review last year, I haven't heard anything, and I don't know if the findings of that review will be made public. But I imagine that you would have access to the information from that review at some point if it is available and not public.

45 On the ground, anecdotally, I could say there is variability about how the Inclusion Support Program is working across the country. But I can certainly say that with limited resources, the KU Inclusion Support which support New South Wales and the ACT, our experience with them has been very positive,

they've got trained experienced people who really understand early education in those roles, doing some good fundamental work with centres.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, Sylvana, I must say, you've packed a wealth of information into your time with us, and we appreciate it greatly. I think we do need to move on to our next group that are waiting to come to talk to us. Do you feel you've had an opportunity to cover all your points, Sylvana - - -

10 MS MAHMIC: Thank you. Thank you. I didn't really know what was of interest to you. So if there is something that you believe that would be more helpful for me to follow up with – I will follow up with the data – but if there's anything else that you would like me to delve in a little bit more detail, please, don't hesitate to reach out.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Appreciate that offer very much and appreciate all your engagement with the inquiry. Thanks, Sylvana.

20 MS MAHMIC: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks, Sylvana.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Good morning. Bye.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So I'd now like to welcome the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia. And I can see Elizabeth, your name there on our screen. So feel free to turn your camera on and join us.

30 MS DEATH: Good morning. I will start by saying I'm having a little bit of trouble with connectivity for my internet this morning. So if I drop - - -

35 COMMISSIONER: Well, that's a shame. Elizabeth, welcome. Thank you for mentioning that, we'll be alert to it. Just to say at the beginning, we'd like you to say your name and the organisation that you represent for the record. Then I think you know the drill, we invite you to make an introductory statement and then we'll move on to a broader discussion with you.

40 MS DEATH: Lovely. First of all. Thank you for having me this morning. My name is Elizabeth Death, I'm the CEO of the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia. And I come to you with a very long extensive career in early learning and care across more than 45 years. As a degree-qualified early childhood teacher from the beginning, director, university lecturer,
45 author of early childhood textbooks, multisite manager, ministerial advisor, director of community services across central Australia, and senior early childhood bureaucrat across the Northern Territory. So I come with a

perspective from a range of different spaces and levels within the early childhood sector.

5 But I really, really welcome the opportunity to speak to the Commissioners today (indistinct). So I would like, firstly, to commend you on the draft, it's – you have an opportunity to offer a significant legacy to introduce the universal early learning entitlement for all Australian children, something that has been front and centre for me across my career. That is just so critical as a grandparent, even more so, as a parent it was, a sole parent, and
10 grandparent now, it's very important. But it's important for more than just those children who have families with social capital, and families with the opportunity to access services. This is for every child regardless of their postcode, regardless of their parent's work, and particularly for those who are experiencing a vulnerability and/or disadvantage.

15 So I'd just like to say, I strongly support your child-first approach to policy and reform, it heartens me to hear – to read that. But enabling our workforce, participation is also important, but I see this as a secondary benefit of early learning and care, the first benefit is for our children. As a parent, I very
20 much valued the opportunity to be able to work and know my children were in a safe, and educative environment.

25 So first of all, the diversity of the market, and I know that's a very challenging topic at times. For ELACCA, I represent, and I'm proud to represent the large providers of early learning and care across Australia, and they are both – it's a mixed market, and our members represent that mixed market with both for-profit and not-for-profit providers, delivering sessional kindergarten, delivering long daycare and outside of school hours care. We offer - - -

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I just have to (indistinct) - - -

MS DEATH: - - - and many of the members offer significant – sorry?

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It is a little bit wobbly, Elizabeth.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Maybe try – it won't be optimal – but maybe turn your camera off. Let's try – will we try that, maybe?

40 MS WILL: Yes. Let's try that.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Because sometimes – it might be - - -

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So leave – yes.

MS DEATH: Try that.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. We'll tell you if - - -

MS DEATH: Is that better?

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: We'll tell you if it's better. Let's see.
(Indistinct).

MS DEATH: And if it's still problematic, I can always switch to my phone.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

MS DEATH: So just, please, let me know.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

15

MS DEATH: So, yes, we offer – many of our members offer significant inclusion support over and above what's currently provided through government funding. And also their services have significant head office teams who can help drive and to deliver high-quality early learning and care with a significant investment in workforce development and pedagogy. So our members provide high-quality services that meet the varying needs of children and families in the communities that they serve.

20

We firmly believe that every child should have access to high quality – and it needs to be high-quality early learning and care in which every setting suits the needs of the child, and that of the family. So we note child safety is of utmost importance to our members and to our communities, but we also – and that's got to be front and centre – but we also need services that suit the needs of the families.

25

30

So when we talk about a funding model, we're really pleased to note that the ACCC found that there was no smoking gun, no excessive profits being made in our sector, and also the ELACCA members are very welcome – very much welcome transparency provisions. And particularly increased transparency for families and government in the light of increasing funding to our sector, that has to be front and centre. But it needs to be front and centre for the whole sector, not just elements of the sector.

35

So we support the continuation of a demand driven funding model, with supply-side supplementary funding. Including for inclusion, and certainly for wages, and to ensure access in what's so-called thin markets. But the challenge is that this is a complex environment, and any changes to the funding model must be thoroughly tested with the organisations delivering services. So we need that really solid collective of people and brains trust to be able to test anything that is being proposed because we can have some quite perverse outcomes if that's not done.

40

45

And a well-balanced – you know, ELACCA is quite well-placed to work with the Productivity Commission and government to advise and stress test any of those proposed funding – reforms to funding or mechanisms. And we urge you not to be tempted by simplistic and suboptimal funding alternatives, for example, the ten dollars a day model. I would suggest very strongly, that like any pedagogical framework – and pedagogical environment, you cannot pick up another country's proposal and system and layer it over Australia.

We have a different model in Australia. We have – it's well-suited to our environment, and certainly, we have challenges, but we know that challenge, supply and quality are a significant issue for Canada, and a quick fix approach, and I'll quote Mencken here, 'That every complex problem has a solution which is simple, direct, plausible and wrong.' We need to be seriously thinking about how this could be – how any system could be implemented in Australia that will meet the universal needs of the communities and the children and families but is not actually ending up with perverse outcomes.

We know that we have high-quality qualifications, and every person working in early childhood needs a qualification, and every child deserves access to a degree-qualified early childhood teacher. We wouldn't accept not having a degree-qualified teacher in schools, why would we accept that in the foundational – most important foundational years for our children? It was a delight actually to follow Sylvana because her commentary around inclusion support was a delight to hear, which I wholeheartedly agree with the expertise in our centre – in our centres for supporting children. I'll move on to national consistency. We support a stewardship of the sector, a strong stewardship, but particularly where it leads to assuring access in those underserved or unserved markets and working towards better coordinated and harmonised policy and funding environment across states, territories and the Commonwealth.

Many of our providers work across jurisdictions, and we'd welcome a nationally consistent approach to teacher and educator registration, to recognition of qualifications, assessment and rating outcomes, and these are just the beginning of the number of things we would like to see a much more stringent nationally consistent approach to.

We also call for a nationally consistent approach that every child has access to at least two years of funded preschool programs in the years before school, but in the setting that best suits the needs of the child and the family. Ongoing funding, certainty and clear roles and responsibilities between states and territories and the federal government must be agreed to resolve these issues.

Though it's beyond the remit of your terms of reference, wouldn't it be wonderful to also have consistent nomenclature? We would like to have every - - -

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS DEATH: - - - jurisdiction having consistent nomenclature. But also, wouldn't it be great to have consistent school starting ages as well? Where families who are transient, including, in particular, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who are very transient, to be able to work, to move as they need across jurisdictions and have a consistency of schooling approach. So that we notice that also that you've recommended the (indistinct) - - -

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15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We're not hearing you, Elizabeth. I wonder if, Elizabeth's – can you hear us?

COMMISSIONER GROPP: No.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I don't know if it's possible, Elizabeth, but maybe join by phone as well, or instead.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Instead.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: What was that last submission?

MS DEATH: (Indistinct).

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Elizabeth, we'd lost you for the last minute or minute and a half.

MS DEATH: Okay.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And we think it would be better if you joined us by phone. How does that - - -

MS WILL: That would be excellent.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS DEATH: Okay.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: (Indistinct.)

MS DEATH: Please give me a moment and I will try and transfer to my phone.

5

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Welcome back.

10 MS DEATH: Just - thank you. My sincere apologies about our internet connection.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, we all understand, and Elizabeth, we - the last bit that we heard really clearly was you made some comments about nomenclature and school starting ages and after that it dissolved.

20 MS DEATH: Okay, thank you for giving me a placeholder. So I just wanted to note that the Productivity Commission's recommendation to establish an independent ECEC Commission to support stewardship among other responsibilities.

25 I think you'll note in our submission that we neither support nor reject a new early childhood commission, but we do recommend a cost-benefit analysis undertaken particularly given risk of adding further bureaucracy to the sector and duplicating existing roles and of bodies such as ACECQA and AERO, and I have raised that before, as you know.

30 I'll quickly move on to workforce, and workforce of course remains the burning factor and it remains the burning issue for many reasons including the quality of provision for children and the safety of children with the importance of the adult-child ratios being maintained and the qualification levels being maintained.

35 So our own personal data at ELACCA indicates there's more than 20,000 unfilled vacancies currently today in our sector, and we know that that's - it will just increase as the demand for early childhood education care increases as well. So we are certainly hopeful that there will be investment in the workforce from the Australian Government, but we don't support that flowing through Child Care (indistinct) - - -

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry - sorry, Elizabeth.

MS DEATH: - - - the Productivity Commission could even consider liaising with - yes?

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, Elizabeth, in this crucial phrase you mentioned a wage increase or supplement and you said 'But we don't support that flowing through' - and then I didn't hear the next bit.

MS DEATH: We don't support that flowing through the Child Care Subsidy.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

5

MS DEATH: (Indistinct) for the Productivity Commission to consider liaison with the Australian Taxation Office as a some more streamlined optimal process for delivery of funding. We need long-term investment - - -

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sorry, Elizabeth.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct.)

MS DEATH: Yes.

15

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sorry, Elizabeth. We - and we'll keep coming back to the absolute critical things that we don't think we can fill in between. So you don't support it through the CCS but then you gave some suggestions about how you did thought - or you had thought it would work, and I think we missed it or at least I missed it. Could you just repeat specifically around how you think a wage support or subsidy or otherwise could - or wage increases should be managed?

20

MS DEATH: The Department of Education to work with the Australian Taxation Office to ensure that the funding goes through directly to the workforce. Our members are supportive of funding, and they're supportive of working with government, but I think there's - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I think we (indistinct).

30

MS DEATH: Sorry, go on.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, we missed a critical phrase. We might have to get you to send us the notes about this. Because each time some crucial words were missed. We did hear 'Australian Taxation Office.' But we didn't hear what the mechanism was that you had in mind. Was it directly something going to the workforce or what?

35

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Reduced tax for those individuals? I don't know, is it a payment like a family benefit payment, or a - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Monitoring single touch payroll or - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We don't know.

45

MS DEATH: I will follow up with some further deep information for you post the Hearing this morning.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

5 MS DEATH: Okay. So I think that we - I'm just finding my space. Yes. Of course we need that as a long-term support from government to make sure we grow and stabilise our workforce. That's so critical and recognition of our workforce. And we know that there are a number of initiatives that are underway at the moment.

10 We also know and I certainly know that early childhood education is a rich and rewarding career, and the presentation of that in the general public at the moment and not as that - it is quite a deficit model that's being presented, and we are very concerned about that because that will actually deter people from joining our workforce.

15 So our members have funded a Big Roles in Little Lives campaign to promote the value and benefits of a career in early learning and care, and we'd be really happy to discuss that as being a potential roll-out nationally in the spirit of rising tides lifting all boats, this is not just for ELACCA
20 members. This is absolutely for the whole sector and upwards, and we continue to pilot innovative solutions to attract and upskill early childhood educators, and our members benefit from participating and contributing to pilot initiatives that can be proven and scaled to uplift the entire sector.

25 So we're very happy to speak to those and provide further detail if you would like. We did reference in our submission the Initial Teacher Education Boost, which is an upskilling program to support student retention and completion of an accelerated initial teacher education course we're currently
30 partnering with the University of Wollongong to deliver. We started our inaugural intake in 2023 and another intake will be starting in July this year. And we also have From the Ground Up - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Elizabeth, sorry.

35 MS DEATH: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sorry to keep interrupting. Just on that, we're quite interested in the Wollongong example, the accelerated teacher education degree. How many are enrolled in that, do you know?

40 MS DEATH: Yes. Well, from our membership alone there were 90. I know that the university received upward of 280 applications of interest in the very beginning. I would need to come back to you with the data of the number who actually enrolled in the long term, but I'm very happy to provide that
45 data.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you. Appreciate it.

MS DEATH: Our From the Ground Up leadership program is again a partnership with a university, this time with Queensland University of Technology, and I just would like to highlight the importance of those long-term engagements with university so that we are not spending our valuable professional development money on one-off programs that don't necessarily have longevity, and engagement with a university and a long-term program - ours is over six months; I would love to see it longer.

10 But what we have is an opportunity to codesign and co-deliver with universities, as we have with Queensland University of Technology, to make sure that our people are having the - we're tapping into the hooks that motivate our people in the early childhood sector, that is: the outcomes for children, what they do day-to-day, what they value in their work - and that is about making sure that their quality improvement plan is involved and is connected with the learning that they're having, it's connected with the children's outcomes, action research that's ongoing that gives the skills for emerging leaders and leaders to continue to upskill and to create higher quality programs for our children. These are things that we need to, again - we need to scale up and we need to make available to the sector.

Of course, anything that we're doing around upskilling from diploma to degree or even from cert III to diploma, or from school-based trainees into services, we need paid practicums, target wrap-around support, scholarships, financial support to enable mentoring, and time off the floor. These are valuable necessary investments to support and reward our workforce. We can't be expecting our experienced early childhood teachers to take on another load of mentoring when they are already at capacity, and we can't expect them to take on more and not be paid for it. We need to recognise their expertise.

And please interrupt me if - any time, I'm still going and happy to be interrupted. Inclusion - - -

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I was thinking about what - - -

MS DEATH: Yes?

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I was actually wondering about what mechanisms you think might work for those sorts of professional development activities. Is that a pool of funding, is it direct funding, is it - have you thought in any detail about those mechanisms.

45 MS DEATH: Yes, and I'm happy to provide some other things offline. But the - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

MS DEATH: Yes, I think that's something I'd love to take on notice, thanks, Deb, that would be - - -

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Sure, yes.

MS DEATH: Yes. Because there are many that I'd like to suggest.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Obviously we're hearing a lot about those issues and particularly that you've mentioned the concept of leadership and obviously the role of the educational leader. We've heard a fair bit about that, and that's one of the issues that we're trying to think through exactly what that is, what its potential is and how it can be supported. So yes, anything around those issues that's practical and thought through would be great for us.

15 MS DEATH: Fabulous. We actually have a Victorian educational leader program that we are partnering with QUT - Queensland University of Technology - that starts in April, so yes, we would be very pleased to provide some additional information there.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Did you just say Victorian educational leader with QUT?

25 MS DEATH: Yes. QUT and ELACCA have partnered, and won the tender with the Victorian Government, yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I see. Okay. Right. Thank you. Okay.

30 MS DEATH: But I'm happy to talk about anything more workforce before I go on to inclusion.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Any other (indistinct) questions?

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: That's fine.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No. Keep going, Elizabeth.

40 MS DEATH: Thank you. So inclusion - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Connection's better. It's better.

MS DEATH: Good. I'm pleased.

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Not perfect, but better.

MS DEATH: Effective and adequately funded inclusion support remains one of the most significant issues that we really do need to address, and as I said, it was delightful to follow Sylvania to hear her. We know that we have a disjointed funding system across Australia. We have the Inclusion Support Program, we have state and Territory programs, we have the NDIS. They're all playing in the same space.

So we don't want any child or family to feel the weight of one unnecessary assessment or complex financial administrative constraints, and we certainly don't want any child to be excluded from participating in and benefiting from early learning. So we need to make sure that all of those systems are linked. With the foundational level for the NDIS, I cannot support it enough that our early childhood workforce have the expertise and the connection and the relationships with families, but particularly the understanding of early childhood pedagogy.

That means that a child, and with the support of professionals - the allied health professionals - they can provide that backbone support to enable those children to thrive. We do not see the benefits when children are removed from the environment that they're most comfortable. They never - I've seen it many times over where a child will be able to achieve a number of different milestones but don't demonstrate that when they're in a therapeutic environment. We need to make sure that children are safe and comfortable as well as having those supports brought into the service.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Elizabeth, can I just interrupt. There's a tiny lag. I'm sure that ELACCA is thinking a lot about the NDIS review and what potentially it might mean for the sector, and combined with our proposals, we're really talking about some transformational elements in terms of the children who would be encouraged and hopefully attracted and brought into the ECEC system. What do you think - have you got a sense about how the workforce is going to respond and manage? I'm thinking particularly with the changes through the NDIS review. This seems to me to suggest quite a very significant change for a number of services (indistinct) - - -

MS DEATH: I think (indistinct) - - -

MS DEATH: Sorry, I just had some problem hearing that last bit, Deb.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Just thoughts about how you think the workforce will respond to the NDIS review, those changes, and what might be needed to make it effective, even though we don't have much detail yet.

MS DEATH: Yes. Yes, and I hear you, and I think this is a piece that we need to deep dive into, and again, it's about bringing the right people in the room to have the conversations of how the sector will be able to respond, but

5 primarily we need to make sure that we have the support workers within the services. I'm concerned that we still don't have enough funding to enable a qualified, diploma at least, person to be working alongside the team to ensure inclusion is able to be achieved and for the hours that the child attends the service. Not just for a part of the day.

10 The sector, I believe, and the people I have spoken to, have found it so difficult to include children who have particular additional needs when they don't have the physical support of somebody else there for the time they're engaged, and it's not about having one person with that child; it's about enabling that child to be included in the setting, and making sure all children have the adult-child ratios that they need to succeed.

15 I think that we would have a very distressed workforce if we just said, 'You need to take all these children in, and you're not going to get any additional supports.' So again, that's something I'm happy to take on notice and to give some further information about.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you. I mean, clearly, that's going to be an unfolding story and we're all putting our minds to it as best we can. So anything further, that will certainly be appreciated.

25 MS DEATH: Yes. And if only we had a streamlined funding system so families, one, didn't have to have multiple assessments, and jump through multiple hoops for either Additional Child Care Subsidy or inclusion support, or any of the funding mechanisms that we have at the moment. It just means that those with the social capital can do it; those without, miss out. So I think it's really beholden on us to make sure that the streamlining of the systems and the states and territory funding models align. I think this - - -

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Were you going to ask about what that might mean?

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, yes. I was going to ask what that means, and then I think Deb and I were thinking along the same lines. I wanted to preface that by saying - or just reminding you what you said at the very beginning Elizabeth which is that you support the demand-driven funding approach but with some additional supply-side and with an expanded inclusion, and with something around wages.

40 So my thought was - I had a question at that point which was, well, at what point do you have so much supply-side driven that you don't actually - you want to relook at the demand side aspect because you're in favour of the demand side aspect and these are the things that are going around our mind -
45 and then as I think Deb and I were sympatico on this which is you said, 'Oh, well, we want a simplified model.'

MS DEATH: Yes. (Indistinct).

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Within that context of demand-side and all these other supplies(indistinct), what does that actually look like for you?

5

MS DEATH: Okay, so if I take inclusion as an example, we've got families who need to navigate the inclusion support system at a federal level, and all the different inclusion and support - all the different models across states and territories. Now, why can't we have in the background from government alignment of funding so that there's one interface there for families? That's one thing. I will go back to the (indistinct) sorry.

10

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Question. Question.

15

MS DEATH: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, Elizabeth. So sorry. But, question, is it in your mind alignment of the inclusion support style funding or is it big picture alignment of funding for ECEC?

20

MS DEATH: With that particular one, I'm talking about the supply-side funding there, and I'm talking about the inclusion piece. Because I do believe we need the demand-driven funding model as a core, but I'm very hesitant around a pure supply-side funding model because I've seen that - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, sorry - - -

MS DEATH: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, I think - (indistinct) just my question very accurately. It was really about when you referred to streamlining funding. My mind didn't go to supply-side necessarily. My mind went to is this about bringing together the preschool model and the long day care model. Is that the streamlining, or is the streamlining on the inclusion support element?

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MS DEATH: It was on the inclusion support element, Deb.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

40

MS DEATH: So, yes, and again, happy to have another conversation offline to delve in deeper if you would like to. There's - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: So it's about one entry point.

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MS DEATH: We just have such - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Sorry. (Indistinct).

MS DEATH: It can have a - yes. Yes, Lisa, I think one entry point.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I think Lisa spoke (indistinct).

COMMISSIONER GROPP: One entry point for demonstrating need, and is that what you're trying to - so and then other (indistinct) - - -

10 MS DEATH: That could be - yes. Certainly could be one of the elements, Lisa. I think there's a number of things that need to be investigated there, and again, it's something that needs to be explored with people who are seeing the complexity that families are experiencing in this environment, and certainly some of our members are very well-versed in this space and we need to make
15 sure that the children who are entering services whose families need to jump through so many different funding - or jump over so many different funding barriers have a much more streamlined approach.

20 But yes, I don't have the silver bullet, but I do have the framework there that I believe we need to have a one-stop, one-place for families to provide information, and then the funding should be accessible for every child whether they're in at preschool, whether they're in a long-day service, whether they're in family daycare or even outside school hours care. We need to make sure that these children have access to the resources that they
25 need, and the services have access to the resources they need without creating too much complexity.

It comes back to there's no simple answer. But one of the things we could do for simplicity of funding models would certainly be to remove the activity
30 test. That would be something that we would support strongly for all children and families, if we have - one of the key barriers to the sector at the moment and for children's access is that activity test in the long-day, outside school hours care environment.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So, Elizabeth, we've made a recommendation along those lines, at least in our draft report it's for the three days or 30 hours, and then we put out a question of well what about the other two days? What's ELACCA's view on that? The other two days.

40 MS DEATH: I would suggest that - with the other two days, I think it would be very important that the families have access to services that meet their needs. So if you've got three days a week and you're working five days a week, basically it should be a basic entitlement for families to be able to access services to the degree that they need whether it's for their children or
45 for their workforce.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sure, but just take that example, if you're working five days a week, you would pass the activity test anyway, so what's the problem with having it?

5 MS DEATH: Yes, I hear you. (Indistinct).

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I'm just putting that as a valid point. I'm wanting to tease out the nature of a view around the fourth and the fifth day, so to speak.

10

MS DEATH: Yes, okay. So it's the activity test itself, I think, that's the issue, and the complexity of it. I think there would be - if we were to remove the activity test, that access to three days a week would be fabulous. But why are we limiting people's workforce - sorry people's access particularly for children who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage? Those children should have access to the number of days. We know that those early foundational years are so critical for development of executive function skills, are critical for children's social and emotional development. So why are we stopping access for those children simply based upon the fact that

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And we wouldn't wish to do that, and I think in the fine detail of our report, we're not actually recommending that those children - we are recommending that those children would have access to additional hours, but we - certainly there's more work and more thinking for us to do about the activity test as a whole.

25

MS DEATH: Yes. And again, I would strongly support that conversation happening with the sector.

30

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Have you got some more points to make, Elizabeth, or you want to finish your - - -

MS DEATH: Could I do a little bit on high quality and then I'll be quiet.

35

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, sure. Okay.

MS DEATH: I think that certainly our members are committed to high quality early learning care, and we back the good work of ACECQA. We have an internationally renowned National Quality Framework and I hear you've already supported that which is wonderful. We are in fact - if we look at our schooling sector, we are well-advanced in having a national framework. We're well-advanced in having that National Law and assured quality standard framework. That helps transcend some of the state, territory, and federal tensions, and it's also an opportunity really for the whole child to be viewed.

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45

5 We would like to see that moving up into the schooling sector. We certainly do not want an academic pushdown from the schooling sector, but we also don't want to see the early childhood sector carved up into jurisdictions again so that we end up losing our national legislation and framework, and that would play into a national commission or heightened stewardship from the Australian Government to ensure that every jurisdiction has that basic entitlement for children.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Just to make sure I understand that important point, Elizabeth, are there things that you see in our draft report that could lead to that carve up in jurisdictions?

15 MS DEATH: I think if - well, no, not necessarily, but I'm concerned, Deb, that that's always been in the background that states and territories would like - well, they see their own provision as being optimum rather than considering a national universal approach. And the example of even the Preschool Reform Agreement - the Preschool Reform Agreement is not - the funding that's supposed to go to every child is not happening across Australia consistently. That's a very basic example of where our system is not working for children. So I would - yes, again, I'm very happy to take that one offline and - - -

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So this is in jurisdictions that won't allocate the funding to long day care, is that specifically the issue, or?

MS DEATH: Yes, well, yes, to across the board when we have the highest provision.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, (indistinct).

35 MS DEATH: Yes. And women's workforce participation we rely so very heavily - all workforce participation, but particularly women's on - and I think we have a long way to go to getting nationally consistent approach to that.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Has ELACCA got a view about what that national consistent preschool offer should be?

40 MS DEATH: Well, I could say yes, we do. I'd love to take that on notice and give something back to you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay, all right. Yes.

45 MS DEATH: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks, Elizabeth. I want to - Martin mentioned supply-side funding and that you have a preference or a strong preference for a mixed model approach where you have a mix of demand side and supply side, and you've mentioned the Canadian or the Quebec model of flat fee, et cetera, and you've mentioned in your submission it's about flexibility, et cetera. Can I just get you to perhaps elaborate on your rationale for that preference? Is it about having a progressive system where people - more income paid? What are the reasons for that strong preference for a mixed-model?

10 MS DEATH: Yes, look, I think that - I suppose my personal commentary there would be that I've worked in an environment where there was a supply-side model of funding, and the supply-side model was - it did not keep up with the needs of the sector. It was inconsistent. It's very reliant upon the government of the day. It's not something that keeps up to date with the actual cost of delivery.

20 And there are no benchmark - there are no efficient costs of delivery because what we've got is a system that is different - and we will provide some more data on this; we've got another paper coming to you - around the nuances of different parts of Australia, and how a flat approach to it and supply-side funding will not answer those nuances and the needs of the communities whether it be in particular pockets of metropolitan, or whether in other environments.

25 I was certainly not in favour of the Child Care Subsidy in remote Indigenous communities, but we also had a very poor example in the budget-based funded model of how those services were financed. We did not have - the needs that we had around funding for housing, for transport, for delivery in remote communities just did not stack up, and it was substandard funding for those communities. So I'm very pleased to see the engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community around Aboriginal controlled community-controlled organisations and further conversations happening there.

35 But it's applicable in many different parts of Australia. We just - we're not - it's not the same in - you can't apply the same rules in many of the environments we're in, so there needs to be that mix and there are places where a demand-side funding model works really well, and there are other places where we need that supplementary supply-side.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Elizabeth, can I just have a sort of almost follow-up question to Lisa's point? Because I noticed that you're not in favour of basing the hourly rate cap on an average efficient cost and you mentioned it's not possible to have that. I'm just - that's how we do it now, and whether you could call it an efficient rate cap, you know, what does that

reflect? But and we've actually recommended reviewing the rate cap as part of a future exercise.

5 But do you want to talk a little bit about why you don't think the rate cap should be based on an efficient cap, and a cost-based, and if not, how would you set a rate cap? Or are you just - is it a percentage of fees depending on however the centres decide to set fee? What is the answer? It's one thing to say, "I don't like that." It's another thing to say, "I prefer this."

10 MS DEATH: So we have - I think in our submission you'll see we have a recommendation there around the fact that the rate cap has not kept up with the cost of delivery.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MS DEATH: And we're actually in the process of doing a little bit more work on that for you.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

MS DEATH: So again, I'd like to take that one on notice to give you a bit more information.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: That would be good.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. You - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Do you want to - - -

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, I was (indistinct).

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: I was going to ask you about the - a bit yes and a bit no on our proposal for an ECEC Commission, and it's a cost-benefit analysis, and I note the potential concerns around duplication, et cetera. You talked about national consistency, the need for those sorts of approaches and I guess we saw Commission would have a role in coordination and sort of monitoring and looking at where things could be done better, and we didn't envisage it as a funding body or something; it would be advisory and a monitoring body and guiding research, et cetera. So overall a system steward, if you like. I mean, what are your major concerns, and if they could
45 be addressed would you be more supportive?

MS DEATH: Look, I think that it's fair to say we have very diverse views across our membership, and some were very strongly for it, and some were strongly opposed. So the stewardship of the Australian Government - obviously, the funding is not going to go to the Commission, so where is the Commission's leverage power? And if it's an advisory body, if we've got ACECQA and we have AERO who are doing a lot of research in the space, and we've got ACECQA who are the national body - not the regulator, but the overseer of the national law and regulations they have and a relationship with every single service across Australia.

So I think it's about - for me it would be about leveraging what we've already got and making sure that the efficient cost is - is it a small contribution - you know, in comparison a contribution that might not be as large as an ECEC Commission to establish going to the bodies like ACECQA and ramping up the stewardship from the Australian Government who have the funding levers, and accessing the research through AERO.

I just think that we need to - we've got data that needs to be collected, we've got the Australian Bureau - we've got a number of different data bodies in Australia. It's about the connectivity of those, and if the ECEC Commission's role is around connecting those, why are we spending a lot of money on a new body that could actually be going into the current ones and supporting - whether it's a stronger amount of funding into each state and territory to the do regulatory - to update the regulatory environment.

I do not believe - having had the regulatory body in the Northern Territory under my responsibility, we did not get enough funding to adequately deliver assessment and rating in the timeframes that we needed. Three years is the maximum time that we should have between an assessment and rating, and the states and territories lost funding for that when the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda was taken away by the previous government.

So we've got to look at all of those things, and what is it - where are the elements there, and isn't it more around supporting the internationally renowned system we've got rather than creating another body? I'm just concerned about the churn of dollars and the churn of the - and more churn for the sector to understand.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Fair enough. Yes. Do you have any more questions?

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No, no. Other than to say it certainly wouldn't be our intent to create something that duplicates or creates overlap and in fact fits more the gaps and anytime - and you would know in yourself in the last

5 sort of conversation we've had anytime you say "Oh, well, that bit's not being looked at," or "wouldn't it be good if we could roll out a consistent approach or bring different jurisdiction or consider a set outcome?" That's that role that we see the almost a system steward - the ECEC Commission - and not to usurp ACECQA's fantastic role or AERO's research program, but we can definitely see some advantage, particularly given the amount of change that's coming through this sector.

10 Somebody needs to help keep an overarching national view which will extend beyond just the accreditation or just beyond the research program just to bring the jurisdictions along and then the Commonwealth along in the journey that we're envisaging. I think that that's - so maybe it has a temporary role. I don't know. I'm not sure whether that's true. But anyway. Other than that, thank you very much for your time today, it's been fantastic.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Elizabeth.

MS DEATH: Yes, pleasure.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And we thank you for your engagement (indistinct) your engagement to date.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, yes.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: In the inquiry. We haven't finished.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Many times.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And thank you for the offers of additional material that you've made to use today.

MS DEATH: My pleasure.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So we're going to take - - -

MS DEATH: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks, Elizabeth.

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We're going to take a short break. I think we might - because we've got (indistinct) - five-past, 10-past, or?

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, let's do.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Some of the other participants might be online.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Okay. Well, five-past.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: But if - at five-past - yes, five-past 11.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. We're going to resume at five-past 11, and yes, and we'll look forward to welcoming the participants from the Wimmera Southern Mallee and other groups from those regions. At five-past 11.

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SHORT ADJOURNMENT

[10.53 AM]

RESUMED

[11.07 AM]

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Good morning, everybody. Thank you. Welcome to the – we're just resuming the public hearing for the inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. And we are about to welcome participants from the Wimmera Southern Mallee, Mallee, Loddon Campaspe and surrounding regions. This is a large group and we're very much looking forward to the discussion with you all. We appreciate the information that you've sent through to us about the issues that are key concerns. We've actually just received an update on that within the last hour. I can't see anybody yet.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We're just getting our cameras sorted.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Technological problem.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And, yes, getting - - -

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Normally it goes to whoever is speaking. So once we go through our introductions (indistinct) - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. All right. I'll keep going then. All right. So we do have a large group, and we want to make sure that everybody who'd like to speak has a chance. Just so you know – I might introduce us first, actually. I'm Deb Brennan, I'm Associate Commissioner on the inquiry and I'm joined by fellow Commissioners Lisa Gropp and Martin Stokie. And by - - -

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: (Indistinct). Good morning, everyone.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Lou Will, an Assistant Commissioner. And Grace Tang. Yes. So we're keen to give everybody who'd like to speak an opportunity. And I also want to stress, we're not going to put anybody on the spot, so if you're here to listen and observe, that is absolutely fine. We've had
5 some themes nominated by participants of this group, broad themes about lack of access, and the unique circumstances of rural and remote communities, impacts on women, children, families and communities, and barriers and solutions.

10 And I'm thinking that it might be good if we progress, at least, to begin with, through those things, and invite people who would like to speak on each of them to do so. And then make sure that we've covered everything that people would like to address with us. So could I ask if there's somebody who'd like to lead us off, and we'd like everybody to say their – as they come to speak if
15 you could say your name and the organisation that you represent because we are having the sessions transcribed and that's important for the record.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Perhaps, just if somebody – beforehand – we – Grace will be able to see electronic hands up if somebody wishes to say
20 something or join the conversation, we can't see it on screen. So we'll make a blanket apology straight away (indistinct) - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I see it. Okay. Now we can see it - - -

25 COMMISSIONER GROPP: We can see it.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We just saw Jane – you put your hand up, Jane, so if you speak, you'll probably - - -

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Lou has just given us a visual of everybody else so, thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Jane, would you like to lead us off?

35 MS HOSKING: Thank you so much, Deb. And thank you to Lisa, Martin, Lou and Grace, we're really very pleased to be here today. So I'm Jane Hosking, I'm the CEO of the North Central LLEN. Would you like me to facilitate everyone introducing themselves, would that be helpful?

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. That's great, thank you .

MS HOSKING: Go for it? Okay. So we'll just go around the screen. Fiona.

45 MS BEST: Yes. Hi everybody, very happy to be part of today's discussion. I'm the CEO of the Birchip Cropping Group.

MS HOSKING: Thanks, Fiona.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks, Fiona.

MS HOSKING: And Chris.

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MR SOUNNESS: Sounness. CEO of Wimmera Southern Mallee Development. Equally very happy to be here and representing our region.

MS HOSKING: Thanks, Chris. And Catherine.

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DR TISCHLER: I assume that's given my formal name, sorry, about that.

MS HOSKING: Sorry.

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DR TISCHLER: No. That's all right. Hi, I'm Dr Cathy Tischler. I am a social and economic researcher with Federation University based in Horsham in the Wimmera Southern Mallee. I am also chair of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, which is a state government organisation.

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MS HOSKING: Thanks, Cathy. And we've also Katherine Durant too, I believe.

MS DURANT: Hi. I'm Katherine Durant, I'm a parent from Rainbow in Victoria.

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MS HOSKING: Thanks, Katherine. And Melanie.

MS ALBRECHT: Hi, I am Melanie Albrecht. I'm representing West Wimmera Health Service, and I'm also a councillor in Hindmarsh.

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MS HOSKING: Prue? You're mute, Prue. We'll let you sort your sound out, and we'll go Jo and we'll come back again.

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MS MARTIN: Jo Martin from By Five, an Early Years Initiative set up to improve outcomes for children before they get to school across the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

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MS HOSKING: Thanks, Jo. How are you going, Prue? Still no sound. So I can introduce Prue until she gets her sound. Prue is a parent and also someone with a very strong agriculture background from Loddon Shire across our region. And Trish.

MS FICARRA: Hi, I'm Trish, a parent from Boort in the Loddon Shire.

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MS HOSKING: Thanks, Trish. And Wendy.

MS GLADMAN: Hi, everyone. Thanks for having us today. I'm Wendy Gladman, I'm the director of Community Wellbeing at Loddon Shire Council.

5 MS HOSKING: And Marianne.

MS HENDRON: Good morning, everyone. I'm Marianne Hendron, the CEO of Women's Health Grampians, which includes the Wimmera region. Pleased to be here.

10 MS HOSKING: Rob.

MR GRENFELL: Yes. Good morning and welcome to everyone. Rob Grenfell, I'm the chief of strategy for Grampians Health, which essentially covers most of the Grampians region from Ballarat right through to the border. And Claire.

MS WOODS: I'm Claire Woods. I'm the Chief People Officer at Grampians Health. Hello.

20 MS HOSKING: And Jess.

MS TURNER: I'm Jess Turner from the North Central LLEN, I'm the Strong Family, Strong Children facilitator, as well as a parent of two from Wycheproof.

MS HOSKING: People have moved, sorry. And Jacinta.

MS SUTTON: Hi, I'm Jacinta. I'm representing parents from Boort in the Loddon Shire.

MS HOSKING: I hope I've got everyone there.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I think so. Yes.

MS HOSKING: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And it sounds like - - -

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Amy. We've missed Amy.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Amy.

45 MS HOSKING: Sorry, Amy. Apologies, Amy. Very important.

MS FAY: No worries, Jane. Hello, everyone. I'm also – my name is Amy Fay, I'm also a parent from Boort, and I'm the executive officer of

Murray Dairy which is a research and extension organisation servicing Northern Victorian and Riverina dairy farms.

5 MS HOSKING: Thanks, Amy.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, thank you, all. It's very nice to meet you all. And we really appreciate your coming along to have this important discussion with us. Jane, I'm wondering, have you actually got a bit of a plan for this discussion might unfold?

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MS HOSKING: Well, if it's okay, Deb, we just had a bit of an introduction, Jo and myself, just to sort of – and then we thought we'd, sort of, you know, at least try and help facilitate to ensure every voice was heard around the room.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS HOSKING: But, obviously, we'll be led by you too as to the questions that you have along the way, you and your team. Are you happy if we begin with a little bit of a - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That'd be great. Yes. That'd be great.

MS HOSKING: - - - bit of context for you. Would that be okay? Yes.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS HOSKING: Awesome. Thank you. Well, thank you so much, we are really very pleased, each and every one of us, to be here today. We can see this as a unique opportunity for our region, we believe partnerships are key, and that's why we're presenting together because we know we'll get the best outcomes when we work together.

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I'd also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land that we're all Zooming in from today, in my case, the Dja Dja Wurrung, and pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to any Aboriginal here with us today.

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So, I guess, we just wanted to begin by really commending the Commission and the government, I guess, on this report and its focus on children and families at the centre and the intent for a universal system for all children. That was sort of our first very major point.

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We have representatives here today from across, as you said, the Wimmera Southern Mallee, the Mallee, and the Loddon Campaspe region. We have – we all represent small rural communities, and I guess they're often characterised as thin markets or market failure regions. So all of our regions

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have not-for-profit early-year providers only involved and sometimes, I guess, those early-year providers would rather not be in the space, but given the market failure, there isn't often an alternative.

5 So just to paint that little bit of a picture, our region covers 48,000 square kilometres, which is a fifth of the Victorian land mass. 50 per cent of our townships have long daycare access, but most of them not enough. We also have one shire, one entire shire, that Loddon Shire that has no formal early childhood – sorry – no childcare, only kindergarten services. We have over –
10 and this is fairly conservative – I think, 300 children and families we know on known waitlists. And of great significance to us, we have between 20 and 55 per cent of our children who are developmentally vulnerable in one area and significant numbers in two or more areas. So we are a significantly disadvantaged region.

15 So again, coming back to why we are so pleased to have children at the centre of what we're talking about here. We – we're not sure if this is the first opportunity – well, we hope there have been some parents presenting, but we've got a group of parents who we would particularly like to welcome
20 today. We've got cross-sectoral, also as you heard, cross-sectoral members, but parents as well because the parent voice is critical to the reform that we need in this space.

25 So, I guess, we hope the recommendations that come of this are really bold, we're hoping that this is not a tweak, we're hoping that this can leave a legacy for future generations. We're not a group that have come together specifically for this, we've been working together across with our regional partnerships for some time now because we are actually determined to build
30 the next generation of our rural communities.

So I'm going to just hand over to Jo, just to go through a few of our key themes, if that's okay, Deb.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That'd be fantastic. Now, thanks for that introduction today.

MS HOSKING: Thank you.

40 MS MARTIN: Thanks, Jane. And we did send through four points that we think might encapsulate some of the topics that we're going - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

45 MS MARTIN: - - - to cover today. But everyone has a unique version of events and what we'd like to see, and hopefully we can help you inform your recommendations as well. The four points we sent through were that small

rural is unique, we often get lumped in with regional, we're not regional, we're not very remote, we're small rural and that's a really different space.

5 We have a lot of physical assets in our region as well. And so we are not – we don't intend or try to speak on behalf of very remote communities. But we also don't – equally don't like to speak on behalf of regional cities like Ballarat or Geelong. That's (indistinct) point there we'd like to put across.

10 Coordination is key for us, we have some amazing assets that we know we could leverage more efficiently and effectively, and we think coordination is key. I think it breaks everyone's heart, on the screen, when we see investment in one part of a system that doesn't connect to another part, and we just don't see the efficiency that we need to see. So we think coordination at all levels, be Commonwealth, state and local level is key to this reform in
15 our space.

20 As Jane mentioned, we think there's some great recommendations in the report and commend the breadth of opportunity there. We hope that the reform that we need to see in rural – we held a forum late last year and I think it was – it was actually palpable in the room how desperate our families and – our families are, our communities are. It's really hard to see small things being sucked out of our communities and the inevitability of what that does to our rural community. So we're actually looking for something that helps us not just draw two strings together for another few years, we actually hope
25 we can leave a legacy for our children who – we don't want them to be literally like we see some of our parents, in the street, you know, writing letters to papers, they're literally fighting for something that's pretty simple. We think simple.

30 And also, that this is really an opportunity, not just as Jane said for our children because our children are starting – we know the children living in rural and remote areas are disadvantaged by postcode, and we know how important ECEC is to changing that. And we really think this is not only important to children, but families, it is critical to our families, and also the
35 future of a lot of our communities as well. You know, sometimes it's hard to believe that we're only in rural Victoria, and we're not in some underground location. But it's the opportunity here for us and as Jane said, this is not a new conversation for us, we haven't just run around our friends and asked them to come on the screen. They're our friends because we're all trying to
40 influence and trying to solve a really complex problem. So they were our four points. I don't know if you'd like to throw to people around the screen or how you'd like to address or ask us to move forward.

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, we're very much in your hands, but given that we've got those themes, or you've presented us with those themes, maybe it's an idea if we work through those, and then people who would like to chip in and contribute on a particular point, do so.

MS MARTIN: Sure. We did have a little meeting last week trying to work out how we could make sure we don't repeat ourselves too much. So we were trying to look a little bit like the band who knows how to play together.
5 So we do have a few people – I'm not sure if Stewart Benjamin is on the screen, but he was listed as somebody as somebody who'd like to speak about the bigger, broader, picture of economics. So if Stewart is there?

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Actually, Jo, the one thing I might do is
10 check that I've got – if you could just run through the four themes or the number of the themes.

MS MARTIN: Sure.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Or Jane, or anybody. Just make sure we've
15 all got the same - - -

MS MARTIN: That small rural is unique, that was one of our points.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.
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MS MARTIN: Coordination at a local level is key.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.
25

MS MARTIN: A system rebuild for rural is required, not a patched system.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: All right.

MS MARTIN: And the future of our children, families, and communities
30 depend on this.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Excellent. Thank you. All right.
35 So we'll lead off then with the unique elements of small rural communities, and what we need to know to think about those features in the context of our inquiry.

MS MARTIN: Cathy, looks like she's going to take it away. Great.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct), Cathy.
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DR TISCHLER: I'm going to take that as a starting point because some of
45 the things I picked up in reading your draft recommendations, we've – our research team here has done some work around the culture of our communities. And one of the things that concerned me in the draft recommendations was a bit of confusion around whether rural communities

are not using childcare services because they don't want them, or they're not using them because they don't exist. Can we just - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

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DR TISCHLER: 100 per cent clarify that, we're not using them because they don't exist.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

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DR TISCHLER: It's not a lack of interest in this. There is a really strong cultural history that people in our communities don't expect a high level of service. So the last four years, all the people on this screen and other people connected to the people on this screen have done a lot of work to raise the profile of childcare as a critical economic issue for our communities, a critical issue for women's independence and women's participation. And also an absolutely critical issue, and this shouldn't be the third point, an absolutely critical issue for our children and our children's development in the region.

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I personally think that the lack of childcare in rural areas and in our communities is symptomatic of us being willing to accept a whole lot of second-rate outcomes, such as lower wages, you know, lower expectations around our kids being ready for school, being willing to accept unviable or really low paid part-time positions because we just want that flexibility because we can't access childcare, and wanting to be grateful for flexibility in our workplaces as an alternative to having childcare.

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So I'm really strong on the view that the system is absolutely broken for rural people and we need to change it, the funding model doesn't work and, you know, we're accepting poorer outcomes for our rural people as a result of this childcare barrier that exists in place. So if I can make that point very strongly. Thank you.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Cathy, can I – thanks so much for getting – I did just want to ask one question about the funding model not being appropriate. Do you mean the reliance on the market that - - -

DR TISCHLER: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: But is that essentially what - - -

DR TISCHLER: Absolutely.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: - - - you're saying to us.

DR TISCHLER: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

5 DR TISCHLER: Yes. So we could – there's people in this room who are more – who are better at this conversation than me in that funding space. But what we have is a model that has to fail to access additional supports. We actually need a model that recognises you cannot have market-viable childcare in most rural areas, but it should be part of the system that exists. So we have to look at funding that in a meaningful way that addresses fluctuations in children numbers. So some years you might have 30 kids
10 wanting to come through, some years you might have 10. You know, the 30 are no more worthy than the 10 and all of them should be able to access childcare. But what happens then is you lose staff, you have all those fluctuations, and your centre radically becomes unviable year to year. So we actually need to smooth that out and have a funding system that works for
15 rural people and we currently don't have that, and tweaking the system won't fix that either.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Can I – sorry – I know there's a lot of other people who want to speak, but just – I mean, we did recommend – we recommended an expansion of the CCCF for supply-side funding for areas like yours, I don't know if - - -

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We might be taking Cathy into a different territory when we talk about CCCF, I'm not sure, but - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It's a supply-side funding model so that we'd be, you know, so providing services more directly in communities. Is that the sort of thing you had in mind? Is that what (indistinct) - - -

30 DR TISCHLER: (Indistinct), do you want to grab that one?

MS MARTIN: Or even Wendy. Wendy might - - -

35 DR TISCHLER: Yes. Wendy, yes, good one. Thank you.

MS MARTIN: - - - link to that one. I could talk all day, so I need to share.

DR TISCHLER: Wendy, go.

40 MS GLADMAN: Thank you. Yes. So, exactly right. That recommendation really was one that I was pleased to see. But I think it's really important that we acknowledge that one funding model doesn't fit all. So the challenge that we've had is that the funding models have been based on a model that works well in a metro or large population area, and our small rural services – well,
45 we actually can't get a small rural service on the ground because they don't have the capacity to actually commence and continue to build that level of service because our families actually have to change their life choices based

on the fact that there's childcare available that they haven't had for a long time, and that takes time. So it takes time for them to trust that there's a reliable ongoing service available. It then takes time for them to find the employment that they're seeking and make those different choices.

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So what we're looking for is actually - we've investigated this to a feasibility study. It's actually about providing support for those start up services - additional support - that actually gives them a base model of funding that allows them to be established and operate at a minimum level of service not dependent on the number of students or children that are registered or the level of service that's provided.

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And that in a rural area, that may take some years for that service to actually be at a point where it's actually financially sustainable on its own, but I guess the thing that we're looking at is that that ongoing model of funding really needs not just a revamp, but a real shake up and a reform to actually ensure that we haven't got communities scrambling to find alternative solutions or models that may or may not work.

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Parents won't give up their volunteer care that they have been able to secure even if it's only for a part-time basis to then rely on a service that may or may not continue to deliver. So we're just looking for something that actually provides the same equitable access for families and children no matter where they live, and we think it shouldn't rely on the advocacy of a community or the strength of a community or of parents to actually secure a form of service. It should be something that's actually designed and delivered for them.

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MS MARTIN: Just to the CCF - sorry, and I know I'm talking over - every service in our small rural relies on CCF except for one who wasn't eligible because they were a new service. You have to fail before you're eligible or show that you're not viable. And I know the criteria changed in Round 4, but it wasn't suitable again for our region. So and being at the whim of cycles of funding and criteria changes is really challenging. So every service in our small rural, except for one, relies on CCF funding and the criteria to remain the same every year - or every three years.

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MS HOSKING: And the shire that Wendy's talking about doesn't actually - hasn't been eligible for CCF because there hasn't been a service system already operating, so up until now you had to have a service to then be eligible for - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Hasn't had anything to fail (indistinct).

45

MS HOSKING: And there's been nothing to fail that, so that's just to speak to what Wendy was talking about there as well to add to that.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So that's really helpful. But when the community has the CCF funding, is it a good model? Does it work? Is it something we should be expanding?

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Or changing the rules around it?

MS MARTIN: The criteria, it's still just cyclic funding and I think that's - I'm on a board also for an early years' service across the whole of or a lot of this region and we're heavily reliant on the CCF. The rules - it's always open
10 though to criteria changes, and I suppose that's the insecurity of it that we find is it's great when it works year on year on year on year, but that's also putting people on short-term contracts because you don't know.

So that security of operation is very - it's a very different model to what we
15 see in other parts of our system, you know, like parallel (indistinct) market failure. I think it could be a mix of base-level funding and I think The Front Project have put up some great concepts on how thin market models could work. CCF's not a great - doesn't provide a lot of security.

20 MS TISCHLER: I think also just to note the churn that takes place when we've got to continually reapply for funding, have things fail, go through those processes. Surely there's got to be a simpler way.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So does this challenge present itself when
25 thinking about preschool, and particularly in Victoria, there's a program, as you know, about expansion of four-year-old and potentially a forthcoming expansion of three-year-old. They operate on a different model. I'm just wondering for small rural, what is your perspective around preschool funding arrangements, so.

30 MS MARTIN: Does somebody want to speak to - Wendy, do you want to speak to that one, or?

MS HOSKING: Yes, Wendy - yes, I'm just thinking, Wendy, that's probably
35 your - - -

MS GLADMAN: Yes, I think for us, having been involved in the delivery of preschool through Loddon Shire for a number of years, the biggest change
40 for us in terms of the viability of the services was when the funding model changed. So the funding model changed to actually provide a minimum base level of funding no matter what size the service was. So we went from - in some years we might have a service that only offers preschool - we might only have four or five enrolments, and on a per capita model, that actually didn't provide enough income then to even fund the teachers that were
45 required to meet the regulations that were needed.

5 So there was always a requirement for our community groups to raise a significant amount of money, and we're talking, you know, sometimes 20- or \$30,000 to actually offset the running costs of that service. So that was a really key component in actually making the services viable and taking away that question every year that we had based on would we be able to deliver that service in that community.

10 And for Loddon Shire, it's not about, 'Oh, well, if we closed that service because there's only four students, they move to the next service in the next suburb.' We're talking about 50 kilometres, half an hour drive, for parents twice a day, often that are in a low socio-economic environment, and or they're trying to work it around being able to work part-time in between kinder times and all sorts of things. So that was probably the biggest difference for us was around that change from per-capita to a base level of funding.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And that - so I'm hearing then that that's quite an effective model in terms of security, dealing with fluctuations in enrolments and so on. I wonder if that - I don't want to rush you through the topics, but for me that does connect to the second issue about coordination, because preschool is one thing, but it's not the only story. And so maybe you want to - maybe some of you would like to comment on coordination or the ability to connect service types or the inability to connect service types and what's needed there.

25 MS TANG: Deb, I might just jump in. We've got quite a few people that have hands up online.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, (indistinct).

MS TANG: If you would like to (indistinct).

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I beg your pardon. Okay.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: That's our board apology. We can't see it, so.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I can see one hand.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Well, so, yes, (indistinct) Grace has just told us that there's a queue.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: You call out a name then, Grace.

45 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: So, Chris, I think you had your hand up first.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Who?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Chris.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, Chris.

5 MR SOUNNESS: Yes, hi, Chris Sounness here, Wimmera Southern Mallee
Development. I'll just give a few stats to probably provide some context of
why what's occurring and going on in some of the also emerging issues. So
in our region - and I think I talk for all - most northwest Victoria - 70 per cent
10 of the residents are in the bottom 30 per cent poorest in Australia, so we do
have a lot of people that are poor and in poverty, but it's not necessarily very
well understood within the communities.

And I think this is what Cathy was highlighting that we accept the second-
best, because if we look at any of the SEIFA indexes, if you look at a SEIFA
15 index at a higher level, a higher zone, then the advantage and disadvantage
doesn't show out. It's only when you really drill down at a very micro level
where the stats I do know are a bit less robust, but I think they're still very
telling for our region, that basically the agricultural communities are, yes,
they have had some good seasons and are going well, but if you look at the
20 towns, they're generally the SEIFA indexes of 1 or 2 - these are the towns
under 2000 people in general.

So these are communities that have got a lot of disadvantage in them, and
that makes it challenging because we also got a lot of people - our
25 25 to 44-year-old females have a higher percentage of not participating in the
workforce than the rest of the state. So once again, there's another indicator
showing that the system isn't working. There should be no reason why
people in our region, females 25 to 44 aren't working. We can only guess it's
because of access to childcare and the support. As I say, I haven't got
30 compelling evidence to say that, but I suggest the anecdotes are probably
pretty good to take on thing because you've got stats that sort of reinforce
that.

So we've got this high level of disparity in the community and we've got a
35 high level of people who I think want to participate in the workforce but
can't, and our disadvantage just keeps on getting wider and wider and it
comes back to, I think, what we set the scene at the start is we think there
needs to be more focus on fairness rather than equity, and fairness means it
shouldn't matter where you were born and where your parents choose to raise
40 you; you have no choice in that, really, but at the moment, the evidence
suggests on postcode, if you live in most of the Wimmera Southern Mallee
postcodes and Mallee postcodes - modern postcodes - you're going to get a
far less chance of having a great outcome than just about everywhere else in
the state, and most of Australia. That just I don't think is on in 2024.

45 And so we've got to really work out how we can make sure fairness is in the
system. I think the rural communities I work with are very aware that any

government investment in infrastructure and services is very valuable, and they're always keen to try and work out how they can leverage them across one another. They realise one piece of infrastructure could potentially solve multiple problems.

5

But whenever they engage with the federal government, they tend to get a very 'Westminster' response, i.e. the Minister is responsible for one particular service, so they can only really talk on that service, and the federal government, and the state governments are very reluctant to collaborate and solve thin market problems together which needs to be a joint government response rather than the Westminster response, which is leading to poorer outcomes.

10

The other looming thing that is front of mind I think across a lot of the northwest region of Victoria is we're about to have \$20 billion worth of construction poured into this region over the next 10 years through transmission line builds, renewable energy builds and critical mineral sands. \$20 billion of construction work is very easy to say, but I think no one really has an understanding of the impacts that will have on the communities.

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These communities have had the history of agriculture as their primary economy. There's a lot of change. They've been told they need to accept these changes because it will allow Sydney and Melbourne to keep the lights on. They have yet to hear very many compelling reasons to see what benefits are coming through to them except probably 'just suck it up,' and as I say, I'm someone that I see is real opportunity here to change this but we're getting no - nothing that's actually delivering anything positive for the region about all these changes.

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The only other comment just on reading the report, one of the recommendations which was really great to read except one line was the Australian Government could use a process of competitive tendering to provide services in markets where community representatives do not apply for grants.

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I think that recommendation probably sums up why so many services are failing and this whole thin markets keep on failing, thinking that when the community is really struggling to deliver a service, the private sector will come in and offer a service where they will get paid well above the odds and I think the last 30 years of whenever this solution has been put forward tends to mean the private sector comes in, takes the government money, delivers the service for a short term, and then walks away again with a broken service because they go, 'Oh, this isn't viable' and once again, the rural community wear the pain of poor policy implementation because we're in a thin market; the private sector is not delivering, and it's across a whole range of services and this is just one, and it is really frustrating, so, I suppose I'll stop there.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, thank you. Thank you, Chris, no, that's hugely important. I've got the list - I've got quite a list of people who I now know have their hands up and it might be - are you okay if I - - -

5 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, well, I was going to ask a question, but why don't we keep going through the - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, I think we'll go through a couple.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Because we've got so many people.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: But do hold your - keep your question there. So I think it's Jess - Jess, where have you gone? I had you next and - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: She's down in - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And now your name's not up.

20 MS TURNER: Apologies. I jumped the gun a little bit and turned my hand down.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Great, well, over to you, yes.

25 MS TURNER: Thank you. Just wanted to reiterate some of that rural uniqueness that we face here and some of the challenges that our families find in the communities that do have available childcare. So for example, I'm in a community with a three-day service and there are some significant benefits to that, but we still have a strong workforce of women that are not
30 engaging because the service hasn't - - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Is that at preschool, Jess? Sorry to cut across you. Is that at preschool? What do you mean by three-day?

35 MS TURNER: Yes, so we have a daycare service that is under threes, and we have eight places at that service, and an adjoining kindergarten as well.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right, okay. Thank you.

40 MS TURNER: Yes. So for the daycare side of things, the difficulty comes in that the service is extremely limited in that families only have a minimal amount of days. The hours are quite short and don't fit within a working scope, so they're like 8.30 to 5.30. And we find that a lot of our vulnerable families do not engage with the service because of activity testing can put a
45 big damper on that, just engaging in Centrelink and the supports that need to navigate that system for a vulnerable family, and the significant costs of the childcare service in our setting.

5 So, for example, we pay comparably the same rate as a family in Footscray, yet our services is limited. We don't run during school holidays. So that's 12 weeks that a family have got to find some alternative form of care. And no work provider provides that kind of leave over the time. As well, we have to provide all food, nappies and anything externally that the children need. So when our most vulnerable community members go to engage in these services that are available, they tend to decline. And the kids that we need most in these services, their families don't want a part of it because it's in the too hard basket. It's too hard to engage. And I don't know if anyone has sat online trying to get Centrelink support, it's near impossible.

15 So we have – I only met with a family through my role, only Wednesday last week, who have a significantly vulnerable story. And they have a service that they could engage and are willing to travel over 80 kilometres to engage so that their family can seek medical support for another child to engage in childcare. However, the system doesn't support them to complete the activity test without further support workers engaging with them. Which is very limited in a rural community.

20 So spending hours with a family helping them engage with a system that's difficult and puts up barriers before you even enrol your child, for a limited service so you can travel three hours for another child to engage in a medical appointment, and then at that same time you still need to provide a lunchbox and all the nappies that are required. You've only got a Monday and your supermarket is shut on a Sunday so you need to be significantly prepared. These stories of these families that are engaging in things like this and willing to travel kilometres to do this for their family, but then the system still doesn't support them, and it doesn't work for their family, it blows me away that – these are everyday stories.

35 Through my work I can go into any township of 600 people and I can find five at a minimum just down the street who have a heartbreaking accessing childcare story, whether they're travelling, whether they have a service, whether there's no service whatsoever. And then we've got the parent groups who are working above and beyond. So we have a service in our town and we still have parents who are chasing the person working at the supermarket who has a certificate in childcare and could work there, but the pay is rubbish. They get paid more to work at the supermarket and they have job security.

45 All the jobs here are casual jobs, part time work, don't run during holidays. So for those families to get loans and basic car finance, it's just near impossible for them. But for them to work at the local pub or the supermarket or on the shire doing the stop go signs, it's much more significantly profitable for them. And then it causes tension in our communities that we are having to approach these people as parent groups to

say, please, please, come and work in our services or our doors shut. And then the 10 families engaging in the service have to turn around and walk away from their own employment. There's a significant pressure on community to uphold these services because there's no one else supporting them in the background. And we've worked really, really hard with all our partners to try and create some level of support. It's not enough. And there's some significant families missing out here. So it needs to be better funded and better supported in that sense.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, those were incredibly powerful examples, Jess. Thank you. I know that myself and my fellow Commissioners would love to ask questions of everybody as we go, but I've already got quite a list of people who'd like to make a contribution. So I'll go next to Rob, or it might be Claire.

15 DR GRENFELL: So. Thanks so much. And I guess as the representing Grampians Health which is one of the principal providers of healthcare, particularly for secondary healthcare and also broader allied health and paediatric services, and the public health services across the region. And we'll talk about two parts of this, of the implications of not having childcare for our service and our population. So I'll focus more on the population health attributes and, you know, we are indebted to the work that Jo Martin and her team have done in By Five with regards to emphasising some of the challenges that it has in the early years in our area.

25 One of the startling facts – a lot of people do refer to areas such as our own as dying areas, that is, that people are getting older. Now, that's actually not true. We actually do have a significant population of children and young adults who are actually in our area. We do lose a lot of our young people from the ages of around about 18 or so when they go away for employment or study opportunities. But that's discounting the number of – and by merits of that the children are disbursed across the region, which means that accessibility is a problem.

35 And as other speakers have already pointed out, the socioeconomic gradient in our areas is, in fact, actually quite profound. And that adds to the problem. So children born into low socioeconomic status with challenges of accessibility, not only to childcare and early education, but also the building blocks to a strong and vibrant life are, in fact, actually difficult for many of these families to do that, particularly because the challenges they have in the sense of looking at quality housing, quality jobs and not even just adding in the childcare issue of actually restricting some of that.

45 So what do we see? In some of the areas we see substantial delays in detection of children with special needs. And that actually, you know, our paediatric services, from a service perspective we are focusing on how do we shorten those delays? How do we look at pickup? The childcare services are

5 a principal way of picking up children who have special needs, and need to go into specialised programs. And so without that accessibility, that means that those children are, in fact, actually delayed in their pickup. It may well be delayed until they actually get to primary school level, which as you know, is actually too late for many conditions, or at least certainly deleterious to their outcomes in that whole.

10 But I'll hand over to my colleague, Claire, to talk about what it means for us as a significant employer of women in the region.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I think that's excellent. Love to hear from you, Claire. And I think it'll work well because our next speaker on the list is Marianne from Women's Health. So I think that will work really well.

15 MS WOODS: Thank you. And to, I suppose the area of the report that I was drawn to was around removing the early childhood barriers could see an increase in labour supply. And I suppose as an employer in the region, one of the things that we believe is that it will result in an increase in labour supply. Because we have three distinct programs that focus on bringing that
20 25-44 year old female cohort into our workplace.

The first one is an education program, an earn and learn, as we call it through an EN traineeship or a (indistinct) program. And our employees in Horsham, Stawell and Dimboola and Edenhope, childcare is a major issue for them.
25 And I can provide examples where people have declined to participate in that education, (1) because being able to access childcare is significant, but also the family supports around that are just not available. So those people declined to participate in programs that have been specifically designed to encourage women to participate in education, then move towards better
30 economic security.

The second cohort that the absence of childcare stops is people who are looking relocate, were willing to relocate. People with families don't relocate unless we can guarantee that they have support for their whole family. So
35 domestic relocations we are limited to agency people who primarily are people without children, who are travelling to a regional or a rural area in particular, to access higher level income, so the FIFO style work. And we have many, many agency workers who come in for that. But those are not the people that we want to come into our communities, as a staple.
40

And the third program that we have that absence of childcare restricts our labour supply is our international recruitment. We have brought over 100 people, 150 people, the vast majority of have one, two or three children, into our organisation from overseas to address the international workforce
45 shortage. Those people will predominantly only go to places where they have access to childcare. So that means our higher populated areas are advantaged in that program. And people overwhelmingly won't travel to a

regional service where they cannot be assured that their children will be safe. We have hundreds of children who we bring in from overseas without family support and we really feel that we have a responsibility to them.

5 So just to, in summary, the comment could, I certainly accept that maybe it's a could if employers are not actively working in that space. But we strongly believe, from our organisation, that it would result in an increase in labour supply.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Claire. And thank you for those very concrete examples. Let's hear from Marianne, and then I will come back to Lisa and Martin to see if there's some questions.

15 MS HENDRON: Thank you. Look, I guess my comments were really about backing up the, Chris' comments earlier around the need for an equity lens and what rurality, as everyone has said, the reality of rurality as a dimension, as a barrier for women's workforce participation. My organisation has been working with all the public sector entities across the region for the last three years, more than three years, to help with the implementation of the Victorian
20 Gender Equality Act, looking at the requirements of that Act for public sector entities.

And look, you know, Chris mentioned there was anecdotal evidence around workforce participation but the auditing that has taken place through that
25 work is very tangible, hard evidence that women are not participating in the workforce opportunities in our region because of childcare. It's quite clear that women are opting to go for part time work, and even casual work, not by preference as kind of their – I think one of the recommendations referred to the notion of preference in terms of how women, what women's workforce participation looks like. But it's actually often by necessity.
30

So, for instance, women who know there will be seasonal demands at home during harvest time for instance, opt to work casually so that they, you know, they are able to be there when they are needed on the farm or in that
35 agricultural context. And the same with, you know, before and after school care. It's flexibility that is absolutely required.

The other area that we have come across the barriers through lack of childcare, we are running a program called 'See What You can Be', which is
40 about encouraging women and businesses for women's engagement in non-traditional workplaces. And again, as Chris mentioned, you know, there's opportunities on the horizon for our region around tech and renewables and so on, perfect for women to really embark on careers in those non-traditional areas. The workplaces we find are willing. They're receptive. They're keen to see what they can do. But it's, you know, that lack of childcare that is a
45 significant barrier.

And, you know, it kind of denies the opportunity for prosperity, I think, within the region. It promotes more of a need for fly in fly out workers, rather than using a ready workforce that's in the community that could really benefit from those jobs.

5

I just also wanted to quickly make a reference to some other data that I think kind of fleshes out the context of what we're talking about, and that's data, for instance, relating to mental health in the region and the disproportionate number of women who have experienced anxiety and depression in that region.

10

When we look at the Victorian data through the Victorian Women's Health Atlas, 41 per cent of women in Yarriambiack Shire - which is right in the centre of the area we're talking about - report being diagnosed with anxiety or depression, and that's compared with a state average of around 27 per cent. So that is significant, and that goes for several other LGAs - local government areas - in the catchment that we're talking about.

15

And access to sexual reproductive health services is a lot more limited, and rates of family violence are significantly higher in this region compared with the state average, and I think they need to be factored into the thinking here, because that's about our context. It's about disadvantage and it speaks to some of the areas that others have already mentioned. So I think they were the main things from me.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you very, very much, Marianne. I just want to say to Fiona, Prue, and Mel that I haven't forgotten you, but I'm going to now ask Lisa and Martin if they have some questions.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: I've just got a quick one, thanks, Marianne. You mentioned how the lack of childcare options is a brake on female participation in the workforce, but also I'm wondering - one thing that we've looked at in our report is the scope for your home-grown workers in the childcare sector, sort of training them up to become educators, teachers. Now, granted that if you got the funding mechanism right so you could have the services, what do you see is the scope for that, for actually for women to become - and it's predominantly women we're talking about - becoming workers in that sector as well so you sort of get a dual benefit if you like?

35

MS HENDRON: That's absolutely right, and I think men as well, to be honest. We would really encourage - we see it works both ways in terms of those gender segregated work roles. So there's nothing we'd welcome more than to see more men participating in the early years workforce. But I do think that that's absolutely a potential benefit of this is that dual job creation as well as creating job opportunity.

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5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Can I quickly ask - sorry, Marianne, and sorry, Lisa, but can I quickly ask if 'See What You Can Be,' a program initiative about getting women, I think you said, into non-traditional professions - does that go the other way? Is it also about getting men into female dominated industries?

MS HENDRON: Absolutely. Definitely, and yes.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay, that's great, Marianne, thank you.

MS HENDRON: But, you know, we all know the reality is for that to happen there would have to be a significant change to the wage structure for those sort of roles. That's - yes.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Thank you. Sorry, Lisa. Thank you.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: No, that's - yes. Because I guess we've seen that in particularly - and I know you're not remote, but in, say, Indigenous regions, and that's seen as a - rather than relying on even - you know, and some of those remote that have FIFO ECEC workers, which is extraordinary, and people who don't stay. So they have that - people were talking about continuity before of provision, and there are a whole lot of range of other issues relating to the workforce, including wages, et cetera, but also if you can have people who live in the region, they've got housing, so some of those other barriers might be already solved, so (indistinct).

25 MS MARTIN: And I think that's a really - a great point you mention because it's also about providing the continuity between all these pieces that allows potential - your full employment, whatever that looks like for you - so if you're only treating it as a childcare or an afterschool care or a kindergarten and all these pieces don't coordinate, which is sort of to our second point - full employment often relies on doing two days a week on that side of the wall and then I'm changing employer to go and do - we have a lot lack of consistency with employment because it's all treated as different parts of the system, but only from a work - I mean an employment structure, but also service provision is treated separately as silos.

30 So I think that would be - we know that rural people return to rural areas. It's seen in a lot of other industries. So if we can see this as a genuine career path for people, I think that's creating the environment, like you said, with funding structures, guaranteed employment, not fluctuating employment, I think that's a great idea.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you very much, Jo.

45 MS TISCHLER: (Indistinct) can I just jump in and add to that?

MS HOSKING: Yes, I was going to say, Cathy, you've got some - - -

5 MS TISCHLER: Because, yes, we're just trialling a program of that nature at the moment in our region because we've said, 'What if we could employ three extra women in one town?' We'd probably actually fix our childcare problem in some of our smaller communities - the staffing issue. So we've just started a project which is funded by the state government to look at training for people in really small groups in our smaller townships. So this is like one person or two or three people, to get them skilled up into care industries. So childcare is one of them, disability support is another, aged care is another.

10 So we are actually trialling that at the moment, so this will be a sort of over the next two years we'll have a look at that and just see if we can make some improvements into structuring people across different part-time work in those care industries and also seeing - finding better models for training, more cost-effective ways to do it. So we're actually well on top of this, and it'll be an interesting trial to keep an eye on.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Absolutely.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks, Cathy.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Martin.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Maybe just by way of bringing some of this discussion around the uniqueness of small rural together, we can move on to coordination and other matters in a second, and maybe this is a question for Jo and or Jane, but I'm just wondering have we not - have we missed the mark in our - or are we on target for our recommendations?

30 And by way of a quick summary, we're suggesting for those families who are on less than \$80,000 a year in essence CCS childcare becomes free because it goes to 100 per cent of the rate cap and that potentially addresses your point, Chris, around if 70 per cent of the families are earning less than \$80,000, would be 70 per cent of the families in your area would be on 100 per cent. Now, that only works if there's a service a go to, and so we've also recommended supply-side funding which is the ongoing annuity type arrangements. Not specific grants, uncertain, et cetera.

40 We're also recommending wrap-around services so that the preschool arrangement that was talked about for the 12 weeks that preschools don't operate, that you could access the 100 per cent, at least for those families on less than \$80,000 - the CCS to help offset the cost of expanding preschool service to effectively offer longer capacity. We're recommending scrapping the activity test so no longer is there a regulatory burden that relies on a constant stream of income, per se, but targets to the child.

We're recommending things around wages so that we actually target into - I'm just listing - and I'm hearing everything you're saying, and I go, 'Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.' But have I - am I missing something? Have we not - nobody's come out and said, 'We think your recommendation will directly target these challenges which are around the unique nature of small rural.' And I just kind of want to put that back as a - do we need to hear something more than we're already hearing, or do something else?

And I think Chris might have made the point of, well, don't have grants, and don't have tendering per se, because that will lead to perhaps a party coming in and then leaving in a couple years and you're worse off than where you were before. So that's an implementation issue we need to take on board and think about. Anyway, that was my broad comment about are we not on target?

MR SOUNNESS: Before Jo and Jane jump in, I'm just going to say, I think most of the recommendations are very good. The one that really did put the wind up me was the one about getting the private sector involved because that has just failed our regions so many times. Time and time again it's been used and failed, and I was surprised it came in a recommendation because if anyone looked at the evidence of that trying to work, I can't find any. So that's probably the bit I was surprised about. But everything else you suggested, I think yes, on the money. That one was the one that put the wind up me.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: All right. Does in part - like, if I stood back and said, 'well, what is the one thing we're trying to do?' Well, one thing we're trying to do is address those children and those families who are currently missing out. So we have a whole lot of recommendations and different parts and different degrees, but in fact all the things you're saying are in fact almost the core focus of our work.

MS ALBRECHT: Is it possible - I'd love to answer that question, if I can and share our experience. Because you're right. Your recommendations, your findings, are you're identifying the issues, and I - at West Wimmera Health Service, my role is Executive Director of business and strategy. So for the last - countless years, that - and similar to Claire, our health staff are saying, 'We can't get childcare. We will come' - if you walk into our allied health building, most of them don't work on Fridays because there's no childcare in the local town. The nurses will say, 'Who's there?' You know, even if it's in a town, it's not the right hours, it doesn't meet their early shifts, the cooks are still cooking, and it's closed.

So we've decided to take things into our own hands and dip our toe into the water, and we will see where it goes over the coming years, but we've just decided that we would start with OSCH. So West Wimmera Health Service has in the last month excitedly been approved under national law to be an

OSCH provider. Which you could clearly say, 'That seems very strange for a health service to enter that space,' but what we have decided is that we can't - we can do, as Claire touched on, the recruitment and retention, but really, there's nothing to sell if you can't assure that base childcare. We approached everyone in the sector in the region and said, 'Would you come to Nhill? This is how we can work with you to get you set up.' No interest. So we're doing it ourselves.

But some of the really key - and the recommendation summary I guess is light so I can't see sort of the detail behind it - but it's been really surprising for us when you're talking about funding models in OSCH - and I know we touched on early years before. For an organisation like us to have a OSCH operating outside of school premises, because none of the local schools have anywhere we can put these OSCHs, so they've just said, 'No, we don't have the infrastructure. You have to go and find the infrastructure.'

These models are funded at one to 15, and we're saying we don't think that's safe to have one worker there with children when no one else is in the building. So we know - straightaway I'm excited about your rural models and how that can work, so I think that'll be fantastic.

We've been really shocked at how hard it is not only - we weren't surprised how hard it was to recruit staff, but we thought, 'Oh, there's people around who've worked in the childcare space. This will work.' But when you get down to the rules about your coordinator must have these specific qualifications, I was certainly really surprised. I naively just thought we'll find someone in town who wants to sign up for a diploma and off we go, and we knew they could be enrolled. They didn't have to be qualified.

We didn't understand the complexity around you can't just enrol in a diploma. You must have a cert III first. So now we're talking about, well, who has a cert III in town? You then have to find a diploma course that enables you to be present working, because the majority of them require your attendance in class. So in Horsham, they can go off and study for a couple of days, but we need them in the building. So that doesn't work.

So we got down to, again after months of searching to try and find a course for the one person that kind of met the criteria to get them in the door so that your recommendations around fast tracked - particularly for thin markets, educational opportunities will be fantastic. Because it doesn't really make sense to me that an 18-year-old could be enrolled in a bachelor's degree at university, no experience, could meet the ACECQA requirements for education, but we can't get the local kind of upskilling to have that kind of career.

We're hoping, as it was touched on before, by being a health service, trying to look at other employment, that person can work. So if you are just giving

5 them - because it's not attractive hours. So we've registered - and this kind of sounds crazy from a rostering perspective, but we've registered to do before school from 6 until 9, after school from 3 until 6.30 and vacation care. And you kind of think about who wants a job that they have to be at work from 6 until 9 and then they go away for the day and come back?

10 So again, hoping as a bigger organisation we can potentially get other roles in there so we can actually give people job security where it's six or eight hours a day employment, and that gives them opportunities whether it's full-time or part-time as that progresses.

15 But we were then really, again, surprised about the overlap of bureaucracy that sits behind this. So the governance frameworks around the national approval were really surprising to a health service, who, particularly working with the Commonwealth - we're NDIS providers and we're also aged care providers. So you could appreciate our board directors, our governance structures all have to feed into those Commonwealth departments to be approved. And I'd love to see in your recommendations it, kind of, coming out that there must be some standard governance or regulatory compliance that the Commonwealth needs as the Commonwealth, but it's not all interdependent on - depending on which department and which sector's paying bills, because at the moment there's a lot of duplication.

25 And even though we're an approved provider, literally today we're working on a governance statement for the childcare subsidy, and that really surprises me again. Why are we proving that we're a governance organisation to be eligible for subsidy, even though we've already approved - got approved provider service? And then the second level of bureaucracy I'm sure you're all familiar with, is the state. We've got the - we've got the tick. We're ready to go. We're an approved provider, but now the state comes in and they say, 'We need everything'. And the lack of consistency, or even the way the portal works, and they're saying, 'I don't have these documents', and we're like, 'We're in the portal'. So there seems to be a lack of cohesion between the two levels.

35 And so, I guess, you know, to your question about the findings, I think you're on track, but it's about really getting down to the detail, because for an organisation like West Wimmera Health Service that has many, many accreditations in different areas, we were really surprised of the level of this. And you can appreciate as a health service we can have children at acute (indistinct), we can have children come (indistinct) allied health with NDIS providers, so it just really didn't make sense. Not undervaluing the complexity that is the system, but I think it's just been a really (indistinct) experience.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's a really good example.

MS ALBRECHT: Yes. For, like, nine months trying to get through this paperwork is what we've been through. Yes.

5 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, for instance, we had recommended in relation to getting access to the 100 per cent for the 80,000, if a family's drawing on a health card. They've already gone through a process, then it's automatic. And what you're suggesting is, well, if an agency is a public sector agency, or is approved under an existing system, why do we need to have a separate governance structure element et cetera. Now, you know, at 10 first blush it sounds quite reasonable and concerning to us, and they're the sorts of examples we, you know, we're wanting to try and help alleviate.

We've also recommended an Early Childhood Education Care Commission, and one of the things that we see that doing is looking at areas of where there are either gaps, or duplication, or in this instance, could champion reforms that might seem, you know, obvious to yourselves, but for whatever reason don't get done when the silos of various tiers of government, sort of, consider the policy, which might take us into a discussion around coordination.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It might, and I'm conscious of - - -

MS ALBRECHT: I think that the system - - -

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Of it being - - -

MS ALBRECHT: Sorry, If I could just finish.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct.)

30 MS ALBRECHT: Sorry, I was just going to finish. Those barriers to entry, I just think it's really important to note because we, as West Wimmera Health Service, have nine rural towns. As it was touched on, you don't want childcare in a different town. You can't do an hour round trip, you know, twice a day. It needs to be local, but the barriers of entry for an organisation such as us that has, you know, 570 staff, has quality teams, has compliance, 35 you could just see it really would be challenging for other smaller organisations in rural towns to step into that space. So we're hoping that as we've stepped in, we will go around all our nine towns and look at areas, and how we can pick up the need, but it really does make sense if there can be 40 reduced barriers of entry.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you so much, Melanie. I'm going to come back to the list of patient people with their hand up. I do think we're making some progress incidentally on system rebuilds definitely. So I think 45 that's not one we haven't got to.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We want to hear from you. That's our intention.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Fiona, I think I'm going to turn to you next. Where are you?

MS BEST: Yes. Thank you. Just to remind you, Fiona Best. I'm the CEO of the Birchip Cropping Group which is an applied agricultural research organisation based in a little town of Birchip, 700 people in Northwest
10 Victoria. Look, great discussion, and I guess it just highlights how complex the issue is, and particularly in a rural setting where we are, but fantastic that we're having the discussion and we've got some fabulous recommendations heading to government. I guess, just a comment on the draft report, I would like – just in relation to access, the report sort of talks about, you know,
15 poorer availability, very few options.

I think one thing that could be made stronger in the report is that there is actually in some instance, just a non-existent – that the service is non-existent. It's not poorer availability, or fewer options, it's zero options. I
20 think that could be made stronger in the report just, you know, across first reading. But, I guess, the key things that I wanted to talk about was the lived experience of the Birchip situation which is, as I said, it's a small rural town, Northwest Victoria, 700 people. Outside of family daycare up until 2016, there was no childcare available, and so essentially it was up to the
25 community to make it happen. The private sector didn't come in and save us. The government, you know, didn't come in and save us, and so essentially it came down to community having to build the system – build it ourselves.

And so fast forward eight years since 2016, we have a co-located long
30 daycare facility with kinder provision through a service provider, but all of the complexities that we've talked about today are very, very evident. We struggle to staff it. Today the centre is closed due to staff shortages. Also lack of availability of spaces. We've got families wanting to access the service and there's just no space available. There's – yes, just ongoing
35 challenges between the kinder provision, and the long daycare provision, the holiday service provision, after school care provision. And so it's – and staffing, you know, moving from one service to another even though it's under the one roof.

40 Trying to leverage those opportunities to have maternal child health services functioning from the same facility, there's so many opportunities but there's so many disconnected moving parts that are making it very, very challenging. And we're an empowered community with a lot of key people really working hard to make this happen. But I guess the key point is that for the first year
45 of – in 2016 for that long daycare provision to be funded, the community paid full fees, and the kinder subsidised the long daycare which caused a bit of, you know, division within the community about whether we should be

using kinder fundraised – community funds fundraised from families to support long daycare.

5 But, you know, essentially we've worked through that as a community, and we're better off for it, but, yes, I think the point is we shouldn't have to work so hard, you know, to make it happen. I think that's the – that's the lived experience. The second point is as an employer. So BCG, we're a research organisation that works across the region, and like many on the call today have already mentioned, we're trying to attract and to – trying to attract
10 employees to the regions is very, very difficult when you cannot guarantee childcare, so I think the impact on rural progress is significant. If that is an objective of government to see regions flourish, then this absolutely has to be addressed.

15 And segueing into I'm also the regional director of the Victorian Drought Hub which is, again, a federally funded initiative through the Future Drought Fund. The key part and key objective of that fund is to build resilience in our rural communities, particularly in the face of drought and climate change. And so when I look at community resilience and farm resilience, it is about
20 building vibrant communities. And we keep coming up against this roadblock, you know, that Claire talked about, and Cathy's talked about, Chris has talked about.

25 We just – we, sort of, get over one hurdle and then we hit another one, and the communities are left having to try and piece it altogether and make it work, and stick bits together to – so, yes, I think this reform has a huge – or this – you know, the recommendations to government have a huge opportunity to make a big, big difference in rural Victoria and rural Australia. Yes, particularly if we're trying to build resilience in our rural communities.
30 So, yes, I'll leave it at that, but obviously happy to answer any questions. And I should say, I'm also a mum of four children who have gone through the lack of childcare, and now the current childcare situation, so it is a real lived experience for myself as well.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Fiona. It's terrific to get that perspective and the other professional perspective in addition. The list is building, but Fiona is next – sorry, Prue – Prue, I beg your pardon.

40 MS MILGATE: Let's see, can you hear me this time?

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS MILGATE: Have you got me on - - -

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MS MILGATE: Yes, you have. Okay.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct).

5 MS MILGATE: Wonderful. I'm a mum of three living in the Loddon Shire, in what we call a black hold of childcare. We have no childcare. None at all. I have been the president of our playgroup. I have been on our kinder committee. I'm now on our East Loddon P-12 school parent's association. I talk to parents across the board. The first point that I wanted to hit on was – that Wendy raised earlier, a representative from our Loddon Shire Council, 10 was the importance of the baseline funding. When I was involved in the kinder committee, we had to raise \$15,000, and we're talking about a tiny little kinder with 21 children having to raise \$15,000, just to ensure that our kinder could continue to run.

15 And that is – when you're talking about half of the families are lower socio-economic who can't even meet their council bills to send their children to council, \$15,000 then is relied upon from our grandparents, and our farming families. And that particular year we were hit by floods, and the stress that that brang to our communities is immeasurable. There was a lot of grief from 20 the then-president. The poor woman had stress coming from every direction, and the council – I've lost count of how many staff we went through in the last five years of council workers working with our early learning centres, because they're trying to help us find funds from a pool that doesn't exist.

25 The baseline funding we now have is vital for our kinders to stay open. We fluctuate some years, like, our intake this year in the four year old kinder program at Dingee is four children. The year before it, however, is 12, so we have 16. Whereas the two years prior to that we had a waitlist of five 30 children, and they're going to other kinders in the Loddon region, travelling over 30 minutes, sometimes over 45 minutes just to access a kinder program. I'm not talking daycare, I'm talking preschool, and my concerns are that the government's talking about this whole of model rollout of the 30 hours a week of kinder hours. Our kinder can't even cope now, let alone rolling out 35 30 hours a week.

40 It's not doable in Loddon Shire, not just at East Loddon P-12 where the Dingee preschool exists. And the reasoning is that our preschool's not part of the school, even though it's on the boundary of the school in the middle of a dairy farm. It's inside the fence, but it cannot utilise the school teachers to provide a lunch break, so then we can't even access after kinder care. Our 45 four-year-old kids come in on the bus. So they come to kinder on a school bus with the school children. They are there from 8.45 to 1.45. The majority of the mothers of these children are tertiary qualified.

45 I myself have two tertiary degrees. None of us can work, because for us to travel to a daycare currently is over 50 minutes to Bendigo, and that's from me who lives closer to Bendigo than the majority of our parents who have to

travel over an hour. I have one parent currently, who is doing a two-hour round-trip morning and night, just so her child can go do daycare so she can come home to run the school books – sorry, the farm books. Whereas I myself had to drive a header at harvest with my two-year-old at my feet, because we do not have a daycare.

And it's really hard to put into perspective some of your recommendations around making sure it's a whole model approach, when we don't even have the basic necessities for our farm businesses to be supported to run as a fully functioning multi-million dollar business, which majority of our businesses are. It's vital that we can get just even basic access to extended kinder hours so that our kids can go on the school bus in the morning and leave at 8, rather than have to be dropped off at 9 am which is – it might seem like one hour, but one hour when you're counting three days a week of kinder, is a massive gain. And if we could get them home on the school bus to then get home at 4.30, rather than have to pick up at 1.45, we're talking about a three hour gain. So it's these little shifts - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That certainly is part of our intention in our draft report, absolutely, that kindergarten, preschools be able to access that Commonwealth funding for additional hours.

MS MILGATE: I know there's been research into childcare for the Loddon region, and it's not overly feasible because we are so spread out. They've said they're going to build one in Wedderburn. That is the edge of our shire. We have got townships of Boort which has got schools, kindergartens, preschools. We've got Inglewood who's got – building township – we're building housing developments going on in Inglewood and Bridgewater on the southern end. We've got Pyramid Hill with massive industries on the northern end all who could have their own childcare centre.

However, this is the whole – it needs to be a broad canvass, because currently our childcare – my mother is two rooms down from me right now. I'm outside on the veranda because we have no service. She's got my two-year-old, because the grandparents are the only form of daycare we have.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Prue. I feel terrible pushing on through the list. Yes, I think the next person I can see is Amy but, Wendy, did I miss you, Wendy? You did have your hand up before. Do you still – have I missed you?

MS GLADMAN: Thank you. Deb, I did have my hand up. I was actually going to just comment on the – around the recommendation. The comment was made about the recommendations, sort of, leading to address some of the concerns that we've raised.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

MS GLADMAN: I was particularly wanting to strengthen the comment around the universal access. And there was a comment in there around centre-based daycare, but also family daycare and mobile care, and really
5 wanting to just ensure that it wasn't considered that family daycare or mobile daycare would actually be a suitable solution for childcare. It's one component of what would support a service system, but we know that family daycare isn't sustainable in the long-term. It doesn't provide a reliable service, and the same with mobile care. When it's reliant on individuals.

10 The other challenge, and it's probably addressed by the recommendation you've got in there around wages, is that we know predominately family daycare is performed by women, but also predominantly, if they're an individual income source, it's not sustainable for them in terms of deriving an
15 income from family daycare either. I just wanted to make those comments, but then others were speaking so well I took my hand down, so thank you for the opportunity, Deb.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks Catherine – Wendy, sorry, they are important points. I've got a couple people on my list that we haven't heard from, and Katherine is next – Katherine Durant.

MS DURANT: Thank you. I wrote a bit of a spiel on the weekend, but it kind of sums up a lot of the things that Marianne was saying, and Fiona, and
25 Jess, so I thought I might just read it out and it just covers a few different things. I'm in Rainbow which is in Hindmarsh Shire right up the top. We run a 6,000 acre sheep and dry land cropping operation. My husband farms with his brother. I've been a stay at home mum for – it's my seventh year. I also do relief teaching across three other schools in our district, and I'm also
30 studying a postgraduate certificate of politics and policy at Deakin.

I'm hoping this will lead to a career change, because I can't go back to work – go back to teaching because we don't have childcare in our town. I can't
35 teach properly the hours that I would want to work because we don't have the care. So at the moment we are very lucky in town to have a woman that does babysitting at her house. She looks after, at times, up to 10 children, anywhere between the ages of literally eight months and eight years old. She does everything. She drops kids off at school, she does kinder pick-up, she does school pick-up. She's amazing and we would be completely lost
40 without her.

She's got school aged kids, so she doesn't look after them on sports – when her kids have sports days, when her kids are sick. Her husband's had health
45 issues, so it's really hit and miss unfortunately. My mother-in-law also looks after our kids. I've had postnatal anxiety after the birth of my second child who's now two and a half. We've had – a couple of years ago we had a very, very, very long harvest that went for eight weeks. I was not sleeping. I was

not eating. I lost seven kilos due to the stress and the anxiety. I wasn't able to get respite from my kids. At that time I had – I had – then I had a year and six month old – no, 18 months old, sorry – 18 month old and a four and a half year old. I was a mess. I was broken. I was – I just couldn't get anyone to look after them at the time, so that was really, really difficult.

And I wasn't on my own. There as heaps of other women in town that are just the same as me that have gone through that as well. What else have I got? We've got women in our town who (indistinct) who can't go back to work, or can't continue their study because they can't get – they can't get care. They want to stay in town. They want to work. They want to work at – they want to work at the hospital, but they just – they just can't. We've got – I personally know a VC maths, and a VC English teacher that are due to come back from maternity leave, like, this month and next month, and their local service just shut on last Thursday because they haven't got any staff, so they can't go back to work.

(Indistinct) study. We've got other women trying to study. We are just so – our hands are just so tied. We've got women trying to start businesses that are having to work from home that, you know, they're relying on their in-laws. We need services like long daycare and out of hours care just desperately so we can attract more young people to our area. We've got a median age of 56 in Rainbow, and our ageing – our workforce is ageing as well. We need to replace it. We need to replenish it so our town can survive. I just thought I'd finish it up with that I'm new to the town. I've only been here 10 years, and I've noticed that there are a lot of women my age now who just don't want to be farmer's wives anymore.

They want to have a job. They want to have a career, and I am one of them. And – sorry, I'm just getting a bit emotional about this, but I want to do what I want to do. I want to go back to work, and I can't, and it's not fair. It's not fair for any of us. So, yes, that's – and – yes, that's all I want to say, thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you for sharing your own experience with us, Katherine. And also pointing us to those other examples about women seeking to come back to work, and obviously contributing in crucial ways to your town or to get to – further their own study or start their own business. We are really listening to you. I've got Amy and Jane, and then coming back to the Commissioners.

MS FAY: Thank you. I wanted to raise a few points. First of all, just to reiterate what's already been said – sorry, I'm just turning my camera off because I think it keeps freezing on me – to reiterate what's already been said, and the lived experience in the region, but also to link that to what it means for agriculture productivity. And I'd also like to really briefly give some positive examples of when we can access local care what that does mean for

families and the industry as well. First of all, I was getting really upset listening to Katerine and Prue talk as well, because that's also been an experience that we've had. And it's just devastating.

5 We come and live in regional areas because we think it's going to be what leads to a really thriving family environment, but I think a lot of families actually find out that it's the opposite, with declining services and outdated cultural norms that don't encourage women who are highly educated and want to contribute to be able to do so. So, I guess, one of my key points is
10 that I still think there's a lot of cultural change that has to occur. There's a lot of women talking about the impact that it has on them not having childcare, which disproportionately impacts women because of the role that we have to play in caring.

15 But there's a lot of – there's a bigger story here around the impact of productivity in regions as a whole. And I'm not talking about, you know, lower paid jobs that are not being filled because casual workers aren't there. I'm talking about multi-million-dollar industries and companies that invest in regional Australia, that need to also take responsibility for the services that
20 are here that support the people that work in them. My husband is a corporate farm manager. He's managing an asset that's worth probably 50-60 million dollars. It employs three different families in the region. We live on the farm.

25 We couldn't do that job, or we would not still be here in Boort, if we didn't have access to the childcare that we currently have, because we've both moved here for professional reasons, and we would not stay here if we didn't have these services, and the true professional organisations that we work with wouldn't have our skills without that support for us. My husband and I see it
30 as both relevant to our roles, and our family, our financial security, but also the progress of the organisations that we both – or the farm that he leads and the organisation that I lead.

35 And Giles is very invested in this topic. He's in apology today because he's working, but he's taken on the role of president of the parents committee for our local childcare, because I think it's time that men and fathers and large corporates are part of the conversation too. As Prue described, it's been too long a burden on women without support to do the fundraising, and planning, and the hard work in order to get any semblance of a service to start with.
40 So, I guess, that's one point I wanted to make. The second point I wanted to make is that both my little – my little girls are three and four, and they are going to the service that Jess had described earlier on. So there is a lot of challenges with that service in terms of the coverage of delivery.

45 As I said, we live in Boort. This service is in Wycheproof, so my husband and I spend two hours a day travelling back and forth to get our girls there. We've been on the waitlist for years and years, and before that we were

stitching together a combination of babysitters and nannies all paid, because we don't have any family locally to support our childcare. So the girls have been there. It's such a great service. I could not be more happier with the support that my girls get there. It's a small centre. We've got really up to date and young staff members who are continually undergoing professional development and learning to increase their skills. Their approach to their early childhood education is really modern, and up-to-date, and would be, you know, the best in the business from my perspective.

We've got three days now which is the maximum that the centre offers, and that's enough for me to be able to have reliability of care. So I've actually been promoted into an executive position in the organisation since having children which, you know, I think is, like, unheard – like, when I first started this journey of having children, I did not think that would be a possibility at all because I didn't have that consistency of childcare. My girls have had some challenges on the way with social and development, that type of thing, and the support the centre's provided in terms of workshopping that, providing solutions, communicating with our family, it's been excellent.

They've enrolled into doing kinder there because of the after kinder care program, so even though that's a lot more travel than our local kinder service in Boort, we've kept them in Wycheproof because of the service provided. They've got bush kinder, and a transition to school program. So, again, even though the Wycheproof school is much further away for us, we'll probably end up sending them to school there because of the integration in that service. They've accessed OT and speech pathologist through the centre. Because we've got friends over there now, and the girls have friends, we've done swimming lessons over in Wycheproof, we go to the football in Wycheproof, we go to the pub over there.

It's actually integrated us into the whole community even though it is quite a distance away from us, and I just think that looking at the benefits for us a family, it's retained us in the region. The social interaction and the support the girls have got, and the links to all the other services, that it's just such an excellent example of what we could be replicating elsewhere if we get the backend right to support communities to develop these systems, but also if we raise the profile about, you know, what the positive impacts of these services are. And it absolutely is about supporting women to go into work, but it's also about looking at the value of the regional economy as a whole, particularly in these remote areas.

Working in agriculture, our dairy farmers alone contribute over 800 million dollars annually to the Victorian economy in Northern Victoria alone, and it's all family-based businesses. So we cannot retain families in these regions without this kind of support. The other thing that Katherine said is that people do want to work. We have a slow but sure cultural change, so the next generation coming through do not want to stay in traditional family

environments where one person is at home and the other person is at work. The young people that I work with, and that I'm friends with will not stand for that. So they will either not move here, or they'll move away when they have children because that's not the family life that they want to undertake and, you know, power to them.

Lack of childcare is the number one reason why my husband and I have discussed leaving this region over and over again. Now that we've got a really, you know, adequate level, despite the challenges of travel, and holidays, and that kind of thing, it's actually now the number one reason why we stay, because just the role of – our roles as professionals in the region, also because we don't have family ties here. And the nature of corporate farming life is – my husband in particular is regularly head hunted for his skills in other rural areas, but I'm the one saying, well, I'm never moving now until the girls are in school, because I cannot bear going back to square one with waitlists for services, and also just complete lack of services in the other regions where we've been approached to move to.

So thanks very much for giving me the opportunity to talk about that today, and I really have enjoyed listening to other people's perspectives too.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you so much, Amy. We really appreciate the mix of stories or family or personal histories that we're hearing ranging from extremely worrying and negative ones to your very positive one. So thank you for that. I'm going to circle back to Jane, and Jane, if I may, you say whatever you wish to say, but if you would like to comment on whether you feel we've had some coverage of all the key themes or whether are particular themes that we need to call out a bit more that would be useful.

MS HOSKING: Thank you, Deb, and thank you everyone. It's a really great breadth conversation. I hope it's really helpful to you as Commissioners to actually hear - I think these personal journeys do really resonate, so I really just wanted to facilitate hearing from our last two parents, Trish, and Jacinta, who did both put their hands up. So I don't think I'm forcing them into it now. And then, Deb, happy to circle back to anything else at the end to finish it up. But I just really wanted to - if that's okay, because they've taken time out of their days.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's (indistinct), for sure, yes.

MS HOSKING: Yes, so we'll hand over to them.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry if I missed them.

MS HOSKING: No, no, no, no. I'm just being a bit bossy.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay, great. Trish and Jacinta.

MS FICARRA: I can go first, Jacinta. My story really sounds really familiar to Katherin, Prue, and Amy. So I am a manager of public health and (indistinct) services at Swan Hill council which is an hour away, and I love my job and I want to keep it, but I would love to work for Loddon Shire, but there is just no childcare from - I've got two girls and a husband who's a farmer but who's also in a wheelchair. So we're quite an interesting dynamic.

So basically, I have to travel for work, and I can work a little bit from home, but there's no childcare basically from zero all the way to high school - like, to school. There's no before and after school care. When they finally do get to kinder, it's 8.45 to 1.45. So if I'm travelling an hour for work, what is the actual point? Like I can't - it's so unsustainable. And just the lack of - yes, there's no babysitters in town, or there's one that is out of town so you would have to still travel to get to her half an hour. So that's an hour just to drop the kids off sort of thing, and then by 1, it's just the same.

So it's just the lack of services that just make life really difficult. So then when I do have to work in the office - like, you know, your day starts at 6 in the morning and your workday finishes at 6 at night. By the time you finish driving home and whatnot, so yes, I think just putting faces to - putting it to the stories hopefully will be really helpful to paint you guys a picture because I think what you're doing is really great work, so thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you very much, Trish. Thank you. And Jacinta, I think - - -

MS SUTTON: Jump over to me, yes, no, thank you everyone. Like the others have said, mine's probably a similar story, and I think we're also all in a really privileged spot that we are able to speak here. There are so many others that are in probably such worse positions with less help that have much worse stories with us that have much more trouble with their access, but I just want to talk to the point on page 76 of the report that discusses that ECEC is not the main barrier for women who want a job or to work more hours. And I think from reading the description, it might be a little bit of a typo, but I did just want to touch that it is my biggest barrier.

What my story, I suppose, is we moved from Swan Hill to the rural town of Boort in the Loddon Shire, and we've got two young daughters who were two and five at the time. We decided to move back. It was our hometown and we wanted to give our daughters the opportunity to have a quality education, but also to enjoy the extended benefits of rural living that we had through our upbringing.

We knew childcare wasn't available, but we didn't quite realise there was none in the whole shire when we moved, but we were moving closer to family, so we thought, you know, 'It'll be fine. We'll be right.' But the day-

to-day reality of it really sunk in when we were there. We previously in Swan Hill had access to four days of long care for both my girls and we could have picked up a fifth day if we wanted. I initially kept my job in Swan Hill working mainly from Swan Hill, and like Trish, one day a week driving the hour to Swan Hill.

I worked from home, and as I know Trish does as well, you've often got the two-year-old at your feet, and it just became too much. I had to give up my job in Swan Hill, which I had loved, and I had been there for over 11 years. And then looking for work in a rural town, as everyone has touched on, there are jobs available, but it might not be the job with your current skillset or the stage of the career you're at that would actually be meaningful work.

So I was lucky enough to secure work, but not in my local town, and it's half an hour away from where I live. So that hourly daily round trip - that decreases the amount of hours I can work each day. Last year we were able to get childcare in Kerang, which is half an hour in the opposite direction to where I work. So I would either have to work from home on those days or do the two hours of driving each day, or my husband would have to take time off work.

Two days a week my mother-in-law looks after the girls, and I've been lucky enough that my mum comes from Bendigo, which is over 100 kilometres away, to look after the girls one day a week. So as I'm sure everyone's aware, the mental load and daily juggle don't only impact myself, but really impact the amount of hours I can work.

But and obviously that's all about me, but my youngest and my daughter who's now at school often - well, it's actually a daily question our household - 'Where am I going today?' or 'Who am I with today? Who's picking me up?' Because there's no consistency in their care, and this is a constant worry of mine about how this will impact her further education and development. When they're getting bounced between families and friends.

And it's still only for me to be able to work sort of 20 or so hours a week, as that's all I can currently manage. So it's not even sort of getting full-time work, and, as everyone else, we need to use our leave or we need to rely on employment with flexibility that, again, not everyone can get, but it's managing school holidays, the curriculum days, the kinder ending at 1.45, and all these smaller rural communities at the kinders and schools, we have to do all the volunteer roles, we have to do the fundraising, all that eat into the hours that we can actually work in a day.

And I can't see myself without any local place-based ECEC. I can't see myself being able to work fulltime for at least another eight years. So that will then obviously impact our family financially with income and super, but

more importantly the impacts it will have on the girls not having the early education.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Jacinta.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Perhaps as an observation, and really it's a note of gratitude for the sharing of the insights and the personal stories. It's brought home to me a couple of aspects. One is the binary nature of ECEC or having some form of access to care which has - it either enables or it doesn't, and there aren't any other options, and there's flow through consequences for the region which is if somebody can't work then there might not be the health worker, there may not be the teacher or the other job. So it's not like it's just a single choice between you, your family, that there's a significant enhanced relationship or implication for the communities in which you're in.

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And the other that sort of struck me is I'm hearing the very personal stories is we've had other conversations with remote regional areas and mining towns in WA or mining areas come to mind where there's a very significant contribution that regions are making not only for themselves, for those communities, but also to Australia more broadly, and do we as - and this is a question for me to think and take away is are we thinking broadly around what that contribution is?

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And for yourselves it's very much an agricultural perspective, but not solely, and then when we're talking for argument's sake Katherine or other parts of Australia, it'll be a mining resources perspective. Are we thinking about what does it need to enable the particular regions and in your language the small rural areas to actually thrive, which is at a broader level than just the personal level which is what does it need to allow you to live the lives that you would like, and for your children to have access to the level of education that we're espousing to in our report which is a universal entitlement, and what does that look like and feel like?

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And I suppose what I'm also hearing is that that needs to be tailored. It can't be a one-size-fits-all that works in highly urbanised regions across Australia. There has to be something that's coordinated and tailored and - anyway, I thank you for the input, and it's fantastic to hear, and as a gratuitous observation, I think it's unbelievably positive that you've all come together from disparate backgrounds and different parts of the one area to form a collective which hopefully you get a comfort from and outcomes, but for us it's unbelievably helpful. Thank you.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Jane, I'm just going to come back to you, unless, Lisa, you've got any final - or do you have a query - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: I had one thing, and first of all I wanted to thank you all too for your personal insights and journeys and for sharing those. It's been really, really powerful. But I wanted to come back to a point - I think it was Wendy - you made about family daycare. Because you said it wasn't a sustainable option and you mentioned that educators and family daycare because they didn't get enough of a return or it was - and then they would - and we are hearing across the country that - well, decline of family daycare and there's been - you might be aware the ACCC did a report and sort of found that they weren't being - yes, that the returns weren't adequate to keep them in providing those services.

But I wanted to - and we've said in our report that we think family daycare can be an option, a very good option where it perhaps in some thinner markets it can be - some people prefer it because of the small scale, et cetera, but also probably offers more flexibility in terms of hours, et cetera. But I just wanted to - where you think it might fit and in regions but recognising that you also have need for more sort of the traditional ECEC long day care model as well. But just getting some perspectives on that whether it's Wendy or anybody else who might want to comment.

MS GLADMAN: Thank you. I can start the conversation just expanding a little bit more, and absolutely a personal experience for me, I have children who are childcare providers, and for different reasons, personal reasons, one of my daughters needed to leave a centre-based employment, and actually went into a family daycare situation.

She was an independent single person, could not afford - she had to give up her accommodation. She couldn't afford to pay to live independently. She had to move home, and we actually had to support her. So she was earning on average \$12 to \$14 an hour for the service that she provided, and that was before she had to meet all the - so at that stage then as well all of the accreditation requirements and the requirements to meet the regulations actually increased as well as the level of education and everything else that went with it. So it wasn't sustainable and it's not a sustainable model.

I think in terms of the offering of ECEC services, there's a real need to really have some sort of coordinated integrated service that actually brings in all of the available options. There's lots of different options, but they're so disjointed and hard to manage. It's really challenging, and we heard that from Melanie around those challenges of being a health service trying to enter into just one component.

But imagine if Melanie needed to have some kindergarten funding for part of it, some outside of hours school care, some long day care to extend the kinder hours. She then had to work across three different EBAs around staffing. The staff had to have different levels of qualifications. The rooms that were provided needed to have different levels of service of structure because of the

varying ages of the students. It's almost impossible for those people who are subject matter experts to actually navigate this system let alone services or agencies who are trying to do it because there's a gap.

5 And I think gone are the days where we can rely on the generous nature of an agency being able to come in and pick up this gap, and for council we've struggled with this, because there has been perhaps an expectation in small rural areas that local government will pick up that gap and provide that service. And we, as one of the lower rate bases in Victoria, we can't afford to
10 do that, but we also haven't got the expertise that we need.

And Prue mentioned that we've been through a number of staff, and it's a real challenge to actually get the expertise that you need, but they don't just wear one hat. They're managing – trying to run a number of different services, and
15 they – you could employ almost one person full-time just to keep to date with all the changes in the structure, and the opportunities to, you know, access additional funding, or making sure that we're capturing the funding that we need. It's just impossible. So I think – getting back to the family daycare, I think it's about an integration of all of the services, and it needs to be a bit
20 more structured around Commonwealth and state working together, because at the moment they work against each other, even though they don't intend to.

Family daycare is a component of a service system, but it shouldn't be seen as the answer to a thin market. There needs to be that work that you've done in
25 those recommendations around providing that base-level of service to get services on the ground, and then that funding model that actually sustains those services in thin markets that don't rely on a market-driven provider. So I'll – sorry, once I started talking about it, there's a lot of those components, so I'll pass over to the others.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks Wendy.

MS BEST: I just wanted to mention just a personal experience with family daycare. It's been an absolute lifeline for me working full time, 8.30 to 5.30
35 in Birchip; however, there's only limited places. Like, Birchip couldn't sustain its workforce on one family daycare provider who can only have a certain amount of kids under three, and so it's not the answer to the whole problem. It's definitely – it's helpful, but it's not, I don't believe, is the answer and, look, in Birchip's case we've had that family daycare provider. She's
40 been a consistent presence in the community for a long time, but in other small communities family daycare providers come in and out of the – in and out of the system and therefore, again, don't provide that certainty for families that they need.

45 But, look, I'm speaking positively about family daycare because it's been an absolute, yes, lifeline for me, and as I said, the long daycare is closed today, so my children are at family daycare. Luckily, I've got staff members who

have not been able to come into work today, but I've been able to come into work because I have that service, but it's not the answer for everybody.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Fiona. I think we're about to draw to a close, but I'll just come back to you, Jane, if you've got any closing observations for us.

MS HOSKING: I think Jo – sorry, I'm happy to, but I think that Jo might have her hand up, and I'm sure she'll do a great job.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I'm so sorry.

20 MS MARTIN: That's okay. I think we can do this together, Jane. You know, I felt a bit of a proud mother even though none of these people are my children, but, you know, we've – it isn't just a, as I said, a cobbled together band here. We – this is a passionate – people have been in this space for a lot longer than I have, and to have this opportunity is amazing. And I just wanted to reinforce, Martin, I think your summation of our session here is perfect, and we do compliment on some amazing changes. And I think to
25 Melanie's point, it's some of those structural changes that enable it to operate, or support those good intent or those good actions such as block funding to actually be mobilised will be really helpful.

30 Like, when Melanie's running a health service with seven layers of accreditation, it doesn't make operation – the operability. So that – that – those supporting mechanisms would also help us take that next step. And family daycare, definitely a great adjunct. We're talking small rural, we're not talking very remote. Small rural, it's a great adjunct, but not our – our primary service that we require to create this system that we need.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Well, thank you very much all participants. I think you've given us a very powerful, unforgettable session, and one that – with due respect to Rob and Chris – one that has particularly brought through the strength of rural women, and your aspirations for your lives and your families. And of course I'm including you in that Rob – Rob
40 and Chris as well. A very, very powerful and important session for us. Thank you.

MS HOSKING: Thank you so much for your time.

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you very much.

MS HOSKING: Thank you.

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LUNCHEON ADJOURNMENT

[1.05 PM]

RESUMED

[1.59 PM]

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We'll resume. I can hear a little bit of an echo there. Well welcome back to the Productivity Commission hearings into early childhood education and care. We've got two organisations participating this afternoon and we'll be starting off with the National Farmers Federation and then moving to the Network of Community Activities.

10 I'd just like to begin by reminding everybody that our proceedings are going live to air and so there could be members of the public observing our discussions. So just wanting to make sure that everybody knows that. The proceedings are open to the media. We're not aware of any media being here but if they are or if they're watching, they are able to engage in social media
15 and send comments to their networks.

And then, finally, to remind you that proceedings are being transcribed and for that reason as each participant begins I'll get you to say your name and the organisation that you represent for the purposes of record.

20 So, David, we're going to start with you, the National Farmers Federation. And I welcome you to do those two things. Identify yourself and then if you'd like to make some initial comments perhaps targeted to our – or ideally targeted to our draft report that would be great and then we'll have a
25 discussion with you.

MR JOCHINKE: Excellent – first of all - - -

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, sorry. I'm so sorry, David, I haven't introduced the people around the table. And I'm so sorry. I'll just quickly do that. So I am Deb Brennan and I'm the Associate Commissioner joined by Lisa Gropp and Martin Stokie - - -

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Hi David.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Good afternoon (indistinct).

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: - - -we're the Commissioners. And Lou Will, one of our Assistant Commissioners and Grace Tang is with us as well. So that's the group and we also have a few people from our team observing online and possibly some members of the public- - -

45 MR JOCHINKE: Excellent. Thank you. Thanks for the introduction. G'dday, I'm David Jochinke – or 'DJ' – President of the National Farmers Federation and for full disclosure I believe you've spoken to the Wimmera Southern Mallee Partnership of which I am the - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We have indeed.

5 MR JOCHINKE: I am a previous chair of the and very proud of the By Five Project and all the good work that we've done there. So, really, really happy that they were able to present earlier today and run through some of the issues that they see both at the regional level of our patch in Victoria, let alone what that means and how we can extrapolate that to a broader national view of the early years.

10 And I believe that Rob Grenfell was one of the ones that presented as a part of - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. He was.

15 MR JOCHINKE: Rob, being a well-respected physician in our area and absolutely hopefully demonstrated that we've been able to get some significant impact by both assisting in early childhood development from the sides of socio-economic disadvantage in the region plus identifying any health and/or education and learning difficulties that those children have and
20 getting on to those quicker have provided both the opportunity for those children to reach their fuller potential. And also help the parents who, in some circumstances, don't have the knowledge or capacity to assist with that – the identifying and helping the earlier development.

25 With proposed options on the table, and I'll broaden this out to more of a national aspect, we see the same challenges both on access to and affordability of both childcare and the ability to physically get positions available in a timely and a capacity manner. As I come to you from Dougly-Dayliss - the Daly Douglas, sorry – it's a Northern Territory – it's a cattle
30 station out here, halfway between Katherine and Darwin itself.

There is, like many parts of rural Australia, young families here that need to have access to education. A lot of that, in this patch especially, is through School of the Air, and/or if possible in their local towns. But the demand or
35 need for the opportunity to have children in a secure placed area so that either both parents can work be due to both either costs of living and/or ability to further career is limiting.

40 Noting that obviously placed based and capacity within regions definitely comes down to both density and the stability of the region to provide that support in its current status. And I do support the recommendations that do came out of, once again, the Wimmera Mallee about ensuring that we've got capacity that is – well, guidelines that can provide capacity that is suited to the ebbs and flows of children coming through their early years process,
45 noting that there is no steady number when it comes to regional areas. Because two children can tip over a threshold for family support at the daycare level, both at - inhouse as well as established bricks and mortar

facilities. But then also being able to keep the funding ongoing so that you do have those professionals that can either broach early childhood education either side of kindergarten so it's extended to be day long and/or then having it as a dedicated daycare service.

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That demand obviously needs to have support at the level where every child has the same opportunity and ability to get access to both the education and the health system. And what we've found and what I've found in a lot of the conversations is trying to marry those two together is the challenge, especially the more remote – rural and remote you go – and having to rely on the teacher or the provider to be able to help identify issues and then actually hook them up with specialists potentially and has seen children not reach their - not developed as well as they should and therefore holding them back and education. And that's – it's from not necessarily empirical evidence that I speak on this but from talking to a lot of the service providers and families essentially is what we see here to get that access.

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What that then consequently means and I'm hoping you would have heard this loud and clear from other presenters is the need to travel to get access to those facilities and those services which puts both strain on family and then career, let alone then when they have to travel distance, if the child is struggling with education that also puts stress on the family to provide additional services out of town or out of region.

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And then when we get to the stage when we are remote and children need to be – once School of the Air age appropriateness has passed and they need to go into further education we are seeing both the number that finished their higher education and also attend either boarding schools or regional centres struggle to both meet the same academic levels as well as finish off their education in the same manner. And I personally believe and what we have seen from, once again, the projects that have been involved with that the earlier we can get on to these issues the better. The better we are both identifying and also providing that the value to the family and an opportunity to the children.

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The only last comment I'd like to probably add to that before getting into some more Q's and A's. At the national level, especially in the remote settings is ensuring that – and we talk about government support – it is blind to the person who requires it.

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Every child should have both the capacity to and the resourcing to get a decent education and what we are seeing with some programs, be it threshold induced or assets – sorry, means-tested – that the children are missing out on opportunities, not because of the family's will but because of the way they've structured either the business that they've been involved in agriculture and/or the distance that needs to travel for that child to remain with their family members. So, at least, they've got some semblance of family when they are

5 having to travel to get that further education. The only other comment I'd probably make is what we have seen is always trying to add on to what we currently have. This is an opportunity with both this inquiry and also the relevance to what we perceive as a gap, to have a different vision of what we can potentially do in this space. Not necessarily reinventing the whole system but rebuilding a lot of what is not working.

10 And that can be from simply understanding the funding models, making sure that government assistance is via that one principle again, that everybody deserves the same opportunity, regardless of where they live. But then finally the fact that a lot of the funding models and a lot of services that are provided, because of the remoteness, travel and access to the students themselves – the children themselves – actually takes up a large percentage of time by those specialists and professionals. And that travel time or ability to access those special needs, needs to be structured in a way where they're able to more either readily available, deployed or regionally focused so that they're better utilised when they are deployed.

20 I'll leave that as my opening comments and hopefully that gives some ability to drill down a little bit further and to where we see the state of play.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's great. Thank you very much, David, for orienting us from your perspective and getting the conversation going. I'm not sure how much you've been able to engage with the progress of our inquiry. So if I can just say a couple of things. It's been going for about a year now and we've put out a draft report last November which is – you know – for discussion now. And I was just going to mention that and a couple of the recommendations which we hope are going to go some way towards addressing concerns that you've expressed.

30 We're certainly interested in hearing where they fall short or where they need refinement. As you mentioned we had a discussion this morning with the Wimmera Mallee group and they were very keen to emphasise to us the – not to put into one bucket – regional, rural, remote and very remote – but to be aware of distinctions and different challenges faced in different types of communities. And that is something that we hope to take on board – but we will take on board.

40 But just to say very broadly. In our draft report we do recognise that the current market oriented settings are not reaching into every community by a long stretch. And we have recommended the direct funding or supply – funding and supply in rural, remote and very remote areas.

45 And we do anticipate and we do talk in our report about the importance of engaging communities in those discussions. Rather than just plonking in a service that somebody else thinks might work. We have got some recommendations that we think will make it easier for short hours preschools

to – or that would make it easier for short hours preschools to extend their hours. I know that's only going to develop it if you've actually got preschool in an area. So just to mention that and we've put forward quite a range of ideas about how to make the pathways for training and education in early childhood education and care easier. And, particularly, we have some
5 recommendations around rural and remote areas.

So, certainly, trying to think constructively and helpfully about that area – those areas – but one question that I would like to ask you is the question
10 about distance and travel. And this came up in our discussion after – and during - after our important session this morning with the Wimmera Mallee group. We don't think that anybody is expecting to see a service on every corner. But have you got any ideas about – you know – what you think is reasonable or the way we should think about areas where there are really
15 significant distances?

MR JOCHINKE: I guess whenever we had this discussion it's always been about what is a good threshold for a service as far as what is sustainable. And for us we've always come down to a discussion around is 500 – is a
20 township of 500 about the number where we – where you would expect to a service, noting that I totally agree. This isn't about having something on every corner. It is about making sure we get access to, once again, travelling specialists so that they can reach down further to places that don't have those services.

25 But for towns that have a reasonable number that potentially will always have a background of demand so that there are places to either attach facilities or have places where we at least know that we can have those specialists travel to as a part of the early education would be adaptable.

30 So, once again, the conversations I've had it's always been around about that 500 number - - -

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

MR JOCHINKE: - - -as far as the township goes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Okay. Lisa or Martin?

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. Because we heard an example – I can't quite recall the name of the town – but they had 700 people and they were – from the Wimmera group this morning and you probably know better than I. And they were concerned and didn't have the services there. And it's an interesting threshold which is food for thought for us. I was probably going
45 to ask a similar question because as I was listening to you talking about, for instance, School of the Air, we don't provide schools into isolated and remote areas. And we have spoken with the Isolated Parents' - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Children's

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Children's - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: And Grain Growers.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Children's and parent's association. Grain Growers. Obviously Wimmera and other regional communities – regional development communities – et cetera. So there's - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And we've been up your part of the world too.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: We've been up to Katherine and Beswick.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, you are physically now, indeed – and so we're hearing these messages quite loud and clear and the question I was going to have was a similar one, which is well at what point do you say you need to have something different, which is for each individual large say property where you are? It's not going to work. The children are already attending school by distance. But distance for ECEC doesn't work – or for early childhood and care because the child is three or four and it's just not practical or desirable for a whole range of reasons as you know. So that was going to be certainly my question which is how do we tailor our answers to or in our recommendations to government so that we capture that ambition of – which is consistent – which is to centre the child and acknowledge almost a right for the child or an act – an ambition that it's an option for parents to choose, as you rightly point out many parents particularly within remote, regional, small rural areas they don't have that – they don't have a choice. They don't have any choice.

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MR JOCHINKE: And I guess to add to that that's why – with that threshold around that 500 or a township of some sort of size has a school that you can build the asset from and often coordinate with. Because not that it's a hard and fast rule but children usually have a community, usually have other siblings as well, and to have that attached or alongside the current facilities.

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And we have seen that probably no better case than what we have tried to strive for at Warracknabeal of all places – my home patch – having all of the school and all education facilities in one campus, giving that kindergarten, preschool through to Year 12, so that the family unit came remain together. So when you do have to travel it is a worthwhile investment on both the family who put their kids in there, but also they've had to travel to drop their kids off.

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5 Noting that in Victoria we're a lot more densely population and we do have school buses, whereas up here those facilities don't exist. So when you do get children together, things like the breakfast club, things like making sure that they've got the right nutrition and can have those discussions with those specialists.

Yes. You know all the information – the stats as far as giving a child the best start. It's just amazing the difference it makes.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Can I ask just a slightly different question then David? It's related and we've heard from a number of particularly regional areas and farming communities et cetera which is – well, there's a unique nature to the rhythm of our life – you know – at certain times and you talk about broad acre farming. It's all hands on deck. Everybody's – you know –
15 on the harvester or what have you and it's intense and you can think about where you are at the moment up in Katherine. There'll be certain times of the year where, potentially, roads are closed are off. It's rained in. You know, it's flooded et cetera. And my question goes to sort of – well, have you got any ideas or suggestions for us about how do you have the ambition to have a
20 national approach which is normally kind of a one-size fits all, whilst at the same time trying to accommodate the nuances of specific areas and the different rhythms that different families are working to I suppose.

25 MR JOCHINKE: I find that a really simple answer because you've just got to uncouple the principle of what we're trying to achieve and that is every child needs to have a decent level of education and access to services. So that's the principal and that's the universal truth. It's how we apply that with the funding model and/or – because that ultimately – this is about allocation of resourcing to be honest. If we get down to business. How do we make sure
30 that we resource the areas appropriately with what they need, in a way that's not going to goldplate the system and let it flex and breathe with the demand of children that are attending. That's the game here actually – to my eyes.

35 So it's being able to assess the need and then deploy resources as needed. Once again, I don't believe that you need to build facilities in every corner of the nation. Because we've already got facilities. We've already got the schools. We've already got the kindergartens. It's how we utilise them and then have rules around both what – well, even assisting – the upskilling of teachers and providers so that they have got the correct qualifications. So
40 that they can take on either larger classes or larger amounts of children and/or flex between that care provider and the kindergarten teacher.

45 So it's as much policy as it is financing and deploying that in the right manner but the principle is universal in my eyes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sure. Lisa?

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks David. So when you're saying you've got the infrastructure and the town's around 500 and you've got the school and you probably have a preschool there. And you would envisage that that would also become the provider of long daycare and then even other services. Is that like an integrated hub of services. Is that what you're suggesting?

10 MR JOCHINKE: Yes. Especially when you've got specialists visiting. For us, from experiences it's just being able to give them the appropriate facilities so that they can come up and set up at either of the clinic or the day visit. So if you have got speech therapists or dentists or hearing that they've got a room that they can utilise and/or office or even facility and it's just that minor tweak to what we've got is it unlocks a lot more potential in my eyes.

15 Now easier said than done. I understand that the rules and the thresholds are both a number of kids in class how to make sure that you're giving full focus onto the kindergarten age versus the daycare age is the trick to making it work. But, essentially, yes – we've got a lot of things in place. We just have to rethink and revision what we're doing. I don't think we can necessarily just bolt this on. We have to actually just have a lot more of a rethink about what
20 are we trying to achieve and how we're doing it with the assets that we've got? Or with a tweak to the assets but a revision of the system that we're using.

25 COMMISSIONER GROPP: And with your experience you said you were formally involved with – well, Wimmera and Mallee and is it because of different governments? I mean you've got the Commonwealth providing funding for centre-based daycare essentially and outside of school hours care and the states provide the schools and the preschool. Is that part of the issue? Is that they just – there's artificial barriers and it's a more unified provision.
30 Is that - - -

MR JOCHINKE: This is where I can get myself into political quagmire if I want to and I will.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: (Indistinct.)

40 MR JOCHINKE: So I do find the whole – the cliff-face between the two jarring – which is exactly what it is. When we've got either a state government that don't necessarily align in early years assistance. So not all three-year old kindergarten, not all delivered to the same service. Not all delivered to the same amount of engagement time, that's an issue to be able – for the federal government to be able to back it in with support. So if we could have a level playing field where all the states provided a similar dedicated commitment, and then the Commonwealth being able to either fill
45 in the gaps or take the lead that would help greatly. But, actually, having uniformity between the states of their commitment would be a good start.

And then, secondly, once again that reflects to understand that every year or even mid-year if a family moves to an area, if the family leaves an area, if we've got the ability to train up somebody who wants to take that extra step further to take on more responsibilities, or if we need to refurbish a room because we have got larger numbers, we have got to understand who has got the lead in these circumstances.

And at the moment I don't know – if you know what these ones are – I find that happens a lot. And, unfortunately, it's the kids that fall through the gaps whenever we get finger-pointing between those situations, which is why I said from the start that the more we can get health to talk to education and education to talk to health by providing those opportunities to get in front of the kids and make sure that they're assessed in the appropriate manner. And especially when it's day-long daycare that's the best opportunity to do it. That's when they are in desperate need to make sure that they've been double checked and triple checked, that they've got no development issues. And so it's an opportunity to provide that additional care as well.

So, once again, I just can't emphasise enough that the more we can assist the circumstances earlier, the better we're going to have communities in the future just because of that learning outcome. So it doesn't – I think – quite answer your question but I do believe to be quite honest, government – both state and federal and even local – to provide the service in the right location to help identify that. It's understanding their roles and then telling – well, at least between federal and state – dedicating who's going to take up the lead because at the moment I just don't see that as a uniform or universal truth between all states.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: One of the things we recommended in our draft was Early Childhood Education and Care Commission which we hope would play some of that coordinating role into the future because that is an area where you're usually across a lot of this but there's such a lot happening in early childhood education and care and out of school – well, particularly, in early childhood education and care. And it's different around the different jurisdictions. But, certainly, there's a lot of movement. And we see a real need for some entity to have oversight and be thinking about the big picture and how the parts fit together. Because we're certainly aware that it's not working for everyone very effectively at the moment.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: David, I think – sorry, David you were going to speak.

MR JOCHINKE: No, I was just going to agree. I'm just agreeing with that. Yes, I think that always in these things, unfortunately the proof is in the pudding, and that pudding is a seven to 15-year bake. And - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MR JOCHINKE: - - -yes, I just always find this conversation around – and everyone's got the best intent. I'm not taking it away from everybody who works in this and I do truly believe that everyone's got the best interests. The trouble always lies in when they're told they can't do that because the system won't allow for that quirk of – I don't know – the additional two hours or the fact that you're below the threshold of needing seven kids or we can't open until the school bus has dropped everyone else off. Like how can we actually design the system to work? Start from that principle and it just – there seems to be a lot of 'no's' – not 'yes's' – when we try to come to finding solutions and that's not because of the people. It's just because the way the system designed and hence why I come back to the full – and, yes, I have read the recommendations to date. And, sorry, I don't have them at my fingertips.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, that's fine.

MR JOCHINKE: But, yes, I acknowledge that you've been working on that. And I do acknowledge that this is a long process. But I really encourage the vision should start with that higher principle and then allow the system to be designed so that it can grow, flex, shrink, reduce when – especially in more the regional areas and remote areas – as demand is there. But always make sure that that net is there to catch those children because by heck that's when we – especially in those remote areas – one kid is a huge percentage of the population and we've got to make sure we capture as many of those as we can. So, yes – sorry – that's a bit of a ramble.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, no.

MR JOCHINKE: But I just get – I just want the art of better or to be able to have that vision of what's the principle we want to deliver first and let that guide us on what we design.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Did you want to come back, Lisa?

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I was just going to ask though, I mean, just on that point, is that we've also recommended expansion of the CCCF program which is sort of a grant based program, but we've heard from the Wimmera group, the Mallee group, about the limitations of that scheme. And we're aware of those of the, sort of, time-limit of grant funding, pretty strict requirements around, you know – we're proposing expansion and offering much more flexibility around what could be delivered under that program including, sort of, like, community-led – what – so the community kind of drives – comes to – these are our needs, and so a bit more flexibility about what the funding could provide.

And I just wanted to get your thoughts on that, but also including what you see as a capacity for local government to drive that as well. I mean, it seems that rural, regional local councils maybe have a good view of needs in their region. Have you got any thoughts on that?

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MR JOCHINKE: I'll start with the local government question first, I guess. I'm going to take a cop out, and I'm going to say it depends. There's some local government that are very much more attuned just because of the way they've structured their executives and their councillors, and to be honest, local government has – is a mile wide and a bloody inch thin with what they do. They do struggle with the resourcing that they've got to deliver what they have to. Early childhood, I'd say almost all of them would agree that they – they need to have a good facility. It's making sure that if there's a grant opportunity, or if there are that – as we mentioned at the start of this question, how do we make sure that it's – it can be done in the right timing in the right manner?

Because quite frankly, a lot of these communities struggle to build a house, let alone a facility. Purely they don't have the tradies there or resourcing there, and then we come to actually the education part, the best thing we can do is grow our own, but to do that they've got to go away and we've got to entice them back. It's a wicked problem. That's truly one of the wicked problems around the service provision end, and also who should help deliver it. Once again, I do believe it is the higher authorities that should be guiding this conversation, and providing the opportunity, and then letting the – let it cascade down to those communities, and then local government to be part of that conversation, yes, to understand what the demand is and request assistance on that basis.

30 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, David, unless you have any other thoughts for us, I think we've come to the end of things we'd like to ask you about. And I certainly didn't think your last answer was a cop out by the way. I thought it was spot on. Yes.

MR JOCHINKE: I would just like – sorry.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. No, you go.

MR JOCHINKE: I'd just like to finish with thanking you for this work as well. I think this is the backbone of building the future communities, and I think that not only is it pertinent discussion, but we've seen, and I've seen on this tour as well, if communities don't have hope, and communities don't have home-grown talent, if they can't support their own, that's when things are going to decay. So I do thank you so much for this – and putting your hands up to be a part of this process, because it is the most important thing.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you so much, David. We appreciate that, and we appreciate the involvement of the National Farmers' Federation, so thank you very much for your time.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you, David.

MR JOCHINKE: Thank you. Cheers.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. We're going to move now to Network of Community Activities. Good afternoon, Pauline. It's nice to see you on the screen.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Your mic's on mute.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: You're on mute.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Is there - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Hang on.

MS O'KANE: Hi Deborah.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Makes sure we get – that's better. That's better.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We can hear you now.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS O'KANE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Pauline, just to make sure that you know everybody, I'm with fellow Commissioners, Lisa Gropp.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Hi, Pauline.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Martin Stokie, and with Lou Will, one of

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the Assistant Commissioners on the inquiry, and Grace Tang. And we have some members of our team online as well. I think you might have heard me make some group preliminary remarks just before David, but I was just reminding everybody that the proceedings are being transcribed, that people are able to come in and watch them live online. And, yes, and that there'll be

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a transcription available on the Productivity Commission website in due course. With that, I'll invite you to say your name and the name of your

organisation, and perhaps make some preliminary comments and lead us into the discussion.

5 MS O'KANE: Okay. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Pauline O'Kane, and I'm the Chief Executive Officer of Network of Community Activities. We are celebrating our 50th anniversary this year, and we're the - - -

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, that's wonderful.

MS O'KANE: We're the recognised peak organisation in New South Wales for outside of school hours, and I guess when you turn 50, you start to look back into your archives about how things came to be. Primarily, outside of school hours services was started by a need for women to return to the workforce, and realising that school just doesn't – the school hours just doesn't fit that pattern of work, and primarily the children attend between 9 and 3. And so our sector evolved over 50 years ago. I think the first organisation was set up by Eva Cox in about 55 years ago in Darlinghurst, Sydney.

20 And so our role is to support educators that work in the sector, and we have grown into doing a lot of emotional support for educators in more recent times, because they're burnt out, fatigued and exhausted. And we also do advocacy. So we are invited to be on any panel, any discussion about outside of school hours care in New South Wales, and we also sit on a national body as the state representative which is NOSHSA, and I believe that NOSHSA has actually presented as well.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: They have indeed, and so has Eva Cox by the way.

30 MS O'KANE: Great.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: She could tell us about establishing the first service.

35 MS O'KANE: Yes.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS O'KANE: Great. And, I guess, I want to talk about, you know – I want to address your points, and your key areas that you've highlighted in the report. And I understand this is a huge and complex area, because I have spent over three decades of my life trying to explain it to people. And, I suppose, to give you a context, any system – and this is the CCS system that has to be put aside in COVID because it actually cannot respond effectively to a crisis, tells you how complex the system is. Even if affluent services

wanted to provide free care to vulnerable children, you're not allowed to do that in Australia, so it's not a flexible or adaptable system.

5 But when we talk about affordability in an outside of school hours care, I believe one of the really critical factors and issues that I want to bring to your attention is the demise of the not-for-profit and parent managed services. And unless we have a robust not-for-profit, and parents involved in running their own services like they started 55 years ago, that is going to impact affordability, because the shift that I've seen in my three decades is the
10 corporatisation of our sector. We have lost over 50 per cent of our not-for-profit and parent managed providers, because we have a rigorous tender process that volunteer parents quite frankly to not have the capacity to engage in, and nor should they.

15 If you are a volunteer parent on an incorporated association, and attached to that school, and want to run before and after and vacation care, it should be absolutely of prime importance that that school community supports those parents to do so. And we've seen a radical demise, and I will leave this sector with probably very few of that model left. And the reason I bring that to your
20 attention is there is no doubt that the not-for-profit, because of their zero and cost-neutral model of management, because the model of management is volunteers, are the approved provider, you have straight away taken out of those costs, so it becomes a more affordable service to parents. And I'm deeply concerned about access, especially for our most vulnerable children.

25 I mean, they have low access anyhow, but in Australia we're building a system, especially in outside of school hours care, that is based on user-paid, and the most affluent parents are getting into those services, and vulnerable children, First Nations children, very, very low representation. And in the
30 areas where I think it's high, it's where you have that local provider that does a lot of outreach to that local community in terms of engagement. The other thing that I wanted to talk about is OSHC perception and image. If I'm a public school parent enrolling my kindergarten child into school, I have a perception, whether right or wrong, that I'm actually going to be able to
35 access before and after school care whenever I need it on that public school site.

40 And during orientation, parents are given clear guidance that they will get a spot, but it's not the Department of Education across any jurisdiction, apart from South Australia that operates services. They're all independently run, and therefore the parent then has to go off and enrol their child in a service, and all too often to be told, 'No, there's not a spot'. And that impacts parents capacity to work, because you might leave a 9, 10, 11 or 12 year old at home on their own as a latchkey child, but you're not going to leave a 5, 6 or 7 year
45 old child. So what do you do? You're in real strife.

I also think, and especially post COVID, because we just don't have the capacity to do the research, but we have a lot of contact with the sector, because we are the largest association in Australia that supports the outside of school hours sector. So in New South Wales, there's about 1,500 services, and over 60 per cent of those services are members of our association. So we really have a good connection to the sector in terms of knowing what is happening on the ground. I guess, it disheartens me that our public schools are not prioritised for outside of school hours services. Many services have to cap their numbers due to access to space.

And, I guess, you know, hearing the previous speaker, David, when he talked about, you know, actually we have to look back designing the model so it fits with what we've got in the community, and an important cog in our sector, is actually the local school. And quite frankly, I think school should be open 24 hours a day for children to play in, to have access to where they can kick a ball as we get more densely populated, and all parents that need before and after school care and vacation care, should have access to it. It should be seen as that wrap-around service that supports children in middle childhood.

I also wanted to talk about the accessibility, because I know that that was a key point, and when I go into school facilities I see numerous classrooms, sometimes two school halls, a library, and I think why can't all of that space be made available to the outside of school hours services? It's just about negotiating at a local level to actually give the space over as a shared space to a provider. We have a crisis with children's behaviour, and I'm sure that throughout your tenure you will have heard the escalating challenges that children are facing from lack of socialisation during COVID, and that is certainly playing out with our year 2, 3, 4 and 5.

And what I hear from educators is that they do really good work with children in their time out of school, which many children can spend as much time in an OSHC program, as they do in the school. And therefore, it becomes this rich environment for play, socialisation, wellbeing of children, feeling a sense of belonging in their community. And you've got these educators that can do really great work that can actually complement what is happening in the school day for children. So I think it was Pasi Sahlberg and the head of the Murdoch Institute that wrote a paper on reinventing schools, because they're concerned about the mental health of children as is our sector.

And we, sort of, segment out different components of the sector. We don't see it as a flow on for 'here's the child at the centre of any provision', whether it's long daycare, moving into a – transitioning into school, transitioning off to high school. And it should be a seamless journey, and all of those educators should be working with the stakeholders so that we get the best outcome for children in their mental health and wellbeing. And each of those entities play an important role. It's often the outside of school hours service, because of the formal nature of school, that will pick up when a child is

experiencing domestic violence, when their experience may be child abuse, when they experience a family breakdown.

5 And it will be those OSHC educators that pick up that and try to navigate and support the family. I just feel that our sector is undervalued and unrecognised for the important contribution it plays to the lives of children. And, I guess, you know, I – you know, there's some general commentary around what is the overarching recommendations for the education and care sector, but I don't think it's strongly recognises the important role that outside
10 of school hours care plays as a component of that sector.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's interesting. Are you saying that we've got a big discussion about the early years and research around children, and although we do talk about outside of school hours care, you're saying you
15 don't find sufficient in there about the role that outside of school – I see, okay. Right. Just making sure I understand what you're saying.

MS O'KANE: Yes. If I can simplify it, my daughter throughout university worked in outside of school hours services, and she always used to say,
20 'It's OSHC to the rescue mum', because if a child forgot their mufti day outfit, it would be the OSHC that would get it together. If a child forgets their lunch, it's off to an OSHC that actually supports that child have food during the day. If the child's having a crisis because they've had a hell day at school, it is often OSHC educators that rescue and support that child. I guess, what
25 I'm saying is I don't think 55 years on from the first services beginning we're any further forward in recognising the professionalism of these educators, and the actual work and benefits to children from attending those services.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.
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MS O'KANE: And (indistinct), I guess, educational program with principles and schools to actually be a promoter of outside of school hours services, as somewhere that children can go in their community to build that sense of
35 belonging, and get that more tailored support that just cannot happen in a school day with an overloaded curriculum.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you very much. Sorry. Sorry, I've cut you off.

40 MS O'KANE: In terms of accessibility, I did want to bring up about inclusion, and the model of inclusion, and I'm sure, and I know that in your report you have highlighted this. At the moment, that system is broken because of the funding that goes to services, but it's also a complex system for organisations to engage with. And in our sector, people are now turning
45 away from the funding, which is a dangerous position to be in because it is easier to take the child without funding, and try and muddle through the best they can, because the paperwork and the administration requires hours and

hours of educators time, and it's time that they don't have in a workforce shortage.

5 The other thing that I wanted to, you know, just highlight, I guess, I'm really concerned especially, and David touched on this, about rural, regional and remote. And they are, as you rightly point out, Deborah, all unique, and all need models that are tailored to their community. But a lot of the funding in Australia is reactive rather than having some preventative funding. And, you know, I'm privileged enough to go out and visit a lot of our rural, regional
10 and remote communities, and recently this was on a personal trip, you go out to Nyngan, or somewhere in Western New South Wales, and there is literally nothing for children in the school holidays.

15 And what I was trying to speak to the New South Wales Government about is having a pot of funds that could go towards growth of the community. Really basing it on a community development model, you would go in, work with that community to maybe start off with a vacation or a holiday program which is desperately needed, and then build on that initial model. But these communities don't have the capacity, or the funding, or the resources to just
20 grow something without some sort of seed funding to enable it to happen. And - - -

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I was just thinking, Pauline, if they don't have that capacity, what's needed – I mean, funding won't solve it really, will it, if they don't have that capacity? Do you envisage some other kind of mechanism to support those communities? Or what do you see happening there?

30 MS O'KANE: What I see happening there is that two – we would have not had the growth in parent managed services if there wasn't some sort of establishment funding back at the beginning. Okay. So over 50 years ago, organisations could apply to the Commonwealth, and they would get two years of funding that would directly fund that community to build up a model, okay. And at the moment, there isn't any of that funding around.
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40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Pauline, can I ask a slightly different question, which is how to best engage parents in the process? So what I'm hearing is that there's a historical parent-led initiative of delivery of these services, and it goes back 50 years, and that was particularly advantageous because it had parents directly engaged with their children, and the school community, and it was very local. You, sort of, jump forward 50 years, and what we can see in the data at least, and you're talking about it, which is that outside of school hours care, which we think is incredibly important for all the reasons your saying, and we need to probably better reflect it in our report, but what we
45 can see the data is that they're very, very big players here, and state coordination of contracting, you know, it's an economies of scale, and it's lost the parent, sort of, interaction.

5 We're actually suggesting we need the space to better engage and give responsibility, tie in the principles to the schools, back into outside of school hours care so (indistinct), I'm just wondering out loud, and it might be anathema to your thinking, which is would it be easier not to support the parents who clearly don't have the time in the current model, or don't have the structure to have the economies of scale, they're only interested in their local school, is to have parent communities working with the provider, so that you get that buy-in from parents, but they don't actually have to be the governance for it. They don't have to run a coordinated – so they don't have to go and employ somebody, but they're getting – you've got more community engagement between the principle, the parents, the provider, the children's representatives.

15 I'm just wondering out loud. It may be anathema to what you're telling us, but it's – I'm hearing the problem from you is that parents are being squeezed out, because the way in which the states and the big providers are now offering that, sort of, economies of scale type universal across the board, you know, the Y's or whomever it might be. I shouldn't have (indistinct) them, per say, but, you know - - -

MS O'KANE: Network gets daily phone calls about parents in schools not happy with their big provider, because - - -

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: (Indistinct.)

MS O'KANE: Okay.

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes

MS O'KANE: And they want to know how they can actually take that service and operate it themselves, okay.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. I thought Martin's question was a really interesting one, and I am hearing – I do hear what you just said, that parents operating the services themselves. I actually was going to ask you earlier on, do you think that is still a sustainable model 50 years on? That was one. But then I want to add now another question which is is there an intermediate place between – it's, I guess, a version of Martin's question – between parent run, and big commercial provider run? Should there be, for example, some expectation or requirement that parents have the opportunity to engage with the provider?

45 MS O'KANE: They do, but parents will only engage when they feel that they have some control, and Network lobbied hard for exactly what you are saying. In our tender document, we actually have all tender – perspective

tenderers have to say how they will engage parents in the operation of the service, but I don't see that happening - - -

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And that's actually part of the National Quality Standards isn't it too? That there is an element of community engagement.

10 MS O'KANE: Yes, but that's not – in terms of what we were looking at is having, sort of, a parent advisory group, so that you were to have a group of parents that would talk about the quality, how to improve the operations, continuity of care, range of activities, and be given a real say in that organisation, but that hasn't come true. And, yes, under the NQS, but that can be too tokenistic.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS O'KANE: That can be sending out a survey - - -

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes - - -

MS O'KANE: And then you've got the evidence to say, 'Well, we only got 5 per cent response so parents didn't engage', or it can be meeting and greeting parents on a day-to-day basis. Look, what I guess I'm saying is that there is a lot of parents that do still want to be engaged in their local public school, and they want to have the opportunity to continue running without the threat of being tendered out their own local service. And, yes, they only have an interest in their own school community, but they invest back into that school community, and they build the capacity of their school community. And if you don't have the potential for that model, in less than – I don't know, 25 in the next decade, we will see a complete demise of the not-for-profit, and the parent managed services. 30

And so we just want two providers, or two or three providers that are going to be the providers of before and after school care, and vacation care in public schools. And, I suppose, I take you back to me – for me, public schools are 35 about local communities, and meeting the needs of local communities. And having parents from that local community involved really tailors a service to that locality, and that local needs of children. And it is the not-for-profit and community-based services that take the children that have high support 40 needs. We know this absolutely that they have a larger percentage of children that are vulnerable, children with high support needs, because they want to include everybody in their community.

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Can I ask you a specific question about the NQS, Pauline.

MS O'KANE: Sure.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Because we have asked in our draft report whether people feel that the current National Quality Standard is the appropriate location for out of school hours care regulation. Does Network have a view about that?

10 MS O'KANE: We fear – because I'm from the world before we were regulated, so in outside of school hours services in New South Wales, they only became regulated in 2012, okay. So before then, they were an unregulated - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes - - -

15 MS O'KANE: Entity of the education and care sector. There is no way that I want to go back to that unregulated - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, no. We're not – no - - -

20 MS O'KANE: No, and I understand you're not saying that, but I guess it's helpful to understand the context about having – you know, we are a newly regulated component of the sector. I guess, what happened in New South Wales and generally across Australia, we were brought into an existing – I know the NQF was new, but there was already a history of - - -

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Yes - - -

30 MS O'KANE: (Indistinct) regulation in the education and care – early childhood sector. And I would definitely agree that it's not fit for purpose in some areas. And it could have a school age care component, and that would be a much better fit for model.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. No, that's helpful. That is the issue that we're trying to get to grips with, and some other organisations have expressed a very similar view to yours there, yes.

40 MS O'KANE: Yes. I mean, in New South Wales we ask educators to do a lot around critical reflection, but we don't ask them to have a qualification. You're asking them to do high order thinking, and you're not – there's no mandated qualifications in New South Wales. And I (indistinct) that, you know, showcases the inconsistencies about how the National Quality Framework is rolled out across the jurisdictions. In an outside of school hours context, it is very wide and varied.

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, indeed. Yes. Well, look, thank you very much, Pauline. Unless there's any other points that you haven't had an opportunity to raise with us, I think we've asked all our questions now. And that's been very valuable for us.

5 MS O'KANE: The only thing I wanted to finish with is that again I want to thank you for doing this, and I just want to, you know, highlight the crisis that we have in our workforce which I'm sure you've heard, and unless we address the workforce, and I won't go into detail because I didn't want to focus on that so much because I know others would have focused on that, and I've heard others focused on it, but we really need to address the issue of the workforce to make sure that we have got a robust education and care sector, and have young people come in to the sector.

10 And at the moment, with having no mandated qualifications in New South Wales, it costs young people a lot of money to do their diploma in school age education and care, which becomes unaffordable for them in a low-paid sector.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Well, thank you very much, Pauline. You've ranged over quite a wide range of issues in outside of school hours care. And thank you very much for coming along to speak with us, and for the very sustained advocacy of your organisation.

20 MS O'KANE: Thank you so much, and I look forward to reading the final report.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Pauline.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks, Pauline.

MS O'KANE: Bye.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Bye-bye. We've reached the end of our hearing from scheduled participants. I'm just going to ask whether there is anybody online who would like to make a comment or ask a question, and I'll just pause for a moment.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: (Indistinct.)

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: (Indistinct.)

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: All right. Well, that draws today's hearings to a conclusion, and we will be resuming tomorrow morning. Thanks very much, colleagues. Bye.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you, everyone.

45

MATTER ADJOURNED

[3.07 PM]