



Australian Government
Productivity Commission

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE INQUIRY

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TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY 13 MARCH 2024

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the public hearings for the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the lands from which we are meeting today. In our case, it's the Whadjuk people of the Nyoongar country, we are in Perth, and may my respects to Elders past, and present.

10 My name is Lisa Gropp, and I'm a Commissioner with the Productivity Commission, and I'm joined by my fellow Commissioners, Martin Stokie, on my right here in person.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Good morning, Julia.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: And online we have Professor Deb Brennan.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I'm just worried we're a bit silhouetted. Are we okay? I was going to potentially close the blinds at the back here.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: I mean, so we don't look like - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It looks okay.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It looks okay? Okay.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

30 COMMISSIONER GROPP: So we're definitely not, sort of, outlines anyway. It might be better anyway. And can people see each other online? Great, okay. The purpose of these hearings is to facilitate public feedback, and comment, on the recommendations and findings that we made in our draft report, which was released November last year. Following out public hearings, we'll be working to finalise the report, and hand it to government by the end of June 2024. Participants, and those who have registered their interest in the inquiry, will be advised of the final report's release by the
35 Australian government, which may be up to 25 parliamentary sitting days after we hand it to them, so it's their report to release.

40 We're very grateful to all the organisations, and individuals, who have taken the time to meet with us to prepare submissions, and to appear at these hearings. And while, as I said, we like to conduct all hearings in a reasonably informal manner, I remind participants that the sessions are being recorded, and a full transcript is being taken. For this reason, comments from observers cannot be taken, but at the end of the day's proceedings, I'll provide an opportunity, for anyone who wishes to do so, to make a brief presentation.
45 Participants are not required to take an oath. Under the Productivity Commission Act, they are required to be truthful in their remarks, and participants are welcome to comment on the issues raised in other submissions. The transcript will be made available on our website as soon as practicable.

5 For any media representatives attending today, some general rules apply. No
broadcasting of proceedings is allowed, and taken, and is only permitted with
prior permission. Members of the media should make themselves known to
Commission staff, who can provide them with further information. And so
participants too should be aware that media representatives may be present
using social media, et cetera, and making comments on your remarks.

10 We also advise that the hearing is available online in real time for members of
the public to observe. And for those who are observing online, we ask that
you keep your microphone on mute, so as to limit disruptions. The next bit is
about evacuation, which we're online, we don't have to go through that.

15 So I'd like now to welcome our first presenter, The Honourable Julia Gillard.
Welcome. How we usually conduct, you wouldn't mind introducing yourself
for the purposes of the tape, and then some opening remarks, and then we'll
just have a chat.

20 MS GILLARD: Yes, great. Well, thank you very much. My name's Julia
Gillard, and I asked to appear today. Whilst I no longer hold the office of
Royal Commissioner in South Australia, I did conduct the Royal Commission
into early childhood education and care in South Australia, so I did seek this
appearance in order to make some remarks on things that I learned in that
process.

25 Can I start by thanking each of the Productivity Commissioners for all of your
work today, and I've had a look at the interim report, and having been through
a bit of a similar process, a bit different, but similar, but having been through
a bit of a similar process myself, I do not underestimate the amount of work
30 involved, particularly in a sector that is quite complex. So thank you for
everything that you've done so far.

35 And then the only other word of warning I should give is I'm coming to you
from London, so it's just after midnight here. So if I seek to make any form of
sense at any point during this submission, feel free to pull the plug on me, I'll
understand, but I'll do my best. What I wanted to do was to make three
observations that I think are relevant to the intergovernmental arrangements in
early childhood education and care, and I've noted your remarks in the interim
submission, and then I wanted to make a couple of more general points. And
40 please excuse me if I'm looking down, I've just got some notes to guide me.

45 Coming firstly to the three points on the intergovernmental arrangements, I
did note that in the interim report you are envisaging a system where
Australian governments, plural, play a role as stewards of the early childhood
education and care area. We, as a Royal Commission in South Australia, also
ultimately came to the conclusion that the South Australian government
needed to accept the role as a system steward, and to create some
arrangements to bring that to life.

One thing that we also recommended, given the finding about the need for system stewardship, is to galvanise everybody in the system. It was important to outline what we hoped would be a galvanising goal. And I know that in your interim report, you are looking to the intergovernmental discussions about the early years to, perhaps, generate the vision that would then guide the system stewards from then on, and that process may well prove to be a completely adequate one. But I did want to also suggest that the Commission itself might want to give some thought to an overarching and galvanising goal.

Given the lens that you are using is one of child development, which is the same approach that we used for the Royal Commission, I did want to submit that the way in which we looked at this was through the lens of the Australian Early Development Census, because it's the most comprehensive data we have about childhood development. And, yes, it is a dataset that is, at the time, a full entry, but because it's been going for a number of years now, it gives us a good longitudinal set, and we identified a vision of reducing the number of children who enter school with a developmental vulnerability to 15 per cent, and we base that number on work by researchers at the University of Adelaide, BEBOLD initiative, where they found in their datasets that that is the rate of vulnerability for children in upper income quintiles, who have had no contact with the child protection system. That is, that they are enjoying a childhood that appears to have no child protection issues, and to have adequate resources, and that's why we thought convergence with 15 per cent would be a galvanising vision. Now, it's definitely not the only way of looking at this, but I did want to, in this submission, suggest that some form of galvanising goal may be appropriate.

Then coming to the second point on intergovernmental arrangements. In the Royal Commission report, we outlined a potential vision for intergovernmental arrangements, which certainly had state and territory governments taking responsibility for quality questions, and I note that you referred to our discussion in the Royal Commission report about the glue that holds the system together, and you view that as an area that might need further work for the Commission that you're recommending be brought into existence.

The glue in our Royal Commission really struck us as so vital that it does make me wonder whether rather than delegating that to the future commission, that at least try to set some benchmarks about state territories investing in the glue might be appropriate as a recommendation for the intergovernmental arrangements. Now, that doesn't mean that the glue would necessarily be one-size-fits-all in every state and territory, but I do think that there could be some aspirations about the interconnectedness of the system, and preschool, in particular, playing that role. That might create benchmarks that states and territories can then be held to under the intergovernmental agreement.

I did want to very much endorse your finding about regulators, and the need for there to be oversight and monitoring of the quality for regulators. I too

was concerned about the very long delays in regulatory cycles, and return visits, and I think perhaps setting some benchmarks and aspirations in that area, what needs to be achieved by regulators as part of the intergovernmental agreement, may also make some sense.

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And then the third, and it really is potentially articulating through to the Australian Early Development Census, we were concerned in the Royal Commission work that the child development checks, that are offered by the South Australian government, were not routinely taken up by families once children were beyond absolute baby age, and we made a series of recommendations about strengthening the child development check system, so that there is a system of checks that takes you from zero to three, and then you've got the school readiness measures, obviously the Early Development Census isn't done every year, but at least you would be able to articulate through that to get a sense of the pathway of development of children from different cohorts.

And I do think that whilst child development checks should remain the responsibility of state and territory governments, that having some national benchmarks about the ages at which those are done, and what is viewed as an appropriate attendance outcome, so that states and territories do engage in measures to get hard to reach families to also participate in the child development checks, would put us in a much better position in relation to the information that we need to inform the work of the early childhood education and care system, and to inform regulators and others about how it's going.

And then thirdly, in terms of the intergovernmental arrangements, I noted what was in the interim report about the division as to who bears the costs of preschool, and that does reflect the arrangements that we have now. And I wondered more about this in the days since the Royal Commission, as even more information has come to light about the pattern of preschool delivery in different states, and different state's aspirations for three year old preschool, and all the rest of it.

But I do wonder whether we will find ourselves in a position, if the decision coming out of this Commission is that the cost of preschool is borne by states and territories, that we find ourselves in five or maybe 10 years when three year old preschool is routinely provided, four year old preschool continues to be provided, most states and territories have a mixed modality of provision, some of it in child care centres, some of it in standalone government preschools, because of families' demands for flexible patterns of care. The standalone government preschools increasingly have wraparound services, which mean that, to all intents and purposes, for longer hours of care, they start to look more like long day care centres, and it becomes increasingly unsustainable to have different arrangements for fees and payment in those two settings. And I don't think that necessarily is a problem that needs to be solved immediately, but I think it's one that is going to present over time. So they were the observations about the intergovernmental arrangements, the potential for an overarching vision or metric, the quality questions, the glue,

the regulators, the child development checks, and the more Ven diagram nature of preschool that is starting to emerge as the pattern of provision.

5 And then just three other areas to comment on. The approach we took in South Australia was very much to focus on progressive universalism, and so to have differential offerings for children who could benefit from those offerings more. And I do note the commentary in the interim report about how children from backgrounds with risk factors, and disadvantage, can benefit more from early childhood education and care. I therefore did wonder 10 whether in your conception of a 30 hour a week early childhood education and care universal entitlement zero to five, whether there was room for perhaps trialling some increased intensity models in disadvantaged communities. Now, we know from the Australian Early Development Census that not all children at risk are in low income communities. In fact, we know that there 15 are growing numbers who are not in low income communities, but the correlation between low income status and childhood domain vulnerability on the Early Development Census is still very strong.

20 And so I wondered whether, in a pilot trial sense, that there might be room for trialling something more than 30 hours a week, and that could potentially articulate into more intense preschool models in those states that are intending to offer them the way South Australia is intending to offer it. I also think that could link into the question of provision in thin markets, because I noted what has been said in the interim report, but I must admit I remain concerned and a 25 bit of a sceptic that we will be, even should the government accept your recommendations about increased investment in child care subsidy, and particularly for lower income families going to 100 per cent, whilst your economic modelling would tell you there are kids, and there therefore is money, in many child care deserts, I'm not sure, in and of itself, that's going to 30 be enough to attract private sector attention, because I do think the dynamics for private for-profit provision, particularly the bigger chain providers, is to go into those upper income markets where they believe that there is the capacity to charge additional fees, and where they also believe that potentially the cohort of children is going to be easier for the centres to manage, and there is 35 less social justice and development questions to be addressed. And so I do think generally that there is potentially more work to do on the question of thin markets, but one mechanism for doing that in low income communities might be trialling a provision of progressive universalism.

40 And then the last thing I wanted to say was simply to endorse the words that you have about the inclusion support issues. They came up very strongly from community members and families to the Royal Commission in South Australia. There's clearly a wide range of need there, and there's some 45 distortions, and gaps, and holes, in the current system. And so, you know, better addressing those, I think, is pivotal for many families around the country. So with those words, I'm happy, within the limit of my intellectual powers at this time of night, to answer any questions.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, thank you. That's an incredibly rich set of
insights, really, and things that we're grappling with, many of those,
preschool, et cetera. On thin markets, yes, we agree that while 100 per cent
subsidy of itself may incentivise some increasing capacity, but we also have a
10 recommendation for expansion of the CCCF to invest in those markets, and
according to community need essentially. And we've had similar feedback
from the Parkville Institute, for example, which has been conducting intensive
three year programs for children in child protection, and it's showing amazing
results. They were doing randomised controlled trials, et cetera, which I'm
15 sure you'd be aware of. So, yes, we're getting that, and maybe we need to be
more explicit. But if it's providing services in thin markets where there is
additional need, in particular, it's what is required, and it's going to require a
more bespoke approach, and it might be that communities get together and
there's a – or whatever is really required, and that's where we saw the
Commission would be playing a role in identifying that, and it wouldn't be a
20 one-size-fits-all model. But would that, sort of, perhaps be what you had
envisaged, or would see as will require a lot more money, I mean, the CCCF
is pretty limited at the moment, and a bit rigid, but it would require a lot more
flexibility.

20 MS GILLARD: Yes. I mean, we looked at the thin market question, and
made some recommendations, but obviously it wasn't directly in the
(indistinct words) the state government, and the work we were asked to do. I
think it is intellectually a very hard area. We all know the problem, but it's a
25 very hard area to draw the lines. Because a very hard area to draw the lines
between areas that parts of the country that will never be able to sustain a
robust early childhood education and care system of the universal platforms,
simply because there are too few children, so regional rural areas, where there
are children who need care, but it's never going to be something that's at a
30 viable size, and it's always going to require long term support to draw the line
between that versus where some catalytic money might get you up and
running, and once you're up and running, then the universal platforms, for
child care subsidy arrangements in particular, are enough to make it self-
sustaining. And the moral, has it been not good getting those lines right, and
35 ending up subsidising for the long term in a different way from the universal
platform, I think it's a very fine grain to get it right.

40 So I do think having a fund that has maximum flexibility is an important part
of that picture. But I also think identifying a model that we know from
available evidence would be efficacious in low income communities where
there are more intense needs, and we really know from the data at the moment
that it's very unlikely that the for-profit sector would meet that need. So I
think we could, obviously it's for your decision, but it's potentially possible to
45 carve that out as something to trial and then potentially build on.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: No, thank you. Deb, you hand your hand up
before.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, thanks, Lisa. Thank you so much, Julia. We really appreciate your engagement with our inquiry, and all the insights from the South Australian Royal Commission. I wanted to take you to the issue of preschool, and particularly your recommendations around an appropriate division of responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. We will certainly be giving a lot of consideration to what you've put forward to us. As you know, we're dealing with all the complexities of all the jurisdictions, and it's dazzling in its complexity.

10 But the particular thing that I think I'd like to ask you about – there are many, but I'm going to focus on funding – so as you know, I think the majority of children accessing preschool or kindy through centre-based long day care, but the majority of jurisdictions, actually, are having state-based school or standalone preschool as the majority form of delivery, so this is a really complex puzzle for us to think about. And I was wondering whether – and maybe you don't want to go this far, you might not have gone this far in your thinking – but I'm wondering about whether you have considered funding mechanisms, and whether you would envisage that in a scenario such as yours, the Commonwealth would use its funding mechanism of the CCS in state-based preschools. I can see a case for that, but one of the things that came through to me in your Commission, only our visits around, is how highly valued preschool is as a form of provision, non-profit or government delivered, and I would be interested in any reflections you might have about how the Commonwealth taking primary responsibility there could lead to a change in the big picture landscape of provision, and particularly that carved out area of government and not-for-profit provision, because I don't think that would be your intention, but I wondered whether have you gone that far in your thinking?

30 MS GILLARD: Yes, it's a really good question. I mean, government preschool is certainly very highly valued, and in a state like South Australia where it's been the predominant provision for four year olds, very highly valued, seen as high quality, and when you look at the data, of course, there are issues with the slowness of the regulator getting back through, but the data that's available certainly does bear out that reputation for quality. Having said that, I think as we are extending preschool provision from four year olds to three year olds, you do necessarily then confront a set of family convenience factors. I mean, we didn't do additional research which absolutely pinned this down, but the sense, from many of the engagements with families and the discussions, were people viewed four year old preschool as, you know, the year before school, so they're getting their heads around what they'll need to do with their care arrangements when children start school, and starting often with very short school days, and people need to then think about how they're going to meet their care needs.

45 Whereas three year olds, they're still very much in the thinking of the child care centre, the child care system. So I don't know whether this will ultimately be borne out over time, but my sense is that many three year olds will access their preschool in child care centres so that the division between

government preschools and child care centre provision will be different for three year olds than for four year olds where I think there will be many jurisdictions, and I would include South Australia in this, continue to be a preference for government preschools.

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So it then, particularly for the three year old area, I think becomes quite complicated as to whether or not there would be a different subsidy and pricing structure. Of course it's doable, and the way we recommended three year old preschool, we obviously noted that this Commission was in progress, so we didn't know what the long term arrangements would be, but I would certainly try to figure out costs and consequences, and those sorts of things, and it's certainly doable. But I do wonder whether over time, that is going to strike families as least fair.

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15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS GILLARD: And I think state governments will increasingly respond by saying that they do want to have more flexibility in the hours of preschool to attract – you know, they've obviously got the lion's share of the market in South Australia for four year olds – but ultimately over time, to attract families who need those more flexibilities, and then it becomes, once again, the system doesn't look that different.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, we've certainly observed that, and heard of that desire by parents to have access to the longer hours, and more weeks in the year, and so on. And we have some pretty important recommendations around that in our draft that would enable preschools to access the CCS for the additional hours. But thinking through the next step that you're suggesting to us, I think that will be an important part of our challenge in the remaining weeks and months. So thanks for laying out so clearly for us.

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MS GILLARD: Thank you.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Julia, I really enjoy the components that you've set out. The challenge that I think you're putting to us, that we're grappling with ourselves, is let's make our directions tangible and real. I like the notion around a galvanising ambition. If it happens to be the AEDC outcomes, that binds or includes the states and the Commonwealth, and more than just early childhood education and care or preschool, it extends to child services, child health areas as well, and so there's a link in with almost the early year strategy, and I like that, and that's food for thought for us. We are being asked to set targets of goals and make it clear, and I think you've got some really good suggestions in here. I wanted to take you to some of the points where you talked about the glue, or the role of the states and territories.

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I think we absolutely agree, which is after a while, particularly with preschool, whether it be three or four year old, it does start to converge and you get a sense of everything's walking like and talking like a duck, and whilst we

haven't called it that, and we're not going to force the change because that's almost too hard at this point in time, but over time that's a reasonable extension, which then has the logical point that you raised, which is, 'Well, do you have different funding sources, or do you start to converge? Do you have different systems, or can you streamline these and make them fairer?', which is to your point around how parents would perceive this. You mentioned the state and territories remaining responsible for quality, and we haven't challenged the current status quo of the National Quality Framework regulated at the state level. I just wonder what you think that means, you know, states and territories responsible for quality, is that derogation at a state and territory level from the national standards or is it, 'No, no, no. We need the regulators on the ground at the coalface, so to speak, there just aren't enough of them, and there isn't enough resources. And that's part of that glue that we must bind everybody towards'. Is that what you mean when you think the states and territories must remain responsible for quality?

MS GILLARD: Yes. I think they need to have the responsibility for quality because if we are going to build a system, so a connected system, that families can navigate, then I think that sense of connection and glue can really only be built at the local level. And you would see in the South Australian Royal Commission, we recommended that in creating the office for the early years, that there be a localised workforce, you know, regional workforce that could help with the planning of three year old preschool, but also help bringing all of the participants in early childhood education and care together to weld a sense of them as a system. And we also recommended that the state government invest in the time of early childhood educators to enable them to have some time away from direct care provision to be the glue. We got the survey data that showed that preschools and child care centres were already playing that kind of role, but doing it out of the goodness of their hearts without being rewarded for it. And if you're going to get it universal and systemised, then it does need to be rewarded. So, yes, absolutely the National Quality Framework to make quality come alive in local communities, we do think that that needs the engagement of the level of government that is closer to those local communities.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. And you've given a number of other examples, Julia, which is, and it may be incumbent on us, that we need to call this out because they then become part of that binding factor for the states and territories to actively engage in a consistent way across their relevant area, but in a consistent way nationally without letting things slip by the wayside. You mentioned another one which was around the availability or reduced take up of child maternal health checks, health checks along the way. We've been grappling with triggers for things like an expanded inclusion support and obviously a health check which identifies developmental delays, or development needs earlier on, is actually an interconnection with ECEC, and it was only really when you started speaking about these things, I thought, 'Actually, it feels bit like the approach that's taken with vaccines', you know, which is there's an important element, we're looking for people to engage with their children into the system that's provided, not everybody does, and with

5 some either gentle or (indistinct words) might be an interesting view from
view which is, you know, 'How gentle or how coercive is that?', you know, or
is it, 'You can't come unless you have had the various checks', and maybe for
ECEC or preschool, that is actually important because we need to know
before they start, or at whatever age they're coming, what are their
development needs.

10 But I thought it was another interesting example. You talked about,
you know, it's outside the ECEC framework, but it highlights the
interconnection of the early years capabilities and the need to have the states
engaged on this and not just say, 'Oh well, that's over here in Eltham, that bit's
over there, and the Commonwealth's doing that bit up there', and so,
you know, we don't need to think about all this together. In fact, they are
all interlinked. But I don't know what your thoughts were of what level of
15 compulsion or what level of support to encourage families to take up the
health checks, et cetera, were you thinking?

20 MS GILLARD: Certainly not thinking of any level of compulsion, but really
think whether it's a passive system or an active system. You know, in a
passive system you're waiting for the families to come and book in for the
check. In an active system, you are out there using different modalities to
remind families and to educate families about the importance of the checks.
And for some families, that will be as simple as getting a ping on an app that
the government has encouraged them to use to help them navigate the early
25 childhood education and care system. But for some very disadvantaged
communities who are inherently suspicious of government systems because of
their lived experience and their families' lived experience going back a
number of generations, is that intersecting with government is often a very
unhappy thing, then you would need different modalities, so community
30 workers, Aboriginal controlled centres, playing a role in reaching out to
families and encouraging them, and helping them to see the benefits of it. So,
yes, it wouldn't be one-size-fits-all, but it's really that move from passive - - -

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Active support is an interesting term.

MS GILLARD: - - - the family has to put their hand up, and go and do it, as
opposed to the system coming to them.

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Just related to that, in your remarks you
mentioned the ECEC Commission, which we've recommended in the draft,
but you said that you'd need to have an intergovernmental agreement to assign
roles and responsibility to different levels of government, and that was in
relation to the glue. But more broadly, I'd be interested in getting your
thoughts on a proposed commission, and we certainly envisage that it would
need to be, we talked about partnership agreement to assign those roles and
responsibilities, but then a role for a commission to act as an ongoing system
steward, and whether it's looking at thin markets, and having responsibility for

monitoring or reporting on it, and a vision, and the commission proposed - one recommended one that's been set up in South Australia, so just getting your thoughts on a national commission. I mean, in the draft report it was fairly rudimentary, you know, we were sort of talking about maybe it could
5 this and that, but we're sort of grappling whether, (a) is it something that could be useful, and what could it do?

MS GILLARD: I do think that there's a role for a national commission. Number one, I mean, it is surprising how much we don't know about what's
10 going on with kids. And early childhood education and care, I mean, we don't even have robust trials of things like the sequence in which preschool is provided, whether it's provided over two long days or three or four short days, whether one is better than the other; we don't have that kind of data. So I think there is so much going on in jurisdictions now, and it's in different
15 jurisdictions that one role for the commission would be monitoring that, learning from it, sharing the learning, pointing out where the data gaps are, because this should be a time when jurisdictions, who are trying different things, are very closely in contact with jurisdictions who are trying other things so that we can see what actually works best. So I think that's one role.
20 I think another role would be having some oversight benchmark functions around the regulators, so setting out what a jurisdiction should be aiming to achieve in terms of cycle of checks, how much time goes by between quality checks in preschools and child care centres.

25 You know, the regulator should remain state-based, but we do want to see much more effort and much more uniformity in that, so I think that is regulator's kind of function there. And then I also think it could be – I mean, ultimately intergovernmental agreements have to be struck by governments, but there's a role to feed into intergovernmental agreements recommending
30 benchmarks for consideration. So, for example, the commission could recommend over time what is emerging as the gold standard for supporting the glue, and then in the intergovernmental arrangements, governments could puzzle through the question, 'Are we going to require every jurisdiction to come up to the gold standard? If so, what incentivises them to get there?', but
35 at least there would be a recognition about what that standard is, and we don't have that now.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: No, thank you. That's really very helpful. I think they're the sorts of things that we laid out, and some other possible ones. But, yes, absolutely, I think that certainly reinforces - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Deb, you've got your hand up. I had a question,
45 but why don't you go first.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, thank you very much. No, those suggestions are very much in line with our thinking. Thank you, Julia. And

also with some of the ideas we're in the process of hearing at the moment.
And of course, as Lisa mentioned, we have met with the new - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, OECD.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: - - - Office for Early Childhood
Development in South Australia, and it's new head, so that's wonderful to see
all of that moving along so quickly. But I think that some of the things you
outlined there in possible roles for the commissioner are very much in line
10 with our thinking. The first one you mentioned there about learning in a more
systematic way about what is actually happening in Australia, and in the
different jurisdictions, what is the best practice in particular areas,
for example. But, yes, we're kind of thinking of that in a way about
systematising the knowledge we have about the federation, and actually using
15 the federation as a laboratory. That is happening now, but we're not
approaching it in a systematic learning and sharing of information way, so
that's very much in our thinking. And that, I think, builds on the idea that
we're not rushing into tell jurisdictions they have to do things differently in
20 2025. I think it's actually really important to respect those historical and
cultural differences that exist, but that's not to say that they are cemented for
all time, and I think that process of learning systematically and reflectively
could be immensely valuable.

25 One interesting question that's come up for us – again, it might be a bit outside
the thinking that you've done, and feel free to say so – but we recommended a
commission and we called it an early childhood education and care
commission, and a couple of significant players have come back to us and
said, 'It should be broader. It should be an early childhood commission, or an
early child development commission', and then again we've had people
30 saying, 'No, this is our opportunity to really work with ECEC', and I've found
myself bouncing around in thinking through those ideas and what we're keen
not to do is to once again silo ECEC because your work in the Royal
Commission, that's more than anything else. It's shown us how porous the
boundaries really are when we think from a child and family perspective. On
35 the other hand, ECEC itself is a very big system and it is our remit. So if you
have any ideas about that, I'm sure we would all really value them.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: How big an ocean do you think we should boil?

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: To boil, yes.

MS GILLARD: Sorry?

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: How big an ocean do you think we should boil?

MS GILLARD: Look, it's a really hard question. I mean, my sense is there is
so much to do in early childhood education and care that it makes sense to
have a commission in that area. But to style that as working in cooperation
with, and then you fill in the ecosystem from there really don't you because

5 you've got the education system, and there's all sorts of federal state agreements around education, and various bodies that bear down on that question, and then the health system for your maternal child health. And of course, we know what happens in pregnancy, has so much power for what happens afterwards. But I think if you broaden too much to encompass everything in health, everything in education, you know, homelessness, insecure housing, all the rest of it, it would get to a stage where people couldn't - - -

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I think that's – yes, sorry. I am coming to the view that that's right, and our starting point in our draft report is the correct one. But I like your use of the word 'style' there. It is about how we style those connections, and how we acknowledge and draw them into our account both of the commission and of the system that we envisage, but
15 thanks, I thought it would be good to get your thoughts on that one.

MS GILLARD: If I could add on the learning system question that you raised that there is so much going on, and so much to learn from, one of the things we certainly stressed in the interim report, and reflected in the final report, is
20 in Australia and overseas there is so much more research being done on child development, you know, the biology of what is going on in children's brains, and big data models, and all sorts of new imaging techniques, I think are going to give us – you know, over the next decade I think we will see a revolution and understanding about childhood development and the insights
25 from that new science. We want a way of leveraging that into the system because it's only going to be effective if it's then understood and flows through into the practice of early childhood educators and carers, and the knowledge of families.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Indeed.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's interesting, as you were talking there, Julia, around what might happen from a childhood development understanding view over the next decade. I just wondered if I could be a little bit cheeky and just
35 sort of say, well, if you project it forward 10 years, and all the things that you've recommended in your commission, all the things broadly that our draft report has talked about, come to fruition, have we solved everything in 10 years' time or is this just, as some have said in response to our report, 'This is a good first step. It will take us on the journey, but it's not the end
40 destination', and I suppose I'm grappling with, 'Well, how much do we want to define what the world should look like in 10/20 years' time?', to the point of the, 'We'll know much more over the next 10 years'. So do we define it now or is it really critical and important to set those visions of that longer term ambition of where we want to go, and given your unique position, I thought
45 I'd challenge and tax your late evening cognostications?

MS GILLARD: Yes. Look, I think you can set an enduring vision, but it is inevitable how questions how to get there will change over time. Because we'll learn more, the science will tell us more, we'll learn more by doing, and

we'll get better at it. So I don't think you make the best recommendations you can about the intergovernmental structures and the agencies and the benchmarks, and all of that kind of stuff, but inevitably, over something like a 20 year cycle, they're going to be refined over time and that's a healthy process. But I think you can set a true north that would endure for a long period of time. I mean, that's what we tried to do by saying – and the science is not precisely available, but the concept was – you know, we want every child to have the supports that the child needs so that developmental delays and vulnerabilities are addressed to the maximum extent possible before they commence school so that they have the most successful schooling journey. And we defined that as best we could as the 15 per cent because that was the best data available to us. So I think a vision like that can endure for a long period of time.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Look, I'm cognisant of the time, and I don't want to keep you away from sleeping. But I've got one quick question, because we've primarily focused on the child, and we've tried to bring that to our inquiry and our report, but some are saying we should have put more emphasis on gender equality, on labour force participation, and I guess just getting your thoughts on that because you've dealt with that in your work, and I guess where there may be tensions. Sometimes they're not tensions, sometimes they're complementarities, but just your perspective, you know, some advice for us on that, I guess.

25 MS GILLARD: Yes. I mean, in many ways that it is a far harder question for you than it was for me in the South Australian Royal Commission, because the, sort of, big levers, you know, child care availability and costs, things you're working through with a child care subsidy and all the rest, you know, those big levers that have got implications for female labour force participation are not in state government hands. I mean, I think your remit really does take you to trying to maximise both the developmental outcomes for children and the labour force overlay which, as we all know, because of the unequal burden of care and responsibilities is predominantly about women's labour force participation. You know, those things can theoretically be in tension, but I think they're possibly less in tension than people, sometimes imagine.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, thank you very much. That's been a fabulous session.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And thank you for staying up so late to talk to us. But, yes, thank you and thanks for your interest throughout our inquiry.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, indeed.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, absolutely.

MS GILLARD: Thank you. Well, good luck with everything to come. I know what that final writing sprint is like.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, yes.

MS GILLARD: All the power to you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay, thank you.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you so much, Julia.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Good night, good night.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

MS GILLARD: Thanks. Bye bye.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Bye.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Bye.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I don't know whether we are silhouetted.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: It's fine on mine.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's fine on yours, because on ours it's appalling.

30 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, we're going from a - - -

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: (Indistinct words.)

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, exactly, so I don't know what other people can see.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Former Prime Minister.

40 MR WEATHERILL: Is this where you want me?

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: That's perfectly fine.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Prime Minister or Premier.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Is it worth closing the blinds?

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, maybe. We're a bit - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I'm terribly sorry (indistinct words).

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Maybe just (indistinct words.)

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Does Jay come in straight away now?

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Jay's here.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Or do we just stay in the call?

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: I think so.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Hello, Jay.

MR WEATHERILL: Hello.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Hi. I can't hear you, but now I see where you are, yes.

MR WEATHERILL: Can you see me now?

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Now I can kind of see you, yes. Hi. Yes, great.

MR WEATHERILL: Hi, how are you?

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We should have invited you in so that you could at least see Julia. I know you could hear her.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: She's behind the – I don't know whether she can - - -

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I think she might have left the meeting.

MR WEATHERILL: She's gone, she's frozen.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: She's frozen.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I think she's frozen, I think she's gone.

40 MR WEATHERILL: I'm actually in London a few weeks, and I've just been texting her to arrange a time to catch up.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: There you go.

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, you could have done it here.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes, could have made final arrangements.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: You could have used the social chat.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Exactly. Check diaries.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: I don't know if we're still recording, are we?
Yes, we are.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, we're very privileged to have such esteemed people, two honourable people.

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: I know, two honourables in a row.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We have a lot to learn from the wisdom of those who have lived and breathed intergovernmental agreements arrangements.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: So you want me to fire away, or how do you want me to do it?

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, just before you do fire away. I mean, you know the three of us.

25 MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Deb's online up there. But before you get going, could you just give your name, and all that, just for the purposes because this is being transcribed.

30 MR WEATHERILL: Sure.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And we could have members of the public observing.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And/or media.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And media could be observing as well, just to let you know.

40 MR WEATHERILL: Sure.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And a transcript's being taken.

45 MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And will be on our website as soon as practicable. So if you just then make your remarks, and then we'll have a chat.

MR WEATHERILL: Now, how long do you want me for?

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I think we've got at least 45 minutes, but we've –
yes.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We have generally around 45 minutes.

MR WEATHERILL: But how long do you want me to – because you've got a
bunch of questions, I presume.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: I don't know, we - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We do, it depends on - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: You say what you want to say, because we're
here to hear from you primarily, we're not here to listen to ourselves.

MR WEATHERILL: All right. My name's Jay Weatherill. I work as a
director at the Minderoo Foundation, and I lead a campaign called Thrive by
Five. And as you'd be aware, we've been campaigning for system change for
early childhood development over the last three and half years now. And
obviously, your work - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: If Jay is speaking, I can't hear him.

25

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

(Discussion ensued re. audio malfunction.)

30

MR WEATHERILL: So it's worth, I think, starting with what the size of the
prize is here, and I think it's nothing short of one of the biggest social
economic reforms that the Commonwealth has undertaken in partnership with
the states. I think it transcends NDIS, and I think it is in the league of
Medicare. So I think that language that was used in the terms of reference is
not an exaggeration, I think it's a massive reform. And arguably, if you get
this right, it intrudes on everything. It's about not only the well-being of every
citizen, it's about their health trajectory, it's about their economic trajectory,
and that obviously in aggregate means the prosperity of the nation, so it's a
massive thing.

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And while we start, our perspective is on everything, so everything that's got
anything to do with children from birth to five, including parental leave, all
that through to the child protection system. We sort of do understand that this
is an inquiry which is fundamentally focused on ECEC, but even in your
interim findings, I think there's an acknowledgement that is a much bigger
thing than just that, and I know that's what you've been grappling in the
questions you've just had with the former prime minister. So I just wanted to
probably start on the things about the draft report which we think are
incredibly valuable and paradigm shifting, because I think they're the things –

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and I suppose our first thing is, 'Don't do any (indistinct) for those things, because they're all great', and then I want to talk about some of the things that we think could change to make the report even stronger, so that's the way I want to, sort of, handle it.

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So the first thing which is quite powerful, I think, is that the report focuses on children. I don't think that's necessarily what the child care system has actually been about. It has over time. I mean, the last set of reforms under the former prime minister, 15 years ago now, did start to privilege quality and so it became more about children. But still, the fundamental logic of the system was about parents. So I think that's a really important paradigm shift, and that informs your discussion about quality because always keep quality front and centre. It also informs the policy recommendation you make about the activity test.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: Because if it is about children, then how can it be the case that what the parents get up to should have anything to do with the access to it.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.'

MR WEATHERILL: But once you do that, once you actually change the nature of the system in that way, it becomes a very different system and it will have to look very different. It's going to pop up in a whole bunch of neighbourhoods which probably haven't had this sort of offering before. And it's going to look very different from probably what you might say the vanilla child care offering that might be just about getting parents to work so they can just juggle work and family life. So that's the first thing, and I think that's really powerful and something that we'd like you to keep hold of.

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The second thing is the specific attention you pay to disadvantage, in particular Aboriginal disadvantage. That's obviously a powerful part of the report. The next thing which I think is very important is the specific attention to disability, and I want to refer to that in a bit more detail. And then an acknowledgement of the gender equity question. I mean, there's pretty much a consensus that the single biggest contributor to disparity in economic opportunities between men and women is essentially unequal sharing of care and responsibilities and a fundamental element of that is what happens with child care. So basically, if gender equity is the question, it's impossible not to consider child care. So all of those things have been touched on in the report, and we think are really powerful.

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In terms of implementation, there's been a whole powerful set of recommendations. The most profound one is the acknowledgement of the inadequacies or limitations of the current market model, and the need for there to be a more substantial role for government in delivering outcomes rather than just standing back and saying, 'Here's a voucher. Go and shop around

and find what you can get out of the market'; so that's powerful. The acknowledgement of the crucial role of the workforce, that's powerful. The acknowledgement of the importance of service integration, so the notion that there are other systems out there which are intimately related to this system, and there has to be a way of connecting them together, or as Julia Gillard would say, the glue that brings them all together.

And the other thing which I think is very powerful is the notion of a guarantee. So it's not just enough to say, 'Here's the voucher. Go and shop for what you want', there's the notion that the government will find a way of guaranteeing a certain minimum standard offer, and I think that's really powerful. And then finally, the need for an institution to drive reform, and you talked about the ECEC. So they're the things that we think are really powerful. So that's what you did, and they're the things we're really keen to make sure are not lost.

The next thing I wanted to go to are the two important things we think have happened since the interim report. One is the handing down of the report from the NDIS review.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: And in particular, the findings or the recommendations around a continuum support for children under the age of nine for their families. I think without simplifying it too much, this report can come down to one thing, and that is essentially kids with developmental delays, in particular, Autism, and the inadequacies of the current system, and being able to grapple with that, and the importance of there being a system of developmental support in the first five years. The whole of this challenge has been driven by the inadequacies of an early childhood development system for small children. But this is what you get - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sorry, Jay. I just have to say the sound is extremely difficult for me. I am getting the gist.

MR WEATHERILL: Okay.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: But I didn't see what the point you picked up, and I didn't quite catch - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It was the NDIS Review, Deb.

MR WEATHERILL: Okay. Yes, it was the NDIS Review. Sorry, I'm a bit of a - is that - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's much better.

MR WEATHERILL: Sorry, I'm a bit of a low talker. I tend to - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's okay. I'm so sorry, I don't want to miss it.

5 MR WEATHERILL: No, no, no worries.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Deb, we're going to have a go at unplugging - - -

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: We've unplugged the screen.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: We'll have to do that.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Just rotate the projector.

15 MR WEATHERILL: I see.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It's over there.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: The sound's the most important anyway really.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No, they're back on the screen, Nick.

25 UNKNOWN SPEAKER: That's good.

MR WEATHERILL: There we go.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: There we go.

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: There you go.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Almost.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: The screen is really important for the three of you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Looking good.

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, but not if we're talking with Jay.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: That's right, so you can see here. Mark, how's that visual?

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: How's that, is that - - -

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: It looks good. We can see the three speakers.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes. Great, okay.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: How's that?

5 UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Jay, can you do a sound test with Deb.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Somebody's on - I'm not on mute, these guys are on mute.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Jay, can you do a sound test with Deb, please.

15 MR WEATHERILL: Okay, Deb, how's that? Does that sound all right?

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That's really good, thank you.

MR WEATHERILL: Excellent, no worries.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, thanks very much.

MR WEATHERILL: So what I was really saying is that there are two things that have happened since the interim report, which I think are really powerful. One is the NDIS Review coming down, and the fundamental finding there is that foundational supports need to be built into the system. And really, I think that's just another way of saying, 'Create a proper early childhood development system', and everybody's got different ways of describing these things. But if you listen to, say, for instance, Professor Andrew Whitehouse, he would say that the fundamental issue is intervening early with support for parents and children. Not some sort of magic therapy that happens, you know, at five years of age or, God forbid, 10 years of age where you're trying to fix something.

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, it's too late then.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes, it's too late, and it's - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: For what Andrew's talking about.

40 MR WEATHERILL: Yes. And so it's really just about ensuring that people have the skills and capabilities to ensure that their child can be the best they can be. It's not about fixing children or trying to cure, sort of, Autism, but it's about making sure that developmental delays, to the extent it's possible, are addressed. So that's really important. And I'll circle back to this, but it sort of answers that question you were debating with Julia Gillard about the breadth of the ambition for the system, so I'll make a point about that in a moment.

45 But the other major thing that occurred has been the ACCC findings.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: And I think the powerful insight in the ACCC findings has been the sort of peculiarity, if you like, of the child care market. It doesn't look like the sort of market that we're typically used to. So price seems to be
5 a really limited mechanism for causing choice between consumers, competition doesn't seem to have the sort of effect on price that you might imagine it would, and it seems to resolve itself into this notion of a series of quite discrete geographic markets which are more related to the convenience and the circumstances of families than it does – there's not some global
10 market in the way that you might imagine there might be in some other context. So I think they're two really important things that have occurred in the meantime.

So I just want to go to the things that we think could be focused on which
15 would improve the report, and allow it to even be a stronger piece of work. But I should say we start at very good – I'm trying to move between very good and spectacular, I suppose.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: (Indistinct words) star.
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MR WEATHERILL: But I think the price is so important that it's worth reaching for that.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.
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MR WEATHERILL: Because I think it's only the things that we grapple with in government, and often it's governments that end up scooping up the, you know, the detritus of failed systems because we haven't intervened early. So all this talk about NAPLAN results and slipping down the international
30 PISA scales, you know, you're kidding yourself if you start that at age five. The child protection systems which are absolute in despair, they are bottomless pits of resources with questionable results for children. We know what's happened with NDIS, this service system, which is a relatively new one, it's just crystallised a whole lot of need that's already out there. It's now
35 just found a place where people can write cheques to address it. So all the things that government worries about and thinks about, there are some really powerful ways in which you could make a contribution to improving that by getting this system right, so I suppose that's the first thing.

So the five big things that we want to focus are, (1) setting a long term vision for early childhood education and care, and that's as part of this broader early
40 childhood development system. And I think this debate you were having with Julia Gillard about the risk of the boiling the ocean versus actually doing something practical, I think you can have your cake and eat it. I think the way
45 I like to think about it is, 'Don't sacrifice the breadth of the vision for the fact that it needs to be built out in sequences'. Because I think there's a risk of - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Could you say that sentence again, please, Jay. Don't sacrifice?

MR WEATHERILL: Don't sacrifice the breadth of the vision.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

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MR WEATHERILL: Because you can't build it out tomorrow.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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MR WEATHERILL: I mean, that really just becomes a question of sequencing and timing, rather than a question of reducing the size of the ambition. And if there was anything about the report that I notice - I think you were grappling with that, you were trying to say, 'Well, we got all these capacity constraints where', so a lot of the recommendations were hemmed in by what you thought was feasible and practical now, and I think that's necessary, and I think one of our other recommendations is you do have to set out that thing.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, I liked the timeline and staging, and some targets that you've given in that table.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes, and reasonable people would disagree about what should come first, and what the timing should be, and how much money there is to do these things, but the notion of it I think is the critical thing.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: And you can make a respectable case for saying wages should be first cab off the rank for the Commonwealth if they're worried about workforce participation, and I understand the Commonwealth are deeply engage in that conversation at the moment anyway.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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MR WEATHERILL: So that sort of makes sense, because without a workforce you don't have the raw material to build this system. So you can see how these things all flow from one another. But I think it would be –and because you're the Productivity Commission, so there is a question of, you know, obviously you're trying to weigh not the benefits, but the costs.

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The costs avoided are extraordinary, you know, this thing, the NDIS, the child protection system. We are writing extraordinary cheques investing in what I would argue are failed systems. You know, a ridiculous number of children are scoped into child protection. One in four kids in South Australia, under the study that Rod Glover did the work on, has got a child protection notification. It's an insane – and that sort of tells you that when you don't have a place, when you don't have a developmental system, tertiary models will actually take over. They will be the systems that become the wicketkeeper for failures in other parts of the system, and driving

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extraordinary costs and relatively poor outcomes compared with early intervention.

5 So I suppose that's the first thing, a long term vision for ECEC as a foundation for the broader system and with sophisticated links with child maternal health, and all the other incidents of support and assistance for children whether it's disability services, allied health, parental support, all of those things could be connected together. The second thing that we wanted to emphasise – and this might be more a semantic question – you use the phrase 'stewardship'. If
10 stewardship means strong public management of the system with a focus on outcomes, then that's fine. If stewardship means a lesser degree of intervention and more guidance, I would argue that the current system is a pretty light touch system. I mean, there are some strong regulations that ACECQA oversees, but their enforcement is problematic because nobody
15 actually thinks they're in the states, you know, only really have an imperfect set of commitments to enforcing those things. So as a Commonwealth institution where the states effectively - it wasn't sort of assisted by the defunding of a national partnership which was to help the states implement that, so I think there's a problematic relationship there.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: so we are moving from that, but I think that if you go back to the essential logic of the system, and that is that there's this notion of a
25 guarantee, it's not sufficient to say, 'We're going to hope that the market delivers this' or 'We're going to make some changes that we expect are going to happen', and I suppose if there's a criticism of the draft report from mine is that there are some big assumptions about whether policy changes will cause things to happen. So one example with, say, the activity test.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: There's an assumption that that will cause a supply response in certain disadvantaged communities and, to a degree, ameliorate
35 the thin markets that exist in some of the outer suburban areas. I think that's a pretty heroic assumption, and without a strong – I mean, it may prove to be true, but I think there needs to be some other mechanism to monitor that, to drive it, and then do the next thing if that hasn't happened, so it's a question of accountability, and who's got that accountability, and who will be driving that,
40 and I suppose it might take use back to the ECEC Commission and the special role it plays in actually observing and monitoring, and then developing the next idea. You know, this notion of the learning system, it's always trying to improve itself having regard to the outcomes that it set for itself. So that's the second major point.

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The third point is really the need for legislation. We think legislation is important to really establish some of these basic concepts. I think because some of these concepts – we have been dealing with them now for many months, and so they'll become second nature to you, but they're probably more

profound than we're probably recognising, and they probably have to be written down somewhere and turned into something which is solid. So even the notion of early childhood development is not really a concept which manifests in any – it's in policies, but it doesn't - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So sorry, Jay. Even the notion of?

MR WEATHERILL: Early childhood development is not made concrete in legislative terms anywhere. I mean, we've got lots of legislation that refers to education, and child protection, and ECEC, and infant maternal health, and all of the things that might comprise early childhood development, but I don't think there's anywhere that anybody said out loud, 'There's an overarching concept of early childhood development', which is the sum total of those things, and other things as well like the systems of tax and transfer which impact on family decisions like parental leave, et cetera. So what is the overarching framework of policies that bear on children and families, and we would argue that that then flows into a commission. And the broad notion of a commission, while its focus might be ECEC, and as was rightly acknowledged, there's enough work to do there, it's worth bearing steadily in mind that it sits as part of the system and it's a foundation for that broader system.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Can I just ask you about legislation. Would you see that as being you have perhaps those concepts in an ECEC Act for a statutory agency, is that what you envisage or is separate again?

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MR WEATHERILL: I mean, we're proposing – and we're about to publish an exposure draft about this very question, which essentially does a number of things. It creates this notion of early childhood development, it establishes a guarantee for children of the type we've been advocating for, it establishes an early childhood development commission. So that would be a piece of legislation that essentially enshrines all those things.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

MR WEATHERILL: And the next issue that I wanted to touch on was the question of providing a detailed pathway to ensure universal access to early childhood education commission. So this is the notion of a stepped-out - - -

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, I really like the table that you submitted. I think it gives some very clear deadlines, you know, it's one page, but for a complex system, so it's inevitably high level, but giving very clear elements of what parties need to be involved realistically around how long it's going to take to do various things like agreed legislation that probably, even if it's at a federal level, needs to include the states and the various roles they play.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes. So we think that stepping it out in that way shows you how large the job is, really, and we're trying to think of what's – I know what's ringing in your ears and saying, 'With us is the capacity constraints

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issue' and, you know, maybe there'll be quite a big supply response to an improvement in wages and conditions. And don't underestimate the supply response that might emerge just because of this exercise.

5 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: You know, people don't want to work in failed systems.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: And a lot of people have left this system because they've felt that it hasn't had the support. Because nobody goes into early childhood education and care to become rich.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: But I think the wages just add insult to injury. What they are worried about, and more importantly, is whether they can engage in their professional practice in a way which actually allows them to meet the needs of children. That's the thing that drives them out of the sector, they don't want to be professional compromised by being in a failed system. So this whole exercise will have its own effect on supply. But we were then thinking, 'What's the next that could be done, which is sensible, which is another step along the pathway?', and we think it's a new national agreement on three and four year old preschool. And the reason why we focus on that is that, (1) there's always a lot of momentum in states and territories on the question; (2) to the extent that there is capacity in the system, you know, there is a bit more capacity in that system than perhaps more broadly, so the challenges – I mean, the challenges are everywhere in ECEC, but it's a system that's already got some institutional weight, if you know what I mean. To some degree, it's a really strong place from which to build out because it always privileges quality, the paradigm is already development and education rather than workforce participation, so it's a good place from which to build out. I mean, it's said internationally that one of the strengths of the Australian system is that we have focused quality, so in a relative sense - and there are some quality issues, but compared with some jurisdictions we're better than some jurisdictions, so we've got that starting point. And it does seem to me that you're kicking with the breeze a bit here with states and territories that are already - so they're leaning into it, they're doing that for - - -

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: For the 30 hours, you mean, some of the expansion in the three year old - - -

45 MR WEATHERILL: Well, South Australia, for instance, the Royal Commission. I've just been in Queensland, there's an active dialogue around three year old preschool there, but each jurisdiction is – and I know that here they're actively thinking about it in Western Australia – but each jurisdiction is very different. So we've got Western Australia at one end of the spectrum, and we've got Queensland at the other end of the spectrum, and so a national

agreement would allow you to enter into bilateral agreements between the states and territories and the Commonwealth in a way which could allow you to strike deals with regional differences, and I think there's something very powerful about acknowledging difference as it emerges across the nation; just the historical difference, but obviously Peppermint Grove is going to be very different from Bidyadanga here in Western Australia. You know, one model, you could build off quite a traditional child care model in Peppermint Grove, whereas in Bidyadanga it might be the Aboriginal controlled health care service that becomes the more sensible place to begin. But that's not something the Commonwealth really are very good at. That's something they need to be in dialogue with jurisdictions about, because they understand place more effectively.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And an aspect of what you're suggesting, Jay, is giving flesh to the bones that we agree, which is, (1) we don't think the Commonwealth can do this without the jurisdictions, and the jurisdictions need the Commonwealth to actually bring it together. We thought a national partnership might be a logical way, but it's not the only way you could do these things, but coming together, and then it comes down to specifically what should what look like, and feel like, and that will ultimately be a discussion at that jurisdictional level, and I think it's good for us to be able to take the various suggestions and think about, 'Well, what is the ambition? Where's the direction that we can suggest?'

MR WEATHERILL: I mean, there's a tension between piecemeal reform that just is going to end there, and milestones along the pathway to the ultimate reform, so that's why a direction between the vision and the steps.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, and your legislation is, sort of, the grander ambition.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: So in our report we talked about the children who are missing out, but you're saying it's the children who are missing out that look at it, maybe initially, at the preschool level, is that what you're essentially saying?

MR WEATHERILL: Yes. I mean, I've always thought all service systems are more powerful when they talk about all children. So in a sense, your report talks about all children, it just finds that the ones that are missing out under the current system are disadvantaged children.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: But the vision is about all children. And of course, you know, you'll find some children missing out in Peppermint Grove.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Absolutely.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Exactly.

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MR WEATHERILL: And this is what we found when we did the work with the Canadian scientist, James Fraser Mustard. He said that the power of universal systems are important because while, in disadvantaged suburbs, there will be more developmental delay, a developmental vulnerability, there'll be proportionately less in well to do suburbs. But because there are more well-to-do suburbs, in aggregate there are actually more children that are scattered around, and they're hard to reach if you don't have a universal platform because they're sprinkled like pepper and salt through well-to-do suburbs.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So I think the fifth point, just from your notes, but that's talking more about funding models, is that right, Jay?

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes. I mean, one way of looking at the report is to say that you've taken a view about universality, which is a narrow view about universality. It's to say, 'Look, the system is already universal, it's just that some people are missing out', and that that's the task you'd set yourself to solve. That's fine, and that's one view of a universal system. It might be one that the Commonwealth is attracted to because it's cheaper than a more expensive version of universality. What we would encourage you to do, though, is to give the Commonwealth an option for a broader notion of universality.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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MR WEATHERILL: And we think that there are some profound affordability issues that still exist for people that you might not call disadvantaged, which having – and this probably goes more to the gender equity question than it does to questions of access – so families are still using child care, it's just that we're creating quite significant barriers, and it's causing significant shifts in choices. It's throwing up in Australia, for instance, one of the highest levels of female part-time employment in a comparable country, so there's no doubt there's a systemic issue which has probably got something to do with the child care system about affordability, and choices that people are making. So we would say that that should be part of the suite of options you put in front of government. It will more expensive, of course. Although, interestingly from the modelling you did, it doesn't look wildly different from the 90 per cent - - -

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: We're talking about a flat fee model.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes, the \$10 a day model.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, they're broadly – it all depends on (indistinct words) fee, I guess.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: But I was just going to ask, and you – I mean, I guess the 90 per cent goes with income. Well, you don't see a case for income means testing at all?

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MR WEATHERILL: No, I don't. Because I think that the marginal savings that you make to the budget by having a cap of that sort, you lose in terms of the complexity of the system. But, I mean, the paradox of the Quebec model was that a lot of disadvantaged families were using it in circumstances where – because it was a highly legible system, everybody knew exactly where they stood. In a world where people's incomes are dancing around where they're in and out of the world of work, where they're worried about complex interactions with Centrelink, I mean, here's the tantalising opportunity here, you take Centrelink out of child care, and I think you cannot underestimate the power of taking Centrelink out of child care from the perspective of the message that that sends, and the – I mean, it's a completely different paradigm.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: I appreciate the point, and we will be looking at it, as we did in the draft, and we certainly propose to elaborate on those absolutely, and that's something we're grappling with. But I guess there are also challenges, some of those models. I mean, look at Quebec, often it's the disadvantaged ones that are perhaps missing out on certain - the flat fee centre-based ones, they've been - you know, we talked to Gordon Cleveland and he acknowledged there were some issues. So I guess no system's ever going to be perfect, but I take your point.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes. But all systems are in a stage of development. I mean, you've got to understand your starting point. We started with quality. That's not a bad place to start. So, you know, there's a sense in which this system that's been created has actually delivered some quite good outcomes. It's at a certain level of maturity, we're now trying to improve upon it by taking it to another level. And I suppose it is a question of sequencing. I mean, one of the things that we would argue is a possible model, is if we accept that the state is going to have step in and provide a supplier response to certain thin markets for unserved or underserved, however you want to describe it, it may well be that in those markets it could implement a fixed fee model, because it will be essentially the supplier.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, absolutely. But I guess one question, because at the moment, I mean, we've recommended in our draft report essentially 100 per cent subsidy for the bottom third. Because if you do look at our modelling for flat fee, if you just did the flat fee, lower income families would be actually worse off, and so that can't be.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes, true. No, it would be a combination. I mean, I use - - -

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: You have to have some - - -

MR WEATHERILL: I use that generically. I mean, we still are attracted to her 100 per cent rate. But, I mean, I suppose our concern with 100 per cent rate is will it be 100 per cent or will there be a charge by the provider that will undermine that notion.

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: That's something we've got to look at it, yes, if it it's up to the cap. But then in a lot of the areas, they're probably not above the cap areas, but that's a risk, and we've also recommended proper calibration of the cap for that reason. But it's right. In thin markets, when we have different more bespoke responses, and what funding models, I mean, ACCOs, et cetera, they might choose how they want to charge, if at all, and so it could be quite outside the – well, usually it's outside the CCS model.

15 MR WEATHERILL: And it may be that there's a bit of virtuous competition.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: I mean, is there something wrong with running a model that sits outside and puts maybe price pressure on some of the market-based models.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I'm conscious of the time. I had a number of questions.

30 MR WEATHERILL: And I'm Deb has too.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: But, Deb, I'll maybe throw to you out of - - -

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Given you're not in the room.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. I have things that I would love to speak to Jay about, but were there things you wanted to mention?

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I'm happy for you to ask the questions, Martin. I'm pretty confident I've heard most of it, but I think it's better if those who are in the room ask the questions.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Two thoughts, and I think you can hear from Lisa, is we're grappling with what does a larger subsidy look, particularly if you're thinking out over time, is it the Canadian, but a one-size-fits-all may not work. You have to deal with genuinely underserved markets where – even a demand supply, it's just not going to survive, and that means those children would miss out, and they'll be the ones that – and we're grappling

with that, and we take the examples and we think your point, which is give governments options, and we're hearing that message loud and clear.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I had two questions. One was relating to the activity test, and one was relating to the legislation.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: On the activity test, I think your view about our draft report at least is valid, which is we've thought very hard about what practically would make sense in the phasing in the stage, and particularly in the first three/five plus years. The activity test we're grappling with, which is – I mean, we said at least for three days, but do you scrap it all or do you scrap it all for those who are disadvantaged, or the 100 per cent, and keep it for others until at least we can address the workforce issues in the sector, and the supply issues. And so it was that notion, you've thought about, 'Well, what is a good staging?', and I just wondered – because the adverse outcome might be that we crowd out the exact individuals that we're trying to attract, because if there isn't an immediate supply response in terms of the market.

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MR WEATHERILL: Well, I mean, the first thing we'd say it's wrong in principle because it, sort of, attaches parent behaviour.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: Let's assume, you know, there is some behaviour you wanted to try and influence on parents.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: I mean, it's sort of perverse in a sense that it actually doesn't even do that we're told through one of the reports. So as long as the principle is established it's got to go, I think the question of when and how it goes is sort of a separate issue. I mean, I think you'd want to really test that notion of whether it is going to cause – I mean, I know it is suggested that it will create capacity constraint issues because you'll get a whole bunch of people that will be making themselves available for child care that haven't before, and depending on how you're going with early educators, you may not be able to meet that need. But I suppose I'd say about that that capacity is unequal across the system.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, absolutely.

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MR WEATHERILL: There may be some capacity to soak up those people, and - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, in the short term I think you're right. It's certainly in some areas.

5 MR WEATHERILL: I mean, I just sort of wonder whether you'd do anything if you actually waited until there was a – because there's sort of a sense in - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: There's no perfect time is what you're saying (indistinct words).

10 MR WEATHERILL: No. Well, but also I don't know whether any system would have started if you'd had everybody there – I mean, when I went to primary - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And build it before they come.

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MR WEATHERILL: Well, exactly. I went to primary school in 1969 and there were so many kids, we needed two primary schools at either end of the street, and they created these teachers called pressure cooker teachers who basically had six months training.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: You're fine.

MR WEATHERILL: And I came out all right. I mean, I actually don't want to create crazy capacity constraints if you can plan around them.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: But I am bit worried about this idea of waiting until we've got this mythical supply of labour.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay. No, it's useful to hear, and we're testing our own thinking with people who are thinking deeply about this. On the legislation, I don't know whether you managed to catch all of Julia Gillard's comments. She talked similarly about an overarching directional vision.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: She mentioned anchoring that to effectively a target in and around AEDC, so an early childhood development census outcome, vulnerabilities.

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes, I heard what she said, yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Because you've also mentioned it's a guarantee, and I'm not quite sure what means. Is it a guarantee hours, or it's a guarantee access, or it's a guarantee of a vision early childhood, et cetera. And I just wondered, they seemed slight variations on the same theme, and I was interested in your thoughts. Because the AEDC actually has some real appeal

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about it, as well as a guarantee, depending on what that means, how you define it.

5 MR WEATHERILL: So the first thing I'd say about that is that the AEDC but it's essentially a vulnerability index, and it has a ceiling effect at about 60 per cent.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

10 MR WEATHERILL: So there's about 40 per cent of kids it doesn't affect (indistinct) measure because they've maxed out.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

15 MR WEATHERILL: So I know that there's some working being done to actually measure for that, so that it can actually measure the presence of thriving rather than the absence of vulnerability.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, okay. No, that's - - -

MR WEATHERILL: And I think one of the reasons why that's important is because it takes you back to all children. Because you want every child to be the best they can be, not some children to be brought up to some sort of average.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: That's a good point.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

30 MR WEATHERILL: I think it what it will do, it will undermine the profound nature of what you're proposing.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Or we'd miss the opportunity. You would just focus on the deficit, rather than the potential.

35 MR WEATHERILL: Exactly.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, okay.

40 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: The strengths, yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

45 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: So the vision we a much broader one. Having said that, I think there's something powerful about having a target around eliminating vulnerability, which is what they've done in the South Australian Royal

Commission, they've actually established that. But that would sit within a commission.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: You're talking about preschool – I guess, starting of there. I mean, where the states are expanding, they're talking about free preschool, is that what you envisage as well?

10 MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

15 MR WEATHERILL: Three and four year old preschool. And most of the small jurisdictions, it's free or near as much to free anyway. It gets complicated in the jurisdictions that are using long day care to roll out preschool. So the jurisdictions like WA that roll out preschool so there's this tension, and then there's the jurisdictions like Queensland that roll out largely through long day care, and the advantage for Queensland is they have wraparound care for the children, but that's expensive because they've still got to pay full (indistinct) and the child care fees. The advantage in Western Australia is that it's free, but the disadvantage in Western Australia is that it's inconvenient to drop your kids off in the middle of the day.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Exactly.

MR WEATHERILL: So somehow you can - - -

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So we recommended kind of a version of the South Australian Royal Commission of the wraparound.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Julia made the comment which is over time it feels like the distinction starts to dissipate and you get convergent, is that consistent with your - -

MR WEATHERILL: Certainly.

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

MR WEATHERILL: In fact you can see that now. There are some child care centres you go to and it's indistinguishable.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MR WEATHERILL: Their kindy program and their child care program, because they've got a bunch of early educators, the program's incredibly high

standard. It's really a semantic thing about when child care ends and preschool starts.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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MR WEATHERILL: I mean, I recall visiting one in South Australia at Flinders University, which is just – I don't know how they manage what they call preschool, but it's just all indistinguishable.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. And I think that's our sense in alignment. I don't know how confronting that would be with the jurisdictions of softly moving towards a - - -

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MR WEATHERILL: Well, it's sort of the long term. I think that's your, sort of, vision piece, but that's why we're really attracted to a new national partnership agreement on - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Maybe that goes – sorry, Jay, but I just wondered that that question could take us to an issue that I've been thinking about asking you about, which is the structure of the market which is one of the things we're asked about in our terms of reference. And I just wondered, I mean, I've advocated for a long time for education and care to be brought closer together. That notion of the Swedish Educare has been around our sector for a long time. But when it comes to actually thinking about making it real, I think there are some hesitations, and we've had some express to us, particularly from those who are standalone, or government preschools, about whether moving essentially to a Commonwealth funded system would mean moving to the child care subsidy, and whether we might lose something that is highly valued by some jurisdictions and some families, which is public and non-profit preschool provision. Would this model simply say, essentially, it's all going to be long day care funded through the CCS?

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MR WEATHERILL: Yes. I mean, it all takes you back to quality really at the end of the day, and I think possibly the expansion of – I mean, we've seen all of the expansion recently has been in the for-profit sector.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

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MR WEATHERILL: So I think there's a fundamental challenge about what are the policy levers that need to be pulled to ensure that there's at least a balanced system or a system that, at the very least, privileges quality so that those anxieties don't become real. I mean, I've always thought that the perfect model is integrated models on school sites, like the children centres we tried to roll out in South Australia, but they won't work everywhere. But the models should, I think, encourage best practice. At the moment, for one reason or another, the model, the funding we have, doesn't seem to lead to the growth of that sector. It's sort of been arrested, and it's not growing at the rate that we would hope it might grow.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, we very much - - -

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I guess that even goes to the question of
who's encouraged to enter the system by existing settings, and the once you've
worked out who enters the system, what funding levers you have to deliver on
government objectives including quality. I guess there's different views
around how effective current settings are in doing that, but I think that they
could be a lot stronger. I don't think they're particularly effective in driving us
10 towards the sort of vision that I think many of us share for a long term
universal ECEC system for this country. So that's one of the toughest issues
that we're grappling with right now.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: But, Deb, it's interesting that – like, Victoria is
building not just some long day care centres, and so that would be drawing on
Commonwealth funding, you know, when they - - -

MR WEATHERILL: On school subs.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, so it's sort of interesting - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Birth through to five, not just preschool.

25 MR WEATHERILL: Look, my sense of it is you need highly pragmatic
programs which are located at the level of the jurisdictions that just solve
problems pragmatically. Like, in remote Aboriginal communities it might be
the Aboriginal Controlled Health Care Organisations; in rural and regional
areas, the schools with plenty of spare land, and that being really the
30 functional institution in town. I mean, I think it will be horses for courses
depending on where you are.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, I like your term of phrase as well, Jay,
which was around preferencing quality, and the acknowledgement that that's
in effect what the ambition has been. We look at the system now and it
maybe hasn't quite got there, or it's lopsided in some ways, and it's overly
represented in some areas and not in others, but continuing to preference
quality I think is inherent in the system and shouldn't be too much of a
challenge for people to grapple with. It might mean profound change in how
40 we fund, support, who we engage, but the notion of preferencing quality is
in fact an enduring and continuing philosophy.

45 MR WEATHERILL: Well, there is no relationship at the moment between
quality and the funding system. There's just a set of standards that people are
– and there's an assumption that would shop around, but we know from the
ACCC people don't.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No, it's hyperlocal.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes, or can't. I mean, they probably do with the constrained options.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, we don't really understand how they use the rating systems. There might be some rule of thumb or some, you know, which - - -

MR WEATHERILL: (Indistinct words.)

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: We very much appreciate the input from yourself for a long time.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Appreciate it, thank you.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: You mention the NDIS, ACCC, we were deliberately not expansive in our draft knowing that they were coming out so that we could take the opportunity to have these conversations.

20 MR WEATHERILL: On the way, yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: The disability one is one we'll actually hand down our report before they've properly thought about, and responded to. But I think there's complete alignment, at least in our perspective, what you're saying, foundation and mainstream capacity needs to improved, and the stitch
25 in time argument is incredibly compelling.

MR WEATHERILL: Yes.

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Whether that ultimately wins the day, because it's in different parts of different areas of government, and tiers of government, and it's over a long period of time that that benefit flows though, but we're very much aligned with that.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: But it's also we're a Commission that would help into what capacity is needed in those mainstream supports.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And we'd be disappointed if a cohort of children, and they aren't driven by socio-economic areas, they are across all areas of Australia, if those disabilities were missing out. And that's just 'a'
40 cohort, it's not – you're absolutely right in your interpretation of where we focused our attention, we're almost unapologetic, which is those kinds who are missing out, and then how could we improve that going forward. And it's excellent, thank you.

45 MR WEATHERILL: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

MR WEATHERILL: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you so much, Jay.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: So our next - - -

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UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Yes, Janine's there.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: She's online, is she. So do we have to re-rig this, or no, is it right?

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UNKNOWN SPEAKER: (Indistinct words.)

MS HATCH: Hello.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Hi. It looks like it might work.

MS HATCH: Hello.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Hello, Janine.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Sorry, we've taken a little bit longer, Janine.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: We went a bit longer, over time.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: But we can still have our full 30 minutes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you very much for joining us, and thank you for your initial submission. I don't know how long you've been watching and listening, but I'll just introduce – we're the three Commissioners. I'm Lisa Gropp, on my right is Martin Stokie, and on the screen I hope you can see Deb Brennan.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Hi, Janine.

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MS HATCH: Yes, hi.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And just a reminder that these proceedings are being transcribed, and so a transcript will be available as soon as it's ready.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: As soon as it's ready, whenever that is, and it will be on our website. But also just to let you know that I think there are quite a few members of the public, there's somebody in the room, an observer, and there's some online observers as well. And there could be media observers online too, I'm not aware, but just so that you know that. So the way we usually run these is just ask you to introduce yourself, and then making some opening remarks, and then we have a chat.

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MS HATCH: Fantastic. Well, thank you for the opportunity to appear today, and to do from finally a rainy wet season day in Broome. It's been very dry

for a wet season. So hopefully you're aware of the RDA network, but just in case I'll provide some context. So RDA Kimberley is a not-for-profit organisation, but we are funded by the Australian government as part of the RDA network. We advocate for our region to the Australian government on regional development issues, and ensure that important policy grants, and program information, from the Australian government, such as the ECEC Productivity Commission, is distributed out to our Kimberley stakeholders.

So access to child care obviously has a critical role in maximising community and economic development outcomes in the Kimberley, and we are acutely aware of child care workforce shortages around the country. However, the situation is exacerbated in the Kimberley due to our remote location. RDA Kimberley has partnered with the Kimberley Development Commission to gather some primary data from our Kimberley child care services. As a result, the Kimberley Development Commission published the Childcare in the Kimberley report, quantifying capacity and characteristics of our sector. RDA Kimberley attached this report to our submission, and we strongly encourage the Productivity Commission to review this information.

The complexity of the Kimberley's child care sector is characterised by our remoteness, seasonal peaks, and socio-economic profile. We have 24 child care centres in our region, comprising of both for-profit and not-for-profit services. While the Kimberley has 900 approved child care places, our region is currently only operating at less than 70 per cent capacity. While at the same time, 80 per cent of our Kimberley centres have a 12 to 24 month waiting period. At current operating levels, the Kimberley has only .5 child care places per child compared to the licenced capacity ratio of .5 for Perth, and there are currently no approved child care options in the most remote Kimberley Aboriginal communities, leaving approximately 700 children with no access to child care services. I have a wonderful map of the Kimberley behind me.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes, that's great.

MS HATCH: For context.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks.

MS HATCH: We do, it's on our wall.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, it's fantastic.

MS HATCH: So workforce shortages are at the heart of the current crisis in the Kimberley. The inability to fill vacancies, cover staff leave, and meet educator to child ratios, have seen centres either reducing services or closing altogether. This is despite high unemployment figures for our region, the Kimberley is currently experiencing over 7 per cent unemployment, and that goes up to sometimes 30 per cent in places like Halls Creek, and that's compared to 3.5 per cent for Australia.

Child care workforce shortages in the Kimberley are driven by high attrition and low completion rates in training, perceived poor wage and conditions, particularly in the context of mining and government sectors, and a lack of affordable housing for staff which is contributing to high costs of living. Across the Kimberley, though, there are many examples of workers finding it challenging or impossible to take on desired amounts of work. Families, we're well and truly aware of many examples of this, have left the region or a prevented from moving to our region amid our child care crisis, and this is exacerbating the Kimberley's workforce shortages in all other areas of our economy.

Improving child care services in the Kimberley is an important strategy for simultaneously achieving workforce, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal economic empowerment, and childhood development objectives, and I'm sure I'm preaching to the converted here. Universal access to child care services is a commendable and an ambitious concept. The draft report identifies that child care workforce attraction and retention needs to be a priority before progressing to a universal access model. The report does fall a bit short, I am sure intentionally because it is being covered by many bodies trying to look at workforce issues, but it does fall short in identifying recommendations that would result in tangible workforce outcomes in a region such as ours. So our submission focused on suggesting some additional workforce recommendations, and we strongly encourage the Productivity Commission to consider further how universal access could and would be delivered in remote Aboriginal communities. So our talking point sort of go toward some of our suggestions around qualification exemption zones, and mentoring models, access to international workforce, so we cover both local and international workers, linking that to housing availability, and putting out the offer of using our Kimberley towns and remote communities as a case study region in policy design in the future.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I really enjoyed the submission, Janine, and I had a question where I'm pretty sure I saw it in yours, which is that you had run very specific dedicated training programs for almost home grown capacity, and it wasn't successful, and we've heard this idea of home grown, and train the locals, and tailor it to match existing skills, and recognise prior learning, et cetera, et cetera. But you're almost a case study, you know, trialling that and it didn't work, and I wonder was it just the way in which it was rolled out, was there some lesson there which is, 'Well, it doesn't work or it would work if we had have done [dot, dot, dot]', because I think you had about 10 or 12, and you ended up with two, or something like that.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, and I think another one you talked about, you had 28 girls from Broome High School enrolled in Certificate III, and not one of them competed.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right. Well, it's something along those lines. So I was just wondering, because you felt broadly, and what can we do

differently here, and whether that's immigration or a specific trial, or a testing, and I think we're actually quite open to these ideas, and I just wondered what happened previously that we could learn from?

5 MS HATCH: I think we have a lot of barriers particularly around numeracy
and literacy that need to be addressed on a whole scale approach to our
training more broadly than just child care certificates, obviously. But as you'll
see in the submission, the feedback from these local programs running across
10 the board is it falls short in trying to get workers across the line for that
Cert III in that the requirement that all child care workers have to be enrolled
or working towards a Cert III. So what we have proposed in our submission,
and what we've been working with, particularly Community Skills WA, is that
notion that maybe there's a micro credential or even a Cert II in playgroup,
15 which was a case study that I put forward as well, where coupled with
mentoring, we can still ensure that quality of education and care, but try to
tackle that hurdle of working towards a Cert III.

Particularly when you look at engaging some of our older residents, or elders
in communities, I guess there's not a lot of desire to complete higher
20 certificates. However, they would still be a valued contributor to a child care
centre. And obviously mentoring is extremely resource intensive, and I know
centres struggle – you know, if they're already short staffed, it's very hard to
put in so much work in terms of mentoring and getting their workers through
the certificates, even though, like we've mentioned in our submission, there
25 are many centres that are completely funding enrolments and course
completion, but the mentoring, I think, and the hand-holding that's required, is
so resource intensive that if there was a broader support for that, we could see
maybe some improved outcomes.

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks, Janine.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, I - - -

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: You go, Deb.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks, Lisa. I was just going to ask, are a
majority of those who start these courses, and then don't complete them, are
40 they mainly Aboriginal young people, and older people, or are they a mix?
Because I was really struck by the Broome High School one, because I
imagine that there's a mix of students there, and not one of them completed
the Cert III, and I think one of the comments was that it's too hard. So there's
so much, I think, for us to learn from that, and I think we'd all like to
45 understand how the recommendations in our draft report, to what extent they
may go towards assisting with that, and where they're falling short. I think it
is a really crucial issue for us. And also, do you happen to know of any – I
mean, your region specific, particularly because of the all the mining, and so
on, and the alternative wages that people can consider, and alternate jobs and

wages that people can consider, but are there any examples that you know where regional areas have been able to successfully address any of these issues?

5 MS HATCH: So I think from a Kimberley perspective, back to one of your first questions around percentages of Aboriginals, our whole region is around 40 per cent Aboriginal, so there are quite large numbers enrolling in child care sector training. I think, like you mentioned, our region is – we do have mining, a lot of government sector as well, which it is very expensive to live
10 here if you're not getting some of those other conditions around housing subsidies, electricity subsidies, and obviously just the raw hourly rate is very different.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

15 MS HATCH: So, yes, there is a bit of competition there. Where I have heard of other regional areas having some success, I'm not sure if you've come across REED in the Wheatbelt, I think it's Regional Early Education and Development.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I don't think so.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: No.

25 MS HATCH: I can forward some information to Nicholas after this if that's useful. And there's something similar that also One Tree Community Services, who operate in Kununurra and Derby, are looking at as well, is having more of a regional approach to training and staff development.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

MS HATCH: So rather than having every individual centre trying to fund training, and professional development, and HR, and everything. So the way I believe the REED model is working in the Wheatbelt - it's a bit different to
35 the Kimberley, but I'll go into it a little bit, the differences – but the Wheatbelt in Western Australia has a large component of local governments having to provide child care services outside, I guess, core business.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

40 MS HATCH: So REED was set up as a bit of a flying squad to have a centralised HR training finance administration model, but running centres in multiple towns to try and build that economies of scale, and they are having some success in attracting and developing their staff.

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We've certainly had engagement with the Wheat Growers Association. It may be that this is in our volume of material, yes. Sorry, keep going.

MS HATCH: So the REED model is a little bit different, and it can't necessarily be applied to the Kimberley because the REED model is operating on, I guess, where there's market failure to having a centre. So they will only come into a town if, say, a local government are the only ones providing a centre, or there is no centre. In the Kimberley, we do have for-profit and not-for-profit service, so REED would necessarily come in and run their model with us. But something similar that's chasing funding at the moment is, as I mentioned, One Tree Community Services, who operate a number of centres across Northern Australia. They have applied for funding through the Department of Communities, so Western Australian state government funding, and we're still waiting on the outcome. They're looking at supporting – I mean, it was meeting the criteria of the funding – supporting not-for-profit centres to be able to tap into their expertise around training, workforce development, HR, so it is building that economies of scale so that small centres aren't trying to all do the same thing with very little resources. So that's, I guess, we're trying to tackle on a regional scale.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: What's the rationale for that, that it's with not-for-profits?

MS HATCH: Because One Tree is a not-for-profit, and the model that was created to unfortunately fit a funding criteria, was only available for not-for-profits.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay, thank you.

MS HATCH: I mean, ideally we'd like our for-profit businesses to be able to participate as well, even if it is with a few. But, yes, it was a pilot that they are developing as part of a funding program.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right. Okay, thank you.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Janine, you were mentioning that you were government funded, and I was getting a little bit confused. Are you funded under the CCCF arrangements, or is state funding, or Commonwealth funding?

MS HATCH: This particular model that's chasing funding at the moment went through the Department of Communities, so state government.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right, okay.

MS HATCH: Yes, it was through – let me find the actual title of – it was around – let me see where I put that. I don't think I've included it in there. But, yes, through the Department of Communities, the WA state government.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay, that's fine. Sorry, thank you.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Janine, you mentioned that the courses, you know, that program of trying to get home grown educators, that the courses were too hard. But when we were up in Darwin, we saw some materials for a course which was, sort of – you couldn't understand it, I mean, nobody could understand it.

MS HATCH: We couldn't understand it.

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: It was really unnecessarily complex. Is that part of it is as well? Is it just the way that materials are presented, particularly for people where perhaps English is not their first language, is that part of the issue?

15 MS HATCH: I think the word 'clunky' came out a few times.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

MS HATCH: A technical term.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

25 MS HATCH: And this is where that mentoring comes in. I mean, we worked closely with North Regional TAFE, and Community Skills WA, to run a pilot skillset in Broome. And like we said, we got high enrolment. The way we got involved, from a regional development hat obviously, we're not a child care expert, but we saw an opportunity to support that micro credential in actually offering child care for the people getting trained.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right, yes.

35 MS HATCH: So that was a nice add-on. And even that took a lot of work behind the scenes to be able to coordinate that with existing child care providers and North Regional TAFE. And thankfully as well, we had support from Yawuru, which is our Broome traditional owner group. So it was clunky because you are dealing with private sector, state government training sector. We have got low literacy in numeracy and digital literacy skills, so the amount of support that was provided, even within the few weeks of the course, in terms of filling in your enrolment forms, it is resource intensive. And I think where we have found small wins, it has been with partnering with
40 Aboriginal groups like Yawuru, or in Kununurra with East Kimberley Job Pathways, to where they've had the resource available to actually hand-hold and individualise that support for each participant, whether it be providing transport to get to the course, having help to sort out care so you can complete the course, having help to fill in the forms, or even linking in with other
45 wraparound services. But we do know that that sort of level of mentorship, that one-on-one service is pretty hard to be sustainable.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks. With your proposal to – you, sort of, have a different approach to meeting the quality standard, and the

5 qualifications, et cetera. I guess you're saying that you could have a different mix of people which together would still provide an acceptable level of quality, but they wouldn't necessarily tick the boxes for the requirements under the quality standard as it currently stands. I mean, the regulations are administered by the states, have you spoken to the WA quality regulators about this?

MS HATCH: We've spoken, in particular, to ACECQA.

10 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

MS HATCH: It comes a bit of a hot potato. ACECQA say that they're guided by legislation, and then the legislation says, 'No, we've got ACECQA'.

15 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

20 MS HATCH: And that was coordinated particularly through Community Skills WA. We had a Western Australian child care round-table, and ACECQA attended that, and this notion of micro credentials, or broadening the continuum of qualifications, came up. And we know that it's going to be a challenge to do this on a national scale. I guess we've been trying to promote that maybe there is a way of looking at areas like the Kimberley, or even Northern Australia, as a band to have particular exemptions to working towards maybe a higher level of qualification.

25 COMMISSIONER GROPP: And centres now, are they using waivers or essentially - - -

30 MS HATCH: Some of them are, but it's just not a sustainable way of getting around the issue, I suppose.

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Is there much engagement from the businesses in the area? So there's a lot of mining aspects of fly in-fly out, I suppose, but relatively high paying areas of that community, which is leading to higher costs in terms of accommodation, and demand, and those sorts of things. And I just wonder, are the companies willing to step in and support, are they seeing the extension of their capacity to do their work is also dependent on having families who can have access to early childhood education and care amongst many services that are acutely short in remote and regional areas?

40 MS HATCH: The Kimberley is probably not – our mining presence is certainly here. It's not as big as, say, the Pilbara, Western Australia.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

MS HATCH: And so the level of corporate citizenship that you'd get from some of the giants is not the same as what the Pilbara gets. So in the Pilbara, I know that the mining companies contributed to – I think they were even partnering with child care providers to offer subsidies for workers. They still

fell short in meeting their targets, because there was no housing for the workers.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Oh dear.

5

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's a many faceted challenge.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

10 MS HATCH: Which is why we had to include housing in our submission, because we just can't decouple it.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

15 MS HATCH: And I think that's where you'd have to partner with corporates to try and tackle some of our housing, because it's cross-sector, it's not just child care.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Are there any Aboriginal community controlled services in the Kimberley?

MS HATCH: Yes, the one in Halls Creek, or that – yes, I think the one in Halls Creek. The one in Fitzroy Crossing definitely is.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right. And - - -

MS HATCH: Yes. Sorry, you go. And there's one in Broome as well.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, I just wonder whether there's potential for further connection with all the – well, I just wonder how they're working really, and whether there's - - -

MS HATCH: Yes.

35 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Because I know they're putting a lot of effort into issues around training, and appropriate qualifications, recognition of prior learning, and so on.

40 MS HATCH: And I think partnering with the Aboriginal groups in each community is integral to get that cultural side of training and workforce development met. I mean, we do have – and this is why we're obviously putting ourselves up as a potential case study – if it can work in – we've got very thin to no markets for the private sector to jump in. And also, I mean, Aboriginal controlled groups are – you know, they can't run it at a loss either,
45 so there is that challenge. And as I pointed out in our submission as well, we'd rather be at the table when these policies are getting considered to avoid situations like what occurred last year with the – I think it's a one-off so far, but the grant that went to try and build new child care infrastructure through the CCCF.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: You're right, yes.

5

MS HATCH: You know, it just fell so short, and I'm not sure if you read that part of our submission, but that was announced last year with two areas in the Kimberley as being eligible to apply. But the two areas – I mean, one was Halls Creek, which their current centre can't run at capacity at the moment without staff, and the other was the SA2 area of Roebuck which there is actually no town site in the SA2 area. It's made of pastoral leases, an Aboriginal community that would have significant barriers to putting a centre in. So it was one of those frustrating things that the federal government announced funding, and we weren't even really - - -

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, you didn't feel considered.

MS HATCH: It definitely fell short.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS HATCH: And we spoke directly to the Department of Education around that, and I had another meeting in January with them, and just the made the offer that, 'Before you announce these programs, it's going to be based on data alone, pick up the phone, check in, see what that looks like on the ground, so we can actually make an informed decision'.

25

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes, we can see why you would offer your region as a case study site.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes. I was going to ask about family day care. I mean, that would still have issues around staffing, about workforce, is that a model that has some legs out in the region, or?

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MS HATCH: We have probably about four or five family day cares in Broome, and maybe only one in Kununurra. I'm not aware of any other family day cares that operate outside of these two towns.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: When you say five family day cares, would that be five people offering it in their home or five services?

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MS HATCH: Yes, offering it in their home.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

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MS HATCH: And of course, you know, they also – you know, when you speak to those, which we did directly in producing the Kimberley report, it is getting harder and harder to set up and run an operation from home. You obviously have the rules and regs from the federal government, we have

additional ones that come in for state government, and we have local government planning rules as well, around car parks and – the one that's really a stumbling block for Western Australia, well mainly for North Western Australia in the Pilbara and the Kimberley, is the state government made a new rule two years ago, or 18 months ago, to say that there will be no more approved family day care places at a residence with a pool. And in the north-west of Western Australia, pools are very common because it is very hot.

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10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right, everyone's got a pool. Did that follow an incident?

MS HATCH: I followed an incident from, I think, 2015 or 2016 where there was a drowning. It's one of these things when it happens once, and it's now broad scale change. So existing licence places have got increased measures around having a pool, but there'll be no new approved places.

15
COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

MS HATCH: So that is a struggle for the north-west most certainly, because people who move here often are looking for a pool for their own lifestyle choices.

20
COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

MS HATCH: And, you know, measures obviously can get put in place to manage a pool at the property. So, yes, it's an additional layer, and an additional barrier, for setting up a centre. Also, I mean, there's a few others around you can't have these centres in government housing. So if there is someone that's come up on a government contract, and their partner wants to run a family day care, they can't from their GROH house. Also we had incidents where a long term child care family day care operator couldn't get insurance. She was operating from a strata lease, and the cost of insurance to run a business from a strata property in the north-west just blew her model out of the water. So, I guess, there was another Northern Australia issue to contend with.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you for that. Have you got any - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Deb, have you got any other - - -

45 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, that's fine. Thanks, Lisa.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Janine, that's been really insightful. Is there any other issue you wanted to raise with us, any other lasting thoughts just to take away?

5 MS HATCH: I think really we probably did focus on the right area, which that micro credential and continuum of training to try and build a local workforce. Because if you have a local workforce, obviously it potentially already removes the issue of housing, because they should already be here.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

10 MS HATCH: So I think that's – but building it up to a regional level to build that economies of scale for us, because we do have such thin markets, and a complex socio-economic profile, I think rather than the challenge that each centre is running at, you know, each individual approach is falling short, and I think having a regional approach to building a bit of a regional workforce that is support, I think is the only way that we can see of getting legs.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: It's a good point. Thanks very much for coming today. Thanks for your time.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We really appreciate it, thank you.,

25 MS HATCH: I looked at the speakers before me, it was a very distinguished list.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Aren't you a former prime minister?

30 MS HATCH: And now you've got Janine from Broome.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Julia, Jay, and Janine.

MS HATCH: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I think everybody's in good company, Janine, including ourselves.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

40

MS HATCH: No, thank you very much for the opportunity. I hope it's been useful.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It has indeed.

45

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Very much so, thank you.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you, Janine.

5 MS HATCH: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: We're going to take a short break now, I think, just a - - -

10 UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Well, Ros is here.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Can we have a break.

DR SAMBELL: Yes, absolutely.

15

COMMISSIONER GROPP: We still need a short break.

DR SAMBELL: Indeed.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Got to go to the bathroom.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I need to go to the loo. Put that on the tape. Can we just have 10 minutes maybe, and make it 1.40 we'll resume.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Maybe not 1.40, 10.40.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: I'm looking at the – 10.40.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: For me.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: The time on the computer is Eastern Standard Time, or Daylight Saving Time. Okay.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thanks, Ros, you've been patient.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Very patient.

DR SAMBELL: No, it's been fabulous.

40 (Short adjournment.)

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Now, I'd like to welcome Dr Ros Sambell for our next session. So, Ros, I think you know who we are.

45 DR SAMBELL: Yes, lovely.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: And so if you could just introduce yourself, your name, where you're from, and then some opening remarks.

DR SAMBELL: Yes, lovely. Thank you very much. So good morning, and thanks for the opportunity, I have to say, to present at this inquiry. It's quite a privilege. My name is Ros Sambell. I'm a registered public health nutritionist, and I work as a research academic at Edith Cowan University in Perth. I also chair the National Nutrition Network for early childhood education and care, and my submission was on behalf of the Network. So the Network actually promotes healthy sustainable food environments for children attending ECEC services, and this does include long day care, family day care, and out of school hours care.

So I just wanted to mention, though, an interesting point that's been raised today when we're talking about the importance of environment. Originally child care services, like long day care services, were actually set up to replicate the home environment, because of the age of children who were attending, and that sometimes can help differentiate the environment conversation between preschool and early childhood education and care as well. So I've actually been supporting the sector for over 30 years as a training consultant, and more recently as a researcher. And my PhD actually focused on food provision quality in early childhood education and care, a topic that I feel very passionate about. So we've had some wonderful presenters this morning who have spoken about different aspects, but my focus today is really going to be talking about the importance of meeting foundational nutrition requirements through early childhood education and care.

So it's also about discussing how the workforce capacity and capability impacts the quality of the food environments in early childhood education and care, which in turn affects both the health and the developmental outcomes of the children who actually utilise these services. I want to provide a little bit of context, because this might help because we've talked a lot about child care services, but not necessarily the food environment in child care services, and there's this assumption that the 900,000 children, who attend centre-based cares in Australia, are actually provided with enough good quality food to meet their dietary needs, and unfortunately that is not the case.

So my research found Perth, for instance, in the metropolitan area, only 10 per cent of services are actually meeting 50 per cent of the Australian recommendations for children of two to three years. And other research across Australia, in different states, is actually finding the same. So we've heard a little about the comparison between profit and not-for-profit today in other discussions, and for the purpose of food provision, there is evidence that suggests that private for-profit services are providing poorer quality food than what the not-for-profit services are.

Some other research that I did in 2018, found that child care services were only spending about \$2 per child per day where food was being provided, because obviously some services ask parents to actually provide the food and bring it in, but where the food was provided, and some statistical modelling, said that an extra 50 cents per child per day would actually help services

become compliant with meeting at least 50 per cent of those Australian dietary guidelines. But I - - -

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Ros.

DR SAMBELL: Yes.

10 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I'm so sorry. I'm having hearing problems with you, and most it's okay, but I just have a sense those last few sentences were really important, and I missed them. It was about the \$2 a day, but would you mind saying those sentences again. I'm so sorry.

DR SAMBELL: Certainly, sorry. Can you hear me now, is that better?

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: The microphone's in the - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: It's in the computer.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: This is for the transcript. The microphone for Deb is in the computer.

DR SAMBELL: Okay, fine.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So if your projector was a computer, you'd be fine.

DR SAMBELL: Lovely, okay.

30 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I'm really sorry.

DR SAMBELL: No, no, that's absolutely fine.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: No, it's worth raising, Deb.

35 DR SAMBELL: So please let me know if I, sort of, drift off again. So what I just mentioned was that in 2018, some research I conducted found that child care services were spending around \$2 on average per child per day across morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea. And with some statistical modelling, we found that just 50 cents extra a day would allow services to be compliant with at least 50 per cent of Australian dietary guidelines. So this was a pre-
40 COVID price, and I think this would need to be reviewed considering the price hikes that have been happening with food, particularly for regional and remote locations as well, because this was a metropolitan figure.

45 So I think we probably all agree that good quality food is actually a foundation for children to reach their full potential, and this includes providing enough nutrients for their brains to grow and develop, and learn, and play. And so in a society where we are actually encouraging early education, a poor quality food environment is potentially sabotaging those

perceived gains. So there's a lot of evidence around the importance of early nutrition from people like Dr Tim Moore from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and so on, and I'm happy to provide that to you if you'd like it. I want to bring the conversation with the Productivity Commission interest under four key areas understanding that there's strong evidence that advocates for investment in access to good quality education, and good quality food in early childhood education. So the current shortfall in ECEC access find some children never being able to attend ECEC before school, and add to this the cost of people actually attending, and also the variation in price that you do see across the services to attend as well.

So we know that where there is limited or no market competition, services try to offer a comparatively cheaper price per child to support those more vulnerable types of group. However, they are then likely to ask parents to provide meals. So if these are from food insecure households, this can translate into absenteeism because families often suffer from shame of not actually sending their children because they can't provide their children with meals to come to the service, or staff having to provide children with food from their own kitchen, or their own lunchboxes they might bring in, and that also presents challenges because we are seeing staff who are also presenting as being food insecure in these services, depending on the environment. And even there's some anecdotal evidence where you're actually seeing staff ask children to spread what small amount of food they have in their lunchbox to make it last over the course of the day, so they have enough energy to keep going, even if that child is presenting as hungry when they actually come to the service.

So there's a lot of challenges with actually managing children who are hungry in child care services, because if you can imagine how they learn, how they play, if they could self-regulate, and then there are challenges for staff to actually then have to manage these situations as part of their normal day to day's going on. So we really need to better understand what is being provided in these services in terms of what quality food, and how it's being provided as well in terms of how staff are helping children actually build their relationship with food, understanding that we have one in four children overweight and obese, and we've got all sorts of public health interventions that are trying to support that, and ECEC plays a critical role in supporting these public health messages.

So as a first step, the National Nutrition Network actually launched a policy brief last year which was saying, 'We need a one tick box', and this would actually identify how services are providing food, thus informing a more targeted support that we could offer to the workforce, and this could be done through existing child care management systems or assessment and rating systems as well.

The second point, which builds on this theme that we've heard about a lot, and also through the submissions, around universal access, is that every service should also be providing food. This could be achieved by perhaps

quarantining a portion of the child care subsidy to be used for food provision, and this is being done in the US successfully, I think with a federally funded program in the child and adult food care program.

5 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Sorry, where was that happening?

DR SAMBELL: This is in the US.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: In the US, thank you.

10

DR SAMBELL: Yes, okay. So providing food would improve the efficacy and effectiveness of that government investment as well, because it directly addresses those nutritional needs of children regardless of that socio-economic status, so it actually provides the potential. This would also support ECEC workforce as there is a sense that due to the lower levels of staff, you know, with the food insecurity, by providing food at the service, you could also potentially feed food insecure staff as well.

15

Thirdly, ECEC staff in Australia face inequitable access to nutrition support with only three states providing three on-the-ground nutrition support, and that's in Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Is that training about nutrition?

25 DR SAMBELL: Yes, that's training and education.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: So for services that sit outside of those jurisdictions, they have no one to really contact to say, 'Well, how do I improve the quality of my food environment', and so on, there's no on-the-ground free support. So the National Nutrition Network recommends all states have access to contextualised on-the-ground free support and training, and this is for directors, for educators, for cooks, and also for assessment and rating officers, to actually build the capacity of staff to foster healthy food environments, and this additional or increased training would be commensurate with the proposal of increased wages also for that workforce, and that school base.

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So there's an increasing number of enrolments of children with a disability, and more complex dietary needs, which has already been discussed today. So establishing a mechanism with registered nutritionists and dietitians to support the management of children living with disabilities, would be a critical new initiative and also reduce the burden on the ECEC workforce.

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So the final point I'd really like to make today is the need to develop a national best practice guide, and currently there's no regulation outlining what or how the food is actually to be provided. A guide supported by regulation and policy would harmonise, and also benchmark, expectations for skills, knowledge, required to staff and services across Australia, and put a halt to

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those state-based interpretations which really does present as confusing for assessment and rating officers, and also educators and directors within those different states as well.

5 There is evidence that other countries, such as Finland, mandate food provision at all ECEC services, and they mandate that two-thirds, so 66 per cent, of food needs to be provided in order to meet those dietary regulations as well. So a guide would also provide a blueprint for any vocational and university training inclusions for the emerging workforce, 10 because we obviously have to upskill our current workforce, but then we've got the emerging workforce to consider. And currently, we really don't know the level or the quality of training for nutrition that's actually embedded in these current qualifications.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I've lost the sound completely.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: You can't hear us at all?

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No, I just heard you. I haven't heard for about half a minute.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

25 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Generally, I've been - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I think that one was you, Deb, rather than us.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Me?

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I think it might have been you, because we didn't do anything.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. The others are okay?

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay.

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And I think Ros was speaking normally, but maybe you just want to go back over the last minute or so.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: You might want to repeat that last bit.

45 DR SAMBELL: So which piece would you like me to repeat, Deb, what did you last hear?

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Look, I think just keep going, Ros, and I'll catch up in the discussion.

DR SAMBELL: Lovely, okay. So the final point I really want to make today is the need for the development of a national best practice food environment guide as currently, as I've said, there's no regulation for the what or the how of food provision, and a guide which is support by regulation and policy would help harmonise and benchmark those expectations, and obviously build the knowledge expectation for staff and services. And I've just chatted too about Finland, and I'm not sure whether you heard that last piece.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I did, yes.

DR SAMBELL: So I've just gone over that. Thank you, okay. So it's clear that some investment will reap dividends in many areas, including improved workforce participation because if food ends up being provided as services, and children are actually being fed adequately, it would support the management and the challenges that go with managing hungry children could be resolved. So the main point from today is really we need to access good quality early childhood education, and having good quality food in these environments is actually foundational because we need to provide this for all children across all of those services, and we could potentially prioritise children who sit to the left of the bell curve, and I appreciate Jay Weatherill talking about that staged approach, and the blue sky thinking about having equitable access for children, but certainly a staged approach targeting support for children who need it most would be a wonderful addition and next step. So I'm happy to take any questions. Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you, Ros. This has been raised in a couple of hearings from participants and research that's been done up in particularly Queensland.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, Karen Thorpe in particular.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: You'd be aware Karen (indistinct words.)

DR SAMBELL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: So, yes, it's sort of that bring more flesh on the bones, I guess, in the first instance around the NQF about the dietary requirements, but that's a bit vague about what's required, and you want to be much clearer about clarifying what that means in practice.

DR SAMBELL: Yes. Well, the NQS in Quality Area 2 is a guideline. So it's really the regulation which is the opportunity to prescribe these requirements.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: But you're suggesting going further, aren't you, and making it a mandatory obligation on all ECEC services to provide the appropriate level of feed as part of their service, is that correct?

DR SAMBELL: Yes, and also to provide food.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, that's what I mean, yes, certainly.

DR SAMBELL: Yes, and then obviously the appropriate level of food as well.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: In your research, is it in higher income areas you do see more food or better food, better nutrition, compared to lower income areas in services in those areas, is that pretty much the pattern?

10 DR SAMBELL: Yes. So in Queensland, we have done some research where we've aggregated some publicly available datasets, and we've been able to identify those services most at need, and certainly what we found is that services where there are market competition, they are more likely to provide food simply because it provides that competition compared to other services.
15 But what we are seeing in more regional and remote locations is they are less likely to provide the food, and that's where there's more likely to be high numbers of vulnerable children.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Do you see the same standard or approach at all age groups? And I raise this because some of the preschools that we've been to visit, they talk pretty proudly about trying to mirror and prepare children for the next phase, which is at school, where they will bring their food, you know, they don't have school canteens, et cetera. And so mirroring the 'Bring your prepared lunch or food to the preschool', and I'm just using
25 preschool, but, like, you know, four year old children, is part of that preparatory phase, and I just wonder whether you see a distinction between, say, what you might do for a one or two year old versus a three or four year old, or it is just universal expectation, this needs to be more than a guideline, it needs to be embedded and enshrined across the board.

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DR SAMBELL: It's a very good question, and there's obviously lots of different models of care that's being provided to children. So a lot of learning happens around mealtimes, and around food, and as we're encouraging people to come back into the workforce, there could be missed opportunities if we
35 step into that, sort of, school readiness action too early. So we might be stealing the opportunity for children to sit around the table and learn how to socialise, or having conversations, and so on, and exploring food that they might not be aware of, because we know that the exposure to these healthy foods, particularly vegetables, early on, you know, impacts their acceptance of this going through into adulthood, and that's a critical issue down the track.
40 So I think for two to three year olds, or that environment in early childhood education and care, having properly managed mealtime environments is a really critical part of that. And there's still plenty of opportunity for children to transition into taking lunchboxes, and also then reduces the burden
45 potentially on the parents who are trying to get back into the workforce with young children.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's a really fascinating discussion. You're raising two points to me. One is that – and we've spoken earlier this morning

5 about there's a whole lot that we don't know, and it's a learning environment, and the critical importance of food coming through in the academic literature, et cetera, in my mind, is raising its prominence and importance from what previously was a guideline; it will be provided, parents will do that, or in fact maybe they can't, they don't have the wherewithal, it's particularly hard at the moment, and some children missing out, and that's hurting and stemming their development opportunities. So that's an interesting point, the more we know, the better the research, the more that can be embedded.

10 DR SAMBELL: Yes.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: The second point it's raising to me is that it's another example of where a simple consideration of the fees charged, without understanding the differences in what the services have provided, so those services you're saying, and potentially lower cost, aren't providing the food, and it may not be all, but contrasting that or comparing that with a service that's actually providing food at a level, and therefore incurring those costs, you know, by definition would tend to have higher fees. It just reminds me again of just the care that we need to apply when we make comparisons across
20 the sector as a whole. So two themes: the research is fantastic, and it's raising the prominence. And, I mean, the second point is one internally for us which is how do we interpret and make judgements about the sector as a whole.

25 DR SAMBELL: We certainly know that lunchbox quality is poorer, so when you're looking at - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Than prepared meals, you mean?

30 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Provided meals.

DR SAMBELL: Well, typically lunchboxes are actually of a poorer quality because they haven't the kind of - - -

35 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Than the prepared meals in the service.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Could you say that sentence again, Ros. 'Lunchbox quality is', I missed the critical word.

40 DR SAMBELL: Yes, it's typically poorer because it's - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Than what?

DR SAMBELL: Than if meals were potentially provided at a service.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right. So did you get that, Deb.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. I did, thank you.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Lunchboxes are poorer than in-service prepared meals.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Well, you said potentially provided, but you meant all - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: On average.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: On average.

DR SAMBELL: Well, obviously it depends on the service.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: You know, because there is a variation of quality across the service for provision, and at the moment we can see that only 10 per cent - - -

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: But giving that choice between in-service provision and parents providing it, is potentially leading to a duality of poorer quality food, nutrition, through the lunchbox. Notwithstanding the mirroring of future behaviours, the research is suggesting we're hurting or having an impact on children's development, so that's interesting.

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DR SAMBELL: Absolutely. So you've got examples of, if you get down to the nutrient level, like, low iron levels in young children's diets actually affects their IQ.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: And that's irreversible. So when we try to build the potential of children, we need to really optimise those foundational nutrition opportunities.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Now, I'll ask something, which we ourselves are not constraining ourselves by, because we think we can solve every problem, but not all services will have the capacity to provide meals as they don't have kitchens, they don't have the facilities. What's your response to that when you're talking about a more universal approach, what does it mean for those services that don't currently have the facilities or the capacity?

40

DR SAMBELL: Okay. So I'll just probably preface that statement with a little bit to probably add credibility to some of this commentary, is that on the National Nutrition Network, we have 36 members that represent all jurisdictions in Australia, from government, from research, and peak training bodies as well, and what we are hearing on the east coast from our members is this growing third party catering where services are actually outsourcing the provision. But because it's third party catering, the quality - - -

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So there's a solution.

5 DR SAMBELL: But the quality hasn't been actually set.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.

DR SAMBELL: So that actually has been sub-standard.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

DR SAMBELL: And I have heard stories of it not being well accepted, and it also has an expense attached to it as well.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.

DR SAMBELL: But when you think about the costing that we did, which is \$2 per child per day, you know, it is such a small amount considering what proportion that would be of the child care subsidy. And under wages, you know, food comes up as a fairly big cost for services, but it's really a big difference between it.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Ros, is that just the food cost or is that the cost of having the chef, and, you know - - -

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DR SAMBELL: That is simply the food cost.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay.

30 DR SAMBELL: We did some ballpark figures, which would need some further exploration, for a food insecurity inquiry in WA, which the report was finalised last year, and recommendations came from that, and we were suggesting probably between \$8 to \$10 per child per day would cover off on in-house costs around employing someone.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: And there's also different models of research that we're looking into, and a colleague at Flinders University looked a model where meal boxes were actually provided to child care services with pre-planned menus, and then the cooks who don't necessarily have the qualifications to plan, or they don't have the time to shop, are actually preparing these sort of foods, or these recipes that are provided.

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45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: So there's lots of different models that we need to explore, and that obviously requires research, funding and support. In addition to that model that I've talked about in Queensland, you know, we could roll that

aggregation of data out for all of the jurisdictions in Australia, and present that to government organisations saying, 'Here are services that need your support first'.

5 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Do you talk to ACECQA?

10 DR SAMBELL: Yes, absolutely. So I met with ACECQA probably about two weeks ago - - -

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And what's their response?

15 DR SAMBELL: They are very supportive, and they certainly have an open door policy for us to share this information with them, and they want to work with us to see, in their capacity as a guiding body, because as you heard from the previous speaker, they're not the regulatory body, that has to then be devolved to the jurisdictions, and WA is different to all other states, because we have the Department of Communities, but all other states is the
20 Department of Education as well, and there seems to be a strong compliance focus, and there's obviously a very big delay in actually regularly assessing and rating services as well. And when there's no on-the-ground free support such as WA, you know, providing a quality improvement pathway for those services falls back to the assessment and rating officers. So that division of
25 their responsibility, yes, it probably needs to be addressed.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes. And how receptive is the local regulatory department in WA, or other jurisdictions, do you get - - -

30 DR SAMBELL: You know, I personally have a very good relationship with the Department of Communities here, who are very receptive. And at the beginning of last year, we were invited and we ran a training session for 50 of their authorised officers to discuss how they could assess ECEC food environments, and so on.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: And do you talk to ECEC providers and get a sense of how receptive are they to what you're saying, or what are they seeing as the barriers, or is because people don't know they should be doing, or?

40 DR SAMBELL: Yes. So two weeks ago, we met with a peak body in Brisbane who has a large number of services across Australia, about 750 from memory, and they were really saying, 'We would be happy to take on any help that you could provide to support building the skills and capacity of our staff to improve the equality of the food environment'.

45 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Have you done studies that – like, do you know what the proportion of ECEC services that offer food, and those that don't?

DR SAMBELL: That is the golden question.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So nobody knows that, is that right, or?

5 DR SAMBELL: New South Wales have a very good recording system called PHIMS, and they are the only state that accurately - - -

COMMISSIONER GROPP: A very good what, Ros?

10 DR SAMBELL: Recording system, an internal system.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Right, thank you.

15 DR SAMBELL: Because they provide on-the-ground free support with (indistinct), really.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's called PHIMS, is it?

DR SAMBELL: P-H-I-M-S.

20 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: P-H-I-M-S.

25 DR SAMBELL: And when we aggregated the data in Queensland with the support of a government funded body, you know, they phone every service to say, 'Are you providing food or are you not?', and we would need to do the same across all jurisdictions. So that policy brief I talked about, which says one tick box, that happens in child care management systems or in assessment and rating systems that says, 'How does your service provide food?', that would actually - - -

30 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I'm going off script here, but, Lou, do you know whether the ACCC had that level of granularity in their cost starter, whether the services identify whether they did or did not provide food?

35 MS WILL: I don't think so. But Bec, if you're online, or somebody from the quad team, can you have a look at the ACCC data request and let us know via a message to Nick?

40 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: I don't know whether they are online, I can only see two other people. But anyway, it was just an aside.

MS WILL: Yes, yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Because it's an interesting - - -

45 MS WILL: I think we've asked that question, I think the answer was no. I've asked Bec that question in the past, and I think the answer was no, Martin.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Okay.

DR SAMBELL: So being able to have access to that type of data as well.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Yes.

5 DR SAMBELL: And I should also - - -

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It's an interesting parallel with the Royal Commission into aged care, I think, which amount spent on elderly people in a day was quantified, I think, at around \$6.50 a day, deemed to be highly
10 inadequate, but obviously we're talking adults in that situation.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. I'm not sure, Deb, how many meals we'd be talking about, and maybe you have a view, Ros, but I suspect it's at least one, and maybe a snack, you know - - -
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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It's a real good question, or issue to raise, Martin, you know, we spoke to Karen Thorpe and her big project is called '10,000 hours', which is the maximum – or not the maximum, but a child in full-time care might spend 10,000 hours in care before they go to school.
20

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And as we know, that's not the typical, but there are plenty of children there for their main meals. And I have also seen –
25 I don't know whether it's research done in your network, Ros, or even if it's international, but I have seen assessments of the average proportion of calorie intake that a child below school age receives in a day care centre. It's a very high proportion typically, as I understand it. I don't know whether that's research – is that ringing a bell with you, is that research in your network, or
30 that's something international that I've read?

DR SAMBELL: I've done my PhD in that, so that reflects the types of information that I found, but that's obviously for a WA type of context, I haven't done it more broadly than that. But, you know, a year's gone by, so in
35 the early 2000s, there was a policy in Western Australia which was requiring services to provide 67 per cent of Australian dietary guidelines. And unfortunately, the monitoring of that presented some challenges, so that's no longer in place. But it's been a long time that we've been trying to improve the quality, and unless we have that mandatory regulatory support, and
40 guidelines, because the sector is very compliance focused, but it needs support to do that.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Have you done any work around the proportion of children who might need additional support? So we talked about food
45 insecurity in a general sense, and part of our draft recommendations are targeting in on supporting those families, and particular those children, who are missing out now, lower income cohorts. They may well be more food insecure than others, and therefore, perhaps to my point earlier, Deb, of – well, it might only be one meal and a snack, but that might be the average for

those children who are missing out, and are subject to food insecurity, and I think you mentioned the phrase, Deb, which is, 'This might be their primary meal'.

5 DR SAMBELL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And we saw it in other jurisdictions where they were getting a meal when they first arrived, and a snack, and then they were going home with additional food.

10

DR SAMBELL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: So there was a level of – which is going beyond the average, I suppose.

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DR SAMBELL: What's emerging.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And I just wonder have you seen that and/or other than, 'Yes, I've seen it', but do you have data on what proportion of children, and the characteristics that might need more than just the average, I suppose.

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DR SAMBELL: The short answer to that is no.

25 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right, okay.

DR SAMBELL: And typically, you know, we are seeing ECEC services providing morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea, but they can also provide breakfast and late afternoon tea.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Right.

DR SAMBELL: So there's five meal opportunities that would be provided. The National Nutrition Network is actually proposing a national food environment to audit, to help us better understand these different contexts, especially by areas of remoteness. So what you're sort of talking about is, 'What are those barriers in those regional and remote communities that inhibit children actually accessing a good quality diet? Is it around food security?', and that would certainly be part of the questions that we would be asking, but we need funding to support something at that scale.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes. You also raised an interesting point, that I hadn't really thought about, but is probably something we do need to take into account is that it would also feed staff.

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DR SAMBELL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: And if they're working in relatively poorer areas, and they themselves are subject to a degree of food insecurity, then it

potentially it might be addressing multiple areas of disadvantage. Yes, it's really interesting area that I think we need to - - -

DR SAMBELL: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: A really interesting area. I think we saw in the South Australian Royal Commission – this doesn't directly answer your question, Martin, but it kind of goes to it – I think we saw there that one-third of long day care centres provide access to a food bank for families.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Really.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It's pretty high.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, that is very high.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So it's telling us something about poverty and food insecurity in some communities, I guess.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

DR SAMBELL: So one point I will add to that, Martin, if you don't mind. So if you think about the developmental outcomes of children, and that point you've raised around if the carers are actually food insecure as well, the conversations that they have around the table could be very different, and we're trying to build these lifelong habits and relationship for those children.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes.

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DR SAMBELL: So if there's not food at home, and a child might leave something on the plate, it's going, 'Well, don't waste that. Eat everything', and we're then stealing that opportunity to help that child self-regulate and make some choices, and provide that agency that's actually required. So it has a sort of flow-on effect, which I haven't touched on very much today, so I thought I wanted to add that point.

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COMMISSIONER GROPP: Self-regulation.

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COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Exactly. Was there anything else you wanted to add, Ros? I think we've got the general thrust, and I think it's very important for us to take onboard.

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DR SAMBELL: Yes. The National Nutrition Network are an amazing group of people, and we do this in a voluntary capacity. But what we have found, and certainly the research around the network was part of my PhD, was that we are a critical intermediary as knowledge brokers, because we bring together those researchers, the policy decision-makers, the practitioners, and we de-silo those efforts, but we do need some additional funding support to actually really realise that we know needs to happen.

5 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Well, one of our recommendations is to support the research, particular as it relates into early childhood education and care, because there's so much we don't know, there's an emerging series of insights, and I think food and nutrition for children is one that I know Karen Thorpe is very strong on this, and so the NNN.

DR SAMBELL: That's right.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: The National Nutrition Network, there you go.

DR SAMBELL: Lovely.

15 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Support the NNN.

20 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. Thank you so much, Ros, for this conversation and, more broadly, for the work you do and the network does. I wasn't previously aware of the National Nutrition Network. I'm really grateful for the information, the policy briefs, and so on, that you've shared with us. So I don't think it's inappropriate if I ask you to extend that thanks to the members of your network. I think you've brought really important issues to our attention.

25 DR SAMBELL: Lovely. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you very much, Ros.

30 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thank you for coming in. It's been great, thank you.

DR SAMBELL: Thank you.

35 COMMISSIONER GROPP: Okay, that concludes the schedule for public hearings for the day. I think that's right, isn't it?

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Yes, we have other meetings, but - - -

40 COMMISSIONER GROPP: But before I formally close proceedings, as I alluded earlier, is there anyone out there, wherever you are, who wants to appear today and make a short presentation? I think you can just put your hand up, or do something like that. Okay, I'll adjourn today's proceedings. The next hearings will be held in Canberra next Tuesday. Is that correct?

45 MS WILL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: Thanks very much, everyone.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks, Lisa, Martin. Thanks everyone.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: Thanks, Deb.

5 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Bye. Bye, Ros.

DR SAMBELL: Bye.

10 COMMISSIONER STOKIE: You'll join us later though, Deb, I'm sure.

COMMISSIONER GROPP: For the meetings.

15 COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I will absolutely, yes. That's in 11.40 to 2.40.

MS WILL: I'm not sure what time it is for you, Deb.

COMMISSIONER STOKIE: It's 12.40 our time. It will be 3.40 your time.

20 COMMISSIONER GROPP: 3.40? Oh her time, yes.

COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: 3.40.

MATTER ADJOURNED