

**IN THE MATTER OF
THE BOARD OF INQUIRY
INTO HISTORICAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN BEAUMARIS PRIMARY SCHOOL
AND CERTAIN OTHER GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

Witness Statement of Jenny Atta PSM

Secretary, Department of Education

I, Jenny Atta, Secretary, Department of Education (**DoE**), say as follows in response to the Notice to Produce a Statement issued by the Board of Inquiry and dated 16 October 2023:

A. CURRENT ROLE

1. I have been Secretary of the DoE since March 2019. I am directly responsible for the management of the department and for supporting the children and education portfolio ministers in the management and administration of their portfolios.
2. The DoE provides learning and development support and services focused on achieving education outcomes for children and young people across Victoria.
3. The DoE plays a system steward role by providing support, guidance, oversight and assurance across the early childhood sector of 4,900 approved providers for 400,000 children and families and the government and non-government school sectors of 2,300 schools for over 1 million students.
4. The DoE has direct responsibilities for Victoria's over 1,500 government schools who employ over 85,000 staff and support over 650,000 students.

B. WORK HISTORY

5. My work history at the DoE is set out in my resume, which is attachment **JA-1** to this statement.

C. APOLOGY

6. I want to say on behalf of DoE – to victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Victoria’s government schools – that I am profoundly sorry for the shocking abuse and injury inflicted on you. Abuse and injury that should never have occurred anywhere, but especially in a place where you were not only entitled to feel safe, but where you should have been safest.
7. I understand, and acknowledge, that harm is not just caused by the abuser, but harm is also caused, and is compounded by, a lack of an appropriate response by those in authority. I acknowledge and deeply regret the catastrophic failings of the government school system and DoE over the period of time being examined by this Board of Inquiry. Our schools and the department failed to protect you at a time when you were most vulnerable, when you were a child. I acknowledge this without qualification and genuinely believe that institutions, particularly public institutions, must own and be accountable for their history.
8. It is utterly unacceptable that a child should suffer sexual abuse while they are under the care and supervision of a Victorian government school.
9. In relation to Beaumaris Primary School, and other schools examined through this Inquiry, I want to say that it is profoundly troubling that multiple students were sexually abused at a similar time. This scale of abuse by individuals employed by DoE and entrusted with the care, supervision and education of children, underscores the very serious nature of the failings of the department at that time – and the systems, processes, and regulatory oversight that allowed such abuse and harm to occur.
10. I am deeply sorry for the psychological trauma and injury suffered by former students of our schools as a consequence of this abuse, and the deep impact and harm that this has caused victim-survivors throughout their lives.
11. I understand that this abuse has impacted victim-survivors in significant and different ways. Children have felt fearful and abandoned at school, not able to focus on learning, and not able to enjoy their childhood. Young adults have faced challenges and difficulties as they transitioned to their adult lives, including mental health challenges, difficulties with personal relationships, and

a sense that achieving their full potential in their work and social lives was compromised. Adults have held an enduring concern about whether other children had or continued to suffer abuse at school in the years subsequent to their experience, and parenting can be a source of great anxiety. Victim-survivors have suffered continuing psychological trauma and injury and that at different times in their lives this experience has been more acute, and not always at times they would have predicted or expected.

12. I want to acknowledge the far-reaching impacts of this abuse on secondary victims and impacted communities. I have heard directly from victim-survivors and through evidence given to this inquiry that the impact on parents, spouses, partners, children and other family members is significant, enduring and often unacknowledged.
13. I want to acknowledge the strength and courage of the victim-survivors who have come forward to describe their experiences both to me and as part of this Inquiry, and the bravery and resilience required of any victim-survivor to come forward. I recognise that it is challenging for individual victim-survivors and their family members to raise these issues in seeking to support other victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. I have listened to victim-survivors talk about the experience of community silence, of a reluctance to acknowledge and talk about childhood sexual abuse and the burden of bearing the trauma alone. In this context the advocacy of victim-survivors is so important.
14. And finally, in making these acknowledgements and offering my genuine apology on behalf of the Department of Education, I am acutely conscious of the calls from victim-survivors for not only apology, but for a commitment to action. I am aware of the evidence already before this Board of Inquiry that goes to this point, that without a commitment and follow through on a course of action there is risk of further harm, and an ongoing absence of trust.
15. As Secretary of the Department of Education I genuinely welcome the establishment of this Board of Inquiry. On behalf of the department, I commit to fully engaging with the findings, conclusions and recommendations so that they can inform tangible steps and actions for the Department, and across

Government, to ensure that there are effective supports and services available to victims of historical sexual abuse in government schools.

D. SUPPORT SERVICES

Qn. 34. What actions has the Department taken in response to recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Sexual Abuse by Religious and Other Non- Government Organisations that are relevant to providing support services for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools?

16. I understand this question to be directed to support services in the nature of therapeutic treatment services for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools.
17. The DoE has not taken any actions relating to the provision of these support services specifically in response to the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse or the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Sexual Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations. I have explained the reasons for this below.
18. The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry in the Handling of Child Sexual Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations did not make any recommendations relating to support services to victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools. The Inquiry focused on religious and other non government organisations.
19. The relevant recommendations made in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse related to the portfolio responsibilities of other departments, in particular the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (**DIFFH**) and the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety (**DJCS**), rather than the portfolio responsibilities of the DoE.
20. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse made six recommendations in respect of support services for survivors of ,

child sexual abuse that were relevant to the Victorian Government. They are recommendations 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.6, 9.8 and 9.9 set out at pages 15 to 17 of Volume 9: Advocacy, support and therapeutic treatment services of the Final Report.

21. The recommendations were directed to Commonwealth, state and territory governments:
 - (a) Recommendations 9.1, 9.2, 9.3 and 9.6 were directed to the Australian Government and state and territory governments and concern the funding and delivery of support services for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse (9.1 and 9.6), with specific recommendations in respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing approaches (9.2) and services for people with disability (9.3).
 - (b) Recommendation 9.8 is concerned with the Australian Government and state and territory government agencies responsible for the delivery of human services ensuring that relevant policy frameworks and strategies recognise the needs of victims-survivors and the benefits of implementing trauma informed approaches.
 - (c) Recommendation 9.9 was directed to the Australian Government, in conjunction with state and territory governments, and concerns the establishment and funding of a national centre to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse, support help-seeking and guide best practice advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment.
22. The Victorian Government has acted on all six of these recommendations. The last implementation report, the Victorian Government Annual Report 2022 – Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, published in April 2023, identifies that two were completed and four were in progress. A copy of the Victorian Government Annual Report 2022 – Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is attachment **JA-2** to my statement (see pp 13 to 15).
23. In Victoria, the funding and delivery of the support services referred to in recommendations 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.6, 9.8 and 9.9 primarily falls within the

portfolio responsibilities of the DFFH (and the former Department of Health and Human Services). Accordingly, DFFH has largely led the response to these recommendations. In addition, DJCS has portfolio responsibilities for the criminal justice system and funds or delivers a range of support services for victims of crime.

24. Broadly speaking, the following support services are available to victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in schools:
- (a) Specialist Sexual Assault Support Services (**SASS**) for victim-survivors of sexual assault funded by DFFH, with additional funding in line with Recommendation 9.6. This includes Centres Against Sexual Assault (**CASAs**) as well as specialist supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders, persons with disability and care leavers, in line with Recommendations 9.2, 9.3 and 9.6. SASS may collaborate with and provide referrals to other services, in line with Recommendation 9.1.
 - (b) Multi-disciplinary centres, which include specialist police units (**SOCITS**), a SASS and Child Protection (who would be involved only if the victim-survivor was a child) co-located in eight locations across Victoria.
 - (c) Victims of crime support services funded or delivered by DJCS.
25. In addition, in line with Recommendation 9.9, the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse opened in October 2021.
26. The National Redress Scheme which commenced on 1 July 2018 also arose out of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in response to the recommendations of the 2015 *Redress and Civil Litigation Report*¹. This National Redress Scheme is specifically designed for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse occurring before 1 July 2018 where a participating institution was responsible for bringing the child into contact with the perpetrator. It is a significant recent reform, intended to

¹ https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/final_report_-_redress_and_civil_litigation.pdf

provide an alternative pathway for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse to seek redress outside of civil claims.

27. Whilst the National Redress Scheme falls outside the terms of reference for the Inquiry, it provides relevant context for the support services available to victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools. The DoE was an early signatory to the National Redress Scheme. Under the scheme, amongst other things, victim-survivors can access counselling and psychological care. The DFFH is responsible for implementing this aspect of the National Redress Scheme on behalf of the DoE and all other Victorian Government institutions.
28. Under current governance arrangements, the DoE's core focus, accountability under its portfolio responsibilities and funding is to support the learning and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people aged 3-18 in our early childhood education and school systems. The DoE's engagement with former students who are no longer in the education system arises predominantly in the context of the National Redress Scheme, and in connection with civil claims, through their legal representatives.
29. For these reasons, the DoE does not provide support services in the nature of therapeutic treatment services directly to victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools. The ways in which the DoE facilitates support services to adult victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse are limited and rely largely on the specialist services provided by other departments and funded providers, in line with the Royal Commission recommendations referred to above. These will be addressed by Kate Rattigan, Deputy Secretary, People and Executive Services.

Qn. 35. What reviews or evaluations has the Department undertaken or commissioned to assess the effectiveness of these actions?

30. The DoE has not undertaken or commissioned any reviews or evaluations because the DoE has not taken any such actions, for the reasons set out in response to question 34.

Qn. 26. In relation to support services for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools:

- a) Does the Department know what support services victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools need or want?**
- b) If so, what support services do victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools need or want?**
- c) If not, has the Department conducted any consultation on this? Why or why not?**

31. The DoE has not conducted a formal consultation process with victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse as to what they need or want in terms of support services. The reason for this, as I have explained in [23] to [29], is that those services are primarily provided by DFFH and DJCS. I understand that the design and development of those support services by DFFH and DJCS has been informed by a number of inquiries and reviews, including with the input of victim-survivors and advocacy groups.
32. Earlier this year I had the opportunity to meet with a small number of victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse in Victoria's government schools. I joined the then Minister for Education and a member of the Premier's Office to meet with the victims-survivors, family members and representatives. The meeting was arranged by the office of the Minister for Education. At the meeting we discussed a wide range of topics which included the experiences of the victim-survivors of child sexual abuse at government schools and the impact that child sexual abuse had on their lives.
33. In relation to support services for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools, the victim-survivors strongly advocated for a public inquiry to give a voice to the experience of the victim-survivors, to ensure that those experiences were on the public record and to explore improvements to the support services available to adult victim-survivors. The victim-survivors explained their struggle over time to get access to the right supports and services and they said that this was a common theme for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. They talked in particular of the need for specialist counselling services, psychology and mental health services, legal advice and support, and financial assistance. Some of the family members spoke about needing access to some of these services, noting that it could be

difficult to find the right type of counselling service, and the financial strain of getting the right services and support.

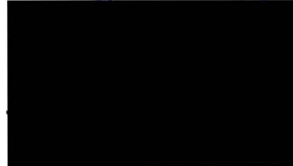
34. In relation to healing for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in government schools, the victim-survivors raised that there had not been sufficient and clear acknowledgment of the harm they and others had suffered in the government school system. They stressed that acknowledgment – and in particular public acknowledgment – of the past failures to protect children in schools, and the enduring harm and trauma that survivors of childhood sexual abuse carry with them, was not only important to a sense of recovery and justice for individual victim-survivors, but also an important additional step to preventing further abuse of children in schools.
35. Following the meeting I wrote to each of the victim-survivors. Each of the letters were different, but in each of them I thanked them for sharing their experiences and the experiences of others and expressed my deep sorrow and apology for the abuse that they had experienced in a government school, and for the ongoing trauma and impact on their lives. During the meeting the victim-survivors spoke about some of their individual needs, and so I also outlined some individual assistance that DoE could provide to them.
36. In the letters to the victim-survivors, I wrote that I would reflect on how best the Department can provide acknowledgement and recognition for the survivors of abuse in Victorian Government schools and I genuinely meant it. The meeting with the victim-survivors was a very powerful one for me and had a significant personal impact. I decided that I would make the apology that I have made in this statement, as the first step.

E. CONCLUSION

37. The Board of Inquiry represents a profound opportunity to hear the experiences of victim-survivors of historic child sexual abuse and deliver recommendations to government to support healing and prevent this shocking abuse and injury happening to others.
38. I look forward to those recommendations and the insights the Inquiry will bring.

- 39. I acknowledge and support the DoE playing a key role in healing, recognising that as the institution that failed in the past, we must act now and into the future.
- 40. And I state clearly my absolute commitment to child safety in everything we do so that every student can feel and be safe in a government school.

Signature:



Printed name: Jenny Atta

Date: 3 November 2023