

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 28 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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WITNESS

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issue Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile telephones should be turned to silent at this point. I welcome Emma King, the CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Service.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I now invite you to proceed with a brief, 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome.

Ms KING: Thank you. And thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today as well. VCOSS, as you probably know, is the peak body for community and social services in Victoria. We represent the interests of the Victorian community, particularly focusing on Victorians who are facing poverty and disadvantage. Our member organisations are very deeply embedded in communities. They excel in building engagement and trust and provide frontline services to vulnerable families and members of diverse communities as well.

As I am sure you have heard all morning, and you know innately, the early years of a child's life is a key time in terms of the foundations for good life outcomes and can often pave the way for overcoming disadvantage. The early years provide an opportunity for children to excel with the right supports and grow into healthy adults that contribute to thriving communities. But when children miss out on vital early learning or they do not receive the support they need we know this impacts on their entire future trajectory. That includes health outcomes and broader social outcomes—employment, contact with the justice system et cetera.

We know that many people from diverse communities come to Victoria to find better opportunities for their families, and we know that the early years of a child's life can set them up for success. We also know that disadvantaged children have the most to gain from high-quality early childhood education and that no community is immune to disadvantage and vulnerability.

As you know, Victoria is one of the most multicultural societies in the world, and almost 50 per cent of Victoria's population were born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas. More than one-quarter of Victoria's population speaks one of 260 languages at home other than English. We in Victoria also receive approximately one-third of Australia's refugee intake.

We know that the State Government understands the value of early learning, but it is worth reiterating that every dollar invested in early childhood education sees a return of approximately \$6 as well, so not only is there strong motivation from a moral and social imperative but there are also really sensible financial reasons for investing as well. The Victorian Government has made a life-changing commitment in terms of investing in rolling out three-year-old kindergarten. I absolutely want to acknowledge that. I think many of us has spent much of our life in working to achieve this, so we are very thrilled that that is the case. But we know not all children benefit from early childhood services and some are more likely to face structural barriers than others. Children who are not proficient in English are more than 90 per cent likely to start school from behind. We know that children who start school from behind are not only unlikely to catch up but the problem is the gap widens as they continue to get older as well.

Three key factors in engaging CALD communities in early years services include trust, community hubs that are place-based and codesigned, and providing flexible and adequate funding. Without trust and without

tailored services that meet the needs of communities—and a lack of funding to support these things—many vulnerable CALD families are unlikely to feel culturally safe in engaging in services, and they risk missing out.

I really want to highlight the importance of trust and building relationships in engaging with CALD communities in vital early years services as well. And when I say early years services that are key to building social connection, I am saying that before this can happen trust must be understood as very much a gateway to building engagement in the services, which I can talk about further.

Our submission identifies some key ways in which organisations can be supported in terms of building and fostering the trust of diverse communities not only to enhance their engagement in vital services and reap the benefits for better life outcomes but also broadly better social connectedness, inclusion and health for entire families and for whole communities as well. We have heard from our member organisations and community sector organisations that they are well-placed to support vulnerable members of the CALD community, particularly those who are new parents, generally new mums, have small children and are at an age to begin early learning when they have got flexible funding and place-based initiatives that work in community hub models.

I just wanted to very briefly touch on a couple of these. One is Doveton College; I am not sure whether you have heard directly from them as well. They bring these important elements together, and for any of you that have been fortunate enough to attend their college, you leave feeling incredibly inspired. It is a fantastic community hub. Last year there 61 per cent of students were identified as having a language background other than English, with more than 50 nationalities and languages spoken. And while the sample size was small, Doveton College found that the children who attended early learning back in 2013 were up to 15 months ahead in their reading and up to three months ahead in their numeracy compared to those who did not attend early learning at the college.

Just one quick example there: an Afghan mum who first came to Doveton and joined a supported playgroup with her daughter, who had some communication challenges and was extremely shy and was overwhelmed in groups. The mum continued to attend the supported playgroup with her daughter through discussions with playgroup leaders—it is interesting that the leaders at Doveton College have spoken to me at length around some of the cultural challenges there because in many communities leaving your children behind—they walk around and carry their children with them, so the notion of not just putting them down and walking away but leaving them in an unfamiliar setting is something that is not normal. The mother stood by her belief that this was the best thing for her daughter, supported by the playgroup and the early learning staff, and they have seen phenomenal development in this little girl in terms of by the time she started school she was excited, happy, participating and ready to learn. The staff talk about how it could have been a very different outcome had she not had this support and her family had not had the support in the very beginning.

Another example is the City of Brimbank, which is one of the most culturally diverse municipalities in Australia and has a high proportion of families with children. It is also the third most disadvantaged municipality in the state. Brimbank City Council has a range of initiatives to meet the needs of its community. For example, they run a shopping centre playgroup that is informal in a very familiar setting. It does not have limited spaces and it has a bicultural worker or facilitator. They have got a new service access team to create ‘no wrong door’, so if you call the council, it does not matter who picks up the phone. This is designed to be able to help you with maternal and child health, kindergarten or tell you about other services. And we know that that very first opportunity to connect with a CALD family is vitally important, and if you miss it, you may not get another opportunity.

We have heard from community organisations who have had success in supported playgroups, running training and upskilling CALD caregivers, who then often go on to become employees running playgroups themselves. At Doveton College, again, almost 100 parents that completed study at the college have transitioned into sound employment, many for the first time. One mum came to Australia from overseas 10 years ago started taking her youngest child to Doveton College playgroup in 2012. At the time she lacked confidence in English and found it hard to connect with other parents. This led to volunteering at the college. She completed a course in hospitality and Doveton’s Creating Capable Leaders course. She is now employed at a local childcare centre with lots of encouragement from her daughter, who suggests that she has lots of friends and possibly more than she does herself.

So in terms of looking then at making sure we have got services and we have got long-term funding so that they are able to invest in programs not only for children but looking at the broader impacts for the community as well. That is a very brief overview, but I thank you again for this opportunity and am very happy to take any questions that you might have. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Emma, for your presentation. I will just start with one question. The Committee has heard about, and clearly we understand, the benefits of a multicultural and multilingual early childhood workforce and a workforce generally that has an increased diversity. What might the Victorian Government or local government do to promote this within the sector? Perhaps you can also say some of the things that VCOSS is doing in relation to increasing diversity in your workforce.

Ms KING: Are you looking particularly at the need for greater numbers of early childhood educators as well overall?

The CHAIR: Absolutely; that is right.

Ms KING: I think it is a really great question. I can talk about one of the initiatives that VCOSS is doing in partnership with RMIT that does not specifically go to early childhood; it goes to the broader community services sector if you like. One of the challenges we are facing across community services as a whole—so, for example, to look at early childhood, to look at those working within and the fact that we as a community are growing older and we need more services in that space, disability, family violence—is we are finding that we have a huge demand for a workforce that we simply cannot meet across the board. One of the things we have done in partnership with RMIT is then to name up the fact that because we do not have the workforce that we need, for example, in disability and in aged care, we have to look at how we create services that are seen as gold-class services that lead to good and sustainable jobs. Through the work we have done with RMIT we have offered a number of courses that are scholarship courses for people actually of any age to come and contribute to.

One of the things we have found through that is—so if we are looking at people who often have perhaps missed out on educational opportunities in the past—one of the key barriers they often have is cost. Again, I would acknowledge the free TAFE that the Victorian Government is offering. We have found though that for a number of people they often need a bit more than the cost of their courses covered. That might be around looking at some assistance to help them, and we have found in this instance everyone is a little bit different. We found that in the first course that we offered, when we got to a certain point a number of students stopped attending. What we found was that when they were phoned and asked why they were not attending it came down to things like they did not have the money for a Myki; they could not afford to actually travel. They might have had issues in terms of child care themselves. Travelling was often overwhelming, and we also had people who had issues with housing and with their mental health et cetera. What we found was having a sort of what could be described, if you like, as a kind of wrap-around support fund that did not actually need to be a huge amount of money and some help—that kind of, ‘How can I help you?’—made a really big difference for people. Looking at having a small stipend fund where you can help people with paying for their Myki so that they can actually attend courses for the year. You can look at actually attending to people with some of the life barriers that fall into place, particularly for people who might be having a more difficult time or might be struggling with broader costs overall. Without a doubt that makes a difference. So I think there is a number of pieces here.

For me, my background is in education, I feel incredibly passionately about the difference that education makes to the life trajectory of everyone and particularly disadvantaged children. It is around looking at how we advertise the fact that working in early childhood, working in community services are good jobs. We have to overcome some of the stigma that is attached there and, to be frank, we do have to look at things like pay, security of employment. They are really important. In terms of then looking at how we attract people from CALD communities to work in those areas, there are a lot of different examples that we have seen, and Doveton is one. We have seen it in others, be it through other educational institutions where they are not only educating the child but they are seeing that opportunity to link with parents who may have been in intergenerational unemployment or for whatever reason may not have had the same educational outcomes as others, and part of it is saying, ‘How can I help you?’, but having people understand that this is the pathway to actually be able to find work, to be able to engage in community. But there is a big part of that about ‘How can

I help you?’ along the way and not having someone feeling stigmatised because of the fact that they might not have the money for travel. A whole lot of other things sit around that. Or, for example, if they are struggling with English, the notion of then undertaking a course, even at certificate III and IV level, could feel really overwhelming. So it is looking at what support is provided to someone to set them up for success, because we know if they undertake those requirements at a sound provider, a high-quality provider, fundamentally if they work in the community services space, including early childhood, they are going to have a job for life. We cannot attract enough qualified workers at the moment in the early childhood space, so we need to do everything we can to talk that up as a profession and to actually look at how we value that within society as a profession as well, because it is a game changer.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is. I will start with the Member for Geelong.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, Emma, for your presentation. We really appreciate you coming along today. I have got a couple of questions. Just on the workforce issue—and you talked about the work with RMIT, which is fantastic—is there any focus on the rural and regional areas? A lot of this work tends to be very Melbourne-centric, and very little is happening in regional and rural areas, so I am just interested if anything is happening in that space too.

Ms KING: Yes, and it is a great point that you raised, because we also know in terms of looking at how we attract staff into rural and regional areas and give every child who comes from a rural and regional community the very best chance in life, we need to do that for the children as well as for the adults in those communities. Look, I think there is a lot more that can be done. We have focused on it to some degree at RMIT and we are looking at how we can potentially scale up and deliver. I think one of the key things at the moment is often the expectation for people that they have to travel to be able to attend courses. Particularly in this area, where people may well have young children et cetera themselves, it is not realistic. If I was to go from the lens of people who are often disadvantaged already, the costs associated with moving potentially out of home and away from supports is also really significant. I think there is a really big area of focus here. The TAFEs offer an enormous opportunity, I think, in terms of looking at where they are located and looking at the fantastic programs that a number of them also already run, but again looking at how you kind of wrap around help so that people can study where they live and actually undertake fantastic employment opportunities where they live rather than having to relocate. We know when we look at unemployment figures they are always more profound when we look at rural and regional areas—always. There is huge opportunity there for early childhood and broader community services around having actual jobs where you live as well. So it is about providing training where people live and jobs where people live, and there is huge opportunity there. There is some work happening that is great. I looked at the work when I was at the recent training awards with Minister Tierney. There were so many great examples in terms of some of those programs that are being delivered on a rural and regional basis, looking at Mildura, for example. But I think there is always more that we can do.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, they are a bit ad hoc, aren’t they? I think the important thing is about reflecting the community. If we want to encourage particularly migrant people and refugees into those courses, then we have to have the support structures to be able to do that.

Ms KING: Exactly right.

Ms COUZENS: So any work that you can do on that would be fantastic.

Ms KING: I am very happy to talk about that further. We are very passionate about it.

Ms COUZENS: During the Inquiry we have heard evidence—a lot of evidence actually—around the value of playgroups. People are raving about three-year-old kinder, which is fantastic. Do you see that three-year-old kinder will overtake the playgroup program or do you think we should be running both?

Ms KING: Running both is critical. One of the things I would say is that in my previous role, which was as the CEO of Early Learning Association Australia, we did quite a bit of work with Playgroup Victoria, because one of the challenges we found was that people often did not give playgroups the status, to be frank, that they deserve. It is really interesting. We looked at a couple of models that the Victorian Government trialled, and I have not kept perhaps as close an eye on those as I should have. We were struggling to get the numbers in

particular communities to have a full kindergarten group or to get the level of subsidisation to enable a kindergarten program to go along. But we also found that in some communities playgroup is not valued as highly as it should be, and that impacted on attendance rates. Again, particularly supported playgroups but actually all playgroups are really important in terms of looking at just embedding in community and in terms of looking at the strength of community and the strength of opportunity to come together. The reality is that you have often got quite skilled playgroup leaders, play-based learning, and actually how we connect those up better to kindergarten I think is a really strong way to go. To me it is not one or the other; it is actually both. They both offer separate but interrelated opportunities. I think it is gold.

And going to your point about regional communities, if you have travelled for a really long way to take your child to three-year-old kinder that may only be sessional kinder, I think there is an opportunity to link some of that to playgroup as well. Coming from a rural community myself, if people are driving for a long way off a farm to go to kinder for a couple of hours, we need to look at actually how to make the most of that opportunity. It is one thing to enrol; it is another to regularly attend and regularly participate, so we need to look at every opportunity to do that. But my recognition of three-year-old kindergarten goes alongside my recognition of playgroups, and they are both incredibly valuable.

Ms COUZENS: And do you think local government has a role in that?

Ms KING: Absolutely.

Ms COUZENS: In actually promoting the playgroups?

Ms KING: Yes, absolutely. And I think there is huge potential there as well. In fact some of them do that and do that very regularly as well.

Ms COUZENS: Some do not.

Ms KING: That is right. In the same way too that you see it really shift from one council to another whether they provide childcare services and whether they provide kindergarten services as well. Some stick a bit more to roads and rubbish and others go more into the early childhood space, and it is interesting watching the different decisions that each local council makes and the impact for residents.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. What strategies would you suggest to ensure that CALD children are not missing out on services?

Ms KING: There are a number of different strategies, and I think there is a lot to be learned from looking at where local councils are doing a fantastic job. I might look at Brimbank, and I know Maribyrnong is doing fantastic work as well in terms of a number of things. First is, rather than expecting people often to come into a service, going into communities to say, 'How can we work with you?', and looking at where some of the key influencers are and the decision-makers within families as well, which is often the mum or a grandparent, particularly given that some of the constructs they have got are very different from what people have potentially left in their own country as well. I do think there is a huge part there in the 'How can we help you?' rather than 'Aren't you lucky that you might come into our service?'. And there is a big part there that is attitudinal. I have seen examples of where people are incredibly welcomed, and I have seen examples of where they are not. That is really important.

If you were to look at Brimbank as the example, for no matter what reason that someone might come into contact with council, it is about saying 'Here's this opportunity over here' and going to where people are and making sure that people are genuinely welcomed. There is another component there which perhaps goes to the earlier question that you asked, which is looking to have people, wherever possible, run and facilitate programs who are from the local communities, even if that is learning alongside. I am trying to think of which city council was speaking to you about this, but they very intentionally were recruiting people and particularly women out of local communities, even if that included training them up to work alongside others perhaps in the first instance, because they knew that there would be a greater level of trust in having someone from their own community as well as continuing to upskill people and give them employment opportunities that they would not otherwise have. There are some really brilliant strategies out there, and it is not a one-size-fits-all model either.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, that is right.

Ms KING: That is where I think place-based is really important—understanding community. In some municipalities there is a much greater cultural mix than others, so having a genuine understanding of that and looking to tailor that accordingly, but engaging with local communities themselves is first and foremost.

Ms COUZENS: Great.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Emma. What I was just about to ask you already alluded to, especially in the Doveton area. I come from the south-east. In terms of the culturally diverse community, do you think that the community is aware of the benefit of early childhood education? I mean, do they know? If not, then is there anything that we can do to promote that?

Ms KING: I think that is a really great question, and I think Doveton illustrates that it is about how you can work with the community so that they understand that that is the case. I do not think that everyone is aware. With the example that I gave earlier of supported playgroups, we knew in some communities they were not as valued as they should have been and it was around looking at: how do you bring people in to have them understand the benefit? I would say that is the case probably across all of the community, otherwise you see kids pop up at school who have not really engaged in early childhood education. And we do not want our early childhood services just to be there for the wealthy and those who are doing all right. They are actually there for all of our population. In terms of our diverse communities I think there are a range of things that can work in that space.

We do have in Victoria fantastic opportunities through maternal and child health nurses. It depends on where a family is at, but for example, if a child is born here, the reality is that the maternal and child health nurse is going into their home to do the first visit, and they should be having their regular visits with that child and that family throughout that time. It is really critical that they are speaking with families about the importance of early childhood education in a very respectful, gentle way as well. But for me it is around looking at every single opportunity we can have in terms of encouraging people to engage.

I do think another clear example is where we have people from the local community speaking to one another, because that is often where the trust is built. A number of our community sector organisations focus very heavily on that and having bilingual workers and workers from the immediate community talk about that. I think the example of the Afghan woman from Doveton community college speaks to that. Early childhood education was not a well-known, well-trusted concept, so I think sometimes it is seeing someone participate and welcome others along that is really important. It is often that understanding within a community as well. I think there is lots more, to be frank, for us to do in that space, and to do collectively. When I say that, from VCOSS's work I am mindful of all of our member organisations that live and work in local communities. I am mindful of the work that local councils do. It is not something that I think any one of us can own on our own. It is actually about how we do that together. Everything we can do to promote high-quality early childhood education is a bit of a no-brainer.

We have talked about a number of things with the department as well around how to make things simple, so for example, showing that an early childhood service is accredited. Whether that makes a difference to every CALD community, I do not know, but for example, showing with just a tick that this is an accredited service, that gives people confidence. What are the sorts of visual things we can do that actually can make it really simple to someone? I think no matter where a family or community engages in our society—whether it is with their GP, whether it is with their maternal and child health nurse or others—having space to have information about the value of early childhood education, having people who can explain it to others, we know, has a benefit that is just phenomenal, and also the cost, on the other side, of not doing it is phenomenal.

Mr TAK: Just a subsequent comment. I think, like you said earlier, the migrant and refugee communities have come to Australia for better opportunities and they know for sure that education is what it is—it is the only thing that gives that stepping stone. But like you said, how are we going to engage?

Ms KING: That is right. Julius Colman—who funded much of Doveton community college, and they are about to work with, I think, another 10 communities—talks a lot about it. I have been fortunate enough to be in

a number of meetings with him recently around saying the migrant and newly arrived communities are actually really motivated and very aspirational for their children as well. I think a broader part for us as a society is making sure people see early childhood education as a part of that, not just when you hit school.

Ms SETTLE: In your submission you talk about the need to fund models such as community connectors and service navigators. Can you explain to us a bit about those?

Ms KING: Yes. It is in relation to these roles, but also a little bit broader. It has been a while since I visited them, so they might have changed things, but I know in Springvale there was a service where you walked in the door—they are very clever—and they had their toy library service set up against the window. So if you were walking past—it was near the train station—they had a number of people walk through because they could see all the toys in the library and they were then coming in to say, ‘How might I borrow one of these toys?’. It was like, ‘You can join the toy library’. Then there is an early years setting there as well and there are a number of other services. So it is that kind of nice way about why you might go through the door.

One of the things they spoke about in their early days was that in the early childhood setting they have the staff in the rooms et cetera, they have got the toy library staff—but how do you get that person who is at the front desk to help someone with any query that they might come in with, to help them join up? Ideally we want people coming in the door, but sometimes it is not easy to find the service that you might need, or to have someone say, ‘That’s great. That’s fantastic. We can lend you some toys. Sign up—that’s easy—but did you know that we also offer this service as well?’. And it can feel overwhelming for any of us. My parents were teachers, worked as teachers, and I still found going into the early childhood system really overwhelming—‘How do I enrol my child? How do I get them into child care, when actually the services often are full to the brim?’. And it can feel incredibly overwhelming, and you need to have people who can help you navigate that, because the last thing you want is someone then from a CALD community saying ‘We want this opportunity’ but materials not being appropriately formed, or just finding it really hard to navigate, and we know that councils often are pretty good at filling that role. As I said, they will often engage people from direct community to work with people as well. Other community-based organisations do the same, but one of the challenges is in a lot of those either co-located services or community hubs, there is often not that person who can help you join the dots. You might go in for one thing, but you can look at the opportunities. And it is one of the areas where Doveton is gold, the fact they have got maternal and child health services onsite, they have got playgroups on site, they have got cooking classes. It is everything to have you walk in and feel welcome, but to actually then to say ‘How can we help you? We’ve got all these other services here’ is about actually making that sense of belonging and connectedness. But the people that might help that are not always funded in every single service, so there are opportunities I think that are lost in that.

Ms SETTLE: So if they exist you think sometimes within the council frame, are you suggesting that we should look at putting that on a wider service level or funding it to be universal through council?

Ms KING: So council, but I would look at community-based organisations as well. One of the challenges we often have in community-based organisations is that short-term funding. So you will get short-term funding for a year for a supported playgroup or you will have it for another service that is provided, and one of the things I would say about community-based organisations that often does not play true with other parts of government is people are not always trusting of government and government agencies but they generally are trusting of community-based organisations. So whether it is looking at neighbourhood houses or others, that level of trust with community-based organisations is high.

So when I talk about funding in that sense as well, it is also that challenge of if someone the first time they engaged with a program had that sense of belonging but a year later the funding is not there, sometimes we lose that connection and that sense of trust, and we do know that for some people in our society they are not going to go to government to get their information but they will go to their local community service organisation, because that is who they trust and they build that relationship, and that relationship and connection is critically important.

Ms COUZENS: Are there any particular gaps in areas that you see that we should be aware of that you would like to comment on?

Ms KING: That is a great question. There is a balance. I would say looking at place-based is critically important, and I know Government is focusing on different place-based approaches at the moment, and for a variety of different things I think there are huge opportunities in looking at how do we invest more solidly in place, because we know that that makes a real difference. One of the challenges we do have, which just goes back to my earlier comment, is around funding and funding for community sector organisations where there is just not that continuity of funding for families to feel certain that the service they are being given now is going to be offered into the future and the connections that they have with people will continue. We do find, going back to the first question I think that I had around workforce, the demand for the workforce there is huge. I am thinking of Shepparton, for example, actually, where I was speaking to a few people up there that were nine months into a 12-month contract, they did not know whether or not the contract was going to be extended, so then they went and took another job. Who can blame them?

So there is that volatility that makes it really tough. Then not only has that organisation lost a worker, they have potentially lost a number of families that that worker had a connection with as well. So I think there is a lot that we can do in looking at place and what can be provided at place and really strong connections, but genuinely funding that and making sure it can work into the future. There are a number of different models that we have seen. I am really heartened by the fact that the work that has taken place at Doveton is going to be embedded in a number of additional communities, and we see lots of good examples—through local councils, community service organisations, early learning centres et cetera. I think there are lots of opportunity there. But for me, I would dig deeper in place and I would look at actually funding for organisations but also how to make sure families do not miss out by virtue of funding opportunities as well. That is another key one. There were a number of children at Doveton—and it would be worth chatting further; I suspect you might be—where families who could have stayed engaged in that early learning program did not because the cost was prohibitive. So that is a really important component to look at as well.

Ms COUZENS: And interpreter services?

Ms KING: Vital; absolutely vital.

Ms COUZENS: So we have heard of issues around the interpreter services across the regions, in particular.

Ms KING: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: And obviously they are a very necessary service.

Ms KING: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Do you get much feedback from your members around those difficulties and how they might be addressed?

Ms KING: Now, I would not pretend to be an expert here and tell you how it might be addressed—

Ms COUZENS: Yes, sure. I am just interested in what your—

Ms KING: I was trying to think. I recall a little while ago there being some particular issues around interpreters and funding for interpreters, but I would need to go back and look at that a little bit further.

Ms COUZENS: That was not raised as much. It was more about people calling through, and by the time they got somebody—

The CHAIR: The accessibility.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, the accessibility issues around that, and then for a lot of people filling out a kinder form, which was 15 pages or something. Some councils specifically targeted assisting people but others did not, and others were looking at how they would best provide that.

Ms KING: And I think to be given broader early learning opportunities looking at how we assist, be it broader early childhood services, cluster managers that operate a lot of the early years services, local councils—again, going to the fact that it is not only kinder, it is also the before, so we know the importance of the first

thousand days. It is that broader part. We know that high-quality early childhood learning makes a profound difference to every child but particularly disadvantaged children. So it helps everyone across the board. So interpreters are critical.

Ms COUZENS: But I suppose if a parent cannot get interpreted information—

Ms KING: What are they meant to do?

Ms COUZENS: how do they get access?

Ms KING: That is right. It is really important, and it goes back to having the information with maternal and child health nurses, kind of every step, and no matter where they might engage with a service again—whether it be a GP, whether it be maternal and child health services, whether it be on immunisation days; wherever—it is about having people there to assist. Having the interpreter services are absolutely vital.

The CHAIR: Just on a final question, what has been your experience of CALD parents of children with a disability seeking and receiving appropriate support for their children? What can be improved? And what has been the impact of the national disability insurance scheme?

Ms KING: Well, hearing the reports on *AM* this morning, which were from the new CEO of Children and Young People with Disability Australia, who was the deputy CEO of VCOSS as well, this is an area that we feel very passionately about. We know that often, we would say, if you are financially poor and you have got a disability, you have got a double jeopardy within our broader education system. Then again, if you are from a CALD community, potentially—because I would rather go, if you like, from a strengths-based perspective—as was mentioned, often CALD communities have very high educational aspirations for their children. We know many educational institutions are not particularly welcoming of children with disability. Some are excellent, and often then, if you like, the expectation is they will take more children, because for parents who are trying to navigate the system, people want to go somewhere where they are welcome, not where life is made harder. I think that where people from CALD communities are trying to enter a system in the very first instance, and for children who have got disability, one of the things that we find is that often it is just really tough. In terms of getting the support that children need, it is often not provided.

We heard examples on *AM* just this morning in terms of children who are excluded, children who are often restrained in ways that are, to be frank, just horrifying. It concerns me enormously as well for any family who was hearing that who then worries that that is what is going to be their experience, that they then may choose to not engage. We know that for families who have children with disability the fact is that every single step is so often a fight. The example I heard on *AM* this morning was of an autistic boy who is now being homeschooled by virtue of the fact that his school was not welcoming for him. It is simply not good enough. So we know there is a lot more to be done when it comes to NDIS more broadly. I am really glad the royal commission is focusing on education as a first step. I mean, there are so many areas that are important to focus on, but we know that so many children, by virtue of the fact that they have got a disability, are basically being excluded from the education opportunities that they should have, and it is simply not good enough.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Emma.

Ms KING: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That concludes our questions, I think. Can I thank VCOSS for all the work that you do. Your submission was really valuable to us. Your submission now will be part of our deliberations, and next year we will table a report with strong recommendations to Government. So your submission will have absolutely been taken into consideration, and we will keep you updated. You can also remain connected on the Committee's website. Again, on behalf of the Committee I thank you for taking the time to present to us today.

Ms KING: Thank you very much for the opportunity; very much appreciated.

The CHAIR: And thanks for all the work that you do at Brimbank.

Witness withdrew.