PAID AGENTS AND THE FAIR WORK COMMISSION

SUBMISSION BY THE CLAYTON UTZ PRO BONO PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

We thank the Fair Work Commission (**FWC**) for the opportunity to make a submission in respect of the issues raised in the *Paid agents and the Fair Work Commission Options Paper*, released on 7 March 2024 (**Options Paper**).

Each year, the Clayton Utz Pro Bono practice¹ advises and represents around 200 people with employment-related legal issues. These clients are referred to us from the legal assistance sector because they are unable to receive assistance from Legal Aid or the community legal sector, and they cannot afford to pay for a private lawyer.

Much of our practice involves representing Applicants in unfair dismissal and general protections applications before the FWC. In our experience, most of these disputes resolve at conciliation. Achieving a negotiated outcome can be a positive and empowering experience for an Applicant, provided it is based on considered and tailored legal advice.

If we may, we begin with a telling anecdote. When the Pro Bono practice ran an internal firm conflict check against a party who we are confident is one of the Options Paper's "8 regular paid agent organisations"², the head of our Workplace Relations, Employment and Safety practice group responded as follows:

"There is absolutely no conflict in us acting, but I am curious. Does this matter by any chance involve them settling a general protections matter at conciliation for \$10,000 and then charging the client \$5,000? In my experience that is what they do."

Remarkably (or perhaps not), this was exactly what the matter we were conflict checking involved.

It is an anomaly of the FWC system that paid agents are treated under section 596 of the *Fair Work Act* 2009 (Cth) (**FW Act**) as interchangeable with lawyers, when in fact the difference in the two roles is significant.

We find it extremely difficult to understand the public policy benefits of permitting parties who are in a legal process about their statutory legal rights, to receive legal advice about those legal rights and about the consequences of legal documents, from people who are <u>not</u> admitted to legal practice. A party in an FWC matter who is represented by a paid agent enjoys none of the essential protections given to other parties in identical matters who are represented by lawyers.

In recent years we have been concerned by the growing number of clients referred to us for assistance who have had negative experiences when represented by paid agents before the FWC. Their experiences are characterised by lack of awareness of their rights, confusing fee arrangements, inadequate client communication from the paid agent, poor quality and inaccurate advice, and obtaining a substandard resolution of their legal dispute.

As a consequence, we have had to commence proceedings under the Australian Consumer Law on behalf of Applicants against their former paid agents, or most recently act before the Full Bench of the FWC, in order to correct plainly egregious behaviour by those non-legal representatives.³

This submission is based on our work for these clients on a pro bono basis, and our experience running matters in the FWC more generally.

¹ See <u>https://www.claytonutz.com/about/pro-bono-practice/pro-bono-at-clayton-utz</u>.

² Options Paper at [14].

³ Samuel Howell v Elite Elevators Corporation Pty Ltd [2023] FWCFB 265; Samuel Howell v Elite Elevators Corporation Pty Ltd [2024] FWC 466

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS to THE FWC

Recommendation 1: Take steps to ensure that the FWC and government agencies do not refer Applicants to paid agents for assistance.

Recommendation 2: Explore and strengthen appropriate referral pathways from the FWC and government agencies to pro bono clearing houses, Legal Aid and the community legal sector across the country, to provide a no-cost, legal representation alternative for low-income and vulnerable Applicants.

Recommendation 3: Take steps to educate Applicants about the distinction between lawyers and paid agents, including on the FWC's website, in the FWC's Benchbooks and through the representative application process. No-one should be represented before the FWC by a paid agent without being informed that the agent is not a lawyer and is not legally qualified to give legal advice.

Recommendation 4: Advocate for legislative amendments to:

- regulate paid agents to ensure they meet ethical and professional standards; and
- extend the time limitation on offences under the Legal Professional Uniform Law in each jurisdiction, to enable the relevant disciplinary body to prosecute paid agents.

Recommendation 5: Establish a referral pathway between the FWC and the Legal Services Commissioner in each jurisdiction in relation to complaints of unqualified legal practice by paid agents.

Recommendation 6: Streamline the existing referral pathway between the FWC and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (**ACCC**) in relation to complaints of misleading and deceptive conduct engaged in by paid agents, including in relation to online advertising materials.

SUBMISSION

1. We echo the concerns raised by the FWC in the Options Paper in respect of the fee arrangements, quality of representation and advice provided by paid agents, and other concerns relating to the conduct of paid agents in FWC proceedings. Many of these concerns are reflected in the following case studies, which we will refer to throughout this submission.

MICHELLE'S STORY		
Background		
In 2021, Michelle was 19 years old, living rurally and working as a casual farm hand. During her employment, Michelle suffered sexually harassment by the owner of the farm, who made unwanted sexual comments and jokes towards her and touched her. In September 2021, Michelle was dismissed unexpectedly from her employment.		
The day after she lost her job, Michelle called a government agency for advice about taking legal action against her employer. Later that day, a representative from the government agency called Michelle and provided her with the details of a firm she could contact for advice and representation. Michelle was not aware that she was not being referred to a law firm.		
Later that day, Michelle spoke to a paid agent by telephone and was told that:		
• it was " <i>not worth</i> " Michelle making a sexual harassment complaint against the employer, and that a sexual harassment complaint would be worth no more than \$5,000;		
• she had a " <i>strong</i> " general protections claim against the employer;		
 if Michelle took a sexual harassment claim to a Court it might take years for her to receive an outcome, but if she used the paid agent's services, she could resolve the matter in a few months; and 		
• the most Michelle would be " <i>out of pocket</i> " for the paid agent's services was \$440, which covered administration and lodgement fees.		
Michelle believed the paid agent was giving her legal advice and assistance. It transpires that the person Michelle spoke to was actually a university student with no legal qualifications.		
Terms of Agreement		
Later that day, the paid agent notified Michelle that it had lodged a "general protections not involving dismissal" application on her behalf, and attached an invoice for \$440. The letter accompanying the invoice read:		
I am writing to confirm our agreement that we have commenced representing you in your general protections claim at the Fair Work Commission against [employer].		
I confirm that \$440,00 has to be paid, being payment of lodgement and administration fees. A further fee of 40% of the net settlement for all services and representation up to and including the conciliation conference is payable upon receipt of an agreed settlement from your employer. If matters are not resolved by this conference, any further representation costs involved for subsequent Arbitration hearing will need to be discussed. [Paid agent] may be prepared to fund, on an agreed fee, an Arbitration hearing before the Commission if we both concur that the offer from the employer, or lack of an offer, is unsatisfactory.		
To be clear, an application had been lodged <u>before</u> any terms were entered into. Michelle was not provided with written terms of the paid agent's "agreement" until after the paid agent had already filed a claim for her. Michelle signed the terms and paid \$440 in accordance with the invoice.		
Resolution		

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The paid agent's representative appeared for Michelle at a conciliation conference in the FWC. The representative did not tell Michelle at any time that he was not a lawyer and not admitted to legal practice.

The representative advised Michelle that she should accept the negotiated sum of \$10,000 to settle her general protections claim, to be paid via instalments. Michelle accepted this advice, and entered into a Deed of Settlement and Release with her former employer, which included a clause releasing the employer from all future claims.

Fees

After the conciliation, the paid agent nominated itself to receive the settlement payment from the employer and retained a portion of each instalment as payment for its service, before transferring the balance to Michelle's bank account.

In total, the paid agent retained \$4,440, or 44% of the settlement sum, in addition to the original \$440 payment made by Michelle. It did not issue Michelle with invoices or bills prior to retaining these fees.

TRENT'S STORY

Background

Trent was terminated from his employment after raising training issues with his manager. The purported reason for his summary dismissal was for Trent attending a meeting without having confirmed his attendance in advance.

Engagement

Shortly after being terminated, Trent Googled who could assist him to question his termination, and a paid agent's website was the first page he found. He contacted them via an online enquiry page. Trent was under the impression that he had contacted lawyers who came with the endorsement of the FWC.

Trent received an immediate reply email to his online enquiry, from a 'Dismissal Claims Consultant'. The email requested documents from Trent, and contained the following:

Please provide as much of the information that you have available, as soon as possible, so that we can complete our assessment on a timely basis. We look forward to receiving your information within 24 hours if at all possible. This is because the law imposes strict time limits on dismissal-related claims. These time limits vary depending on the type of claim, and the jurisdiction in which it is brought. You do not want to lose your right to claim because you left it too late and missed the deadline. This could make it harder for you to get a new job in the future, because the Fair Work Regulations 2009 (Cth.) requires employers to retain a record of your dismissal for at least six years from the date you were dismissed unless the dismissal is reversed. Many dismissed employees leave it too late, only to lose their right to pursue maximum compensation and the reversal of their dismissal. Don't lose your right to try and get your name cleared, and prevent your former employer from telling future employers that you were dismissed from your job for poor performance or misconduct. Act promptly!

Trent hurriedly provided the paid agent with details of his employment and termination, including his contract, pay slips and termination letter. That same day, the paid agent lodged a general protections application with the Fair Work Commission on Trent's behalf.

About one week later, the paid agent sent Trent its terms of engagement. Trent "accepted" the terms within 20 seconds of receiving the email. The paid agent did not call Trent to confirm that Trent understood the terms following such an immediate "acceptance", nor to explain the effects of its terms of engagement or its fees.

The written agreement that Trent signed included the following terms:

- Trent would be liable to pay a professional fee of \$4,490 (plus GST), unless the "No Win No Fee" guarantee applied; and
- The "No Win No Fee" guarantee would only apply if the following conditions (among others) were met:
 - neither party terminates the agreement;
 - the paid agent is authorised to appear at the conciliation on Trent's behalf;

•	the employer does not at any time make a settlement offer that is equal to or exceeds the amount of the professional fee;	
•	Trent instructs the paid agent to discontinue the application within 21 days of the conciliation conference, without accepting a settlement offer;	
•	if the employer makes a settlement offer at any time, the "No Win No Fee" guarantee will only apply to the amount of the professional fee which exceeds the settle offer;	
•	if recommended, Trent authorises the paid agent to continue negotiations with the employer for up to 21 days after the date of any conference or directions hearing; and	
•	Trent does not engage any lawyer or other industrial agent to represent him in the application, or a similar application.	
The paid agent sent Trent an "Irrevocable Authority" which included an authorisation to pay any settlement sum into the paid agent's bank account.		
Resolution		
The paid agent represented Trent at a conciliation conference in the FWC.		
The paid agent advised Trent to accept a settlement offer from the employer of two weeks' wages. Trent and the employer reached an in principal settlement agreement, and the Commissioner's chambers emailed the parties terms of settlement for signature shortly thereafter.		
After the conference, Trent emailed the FWC to enquire about the settlement, because he had not received payment and could not contact the paid agent. Through the FWCs enquiries, it became clear that the settlement sum had been paid directly into the paid agent's bank account.		
The paid agent later emailed Trent to confirm that it had received the settlement sum, and that because his settlement sum didn't cover their professional fees, Trent still owed them more money.		
Trent received no financial benefit at all from being represented by this paid agent and settling his complaint on the terms that the paid agent had negotiated.		

Misleading and deceptive conduct

2. In our experience, clients like Michelle and Trent believe that they are receiving legal advice from a practising lawyer. They trust the advice and guidance given to them by paid agents and are under the misguided belief that paid agents have some kind of legal or ethical obligation to act in their best interests. The clients we have assisted are usually shocked to learn that paid agents are not lawyers and therefore not subject to the same professional obligations as lawyers.

Trent told the FWC:

"I was under the impression they were lawyers and they had my best interest in mind."

- 3. In accordance with their belief that they were being advised and represented by lawyers, Michelle and Trent relied on the skill and judgement of the paid agents and did not seek independent legal advice as to the merits of their claim or the suitability of the paid agent's services.
- 4. We are especially concerned about the ease with which clients can locate and engage a paid agent. Currently, a client who has lost their job or experienced discrimination in the workplace is far more likely to find their way via an internet search to a paid agent rather than to a suitably qualified legal practitioner. Finding appropriate and timely legal advice is particularly challenging for individuals with poor literacy, who cannot speak English, who may live in remote communities, or suffer from mental health issues.

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- 5. Paid agents rarely make positive assertions that they are a lawyer or have legal qualifications. Rather, they can mislead clients into believing that they have legal training or expertise through their words and conduct. For instance, our client Michelle told us that the following conduct caused her to believe that her paid agent was a lawyer:
 - (a) in their initial phone call, the paid agent told Michelle that its employees were *"representatives"* who could assist with her legal problem, and advised her about the relative worth of different legal actions she could make against the employer;
 - (b) the general protections application forms listed her representative as a "*lawyer or paid representative*";
 - (c) in its communications to Michelle, the paid agent often described its employees as "associates" or "principals" of the organisation;
 - (d) the paid agent sent Michelle communications which used language that it had been "*retained to pursue an action*" on her behalf and had "*commenced representing*" her;
 - (e) the paid agent emailed Michelle a copy of correspondence from a third party to the FWC which described the paid agent as the "*Applicant's solicitor*", and did not correct this characterisation; and
 - (f) the paid agent who represented Michelle at the FWC conciliation conference, negotiated on her behalf with the employer to reach a settlement agreement and gave Michelle what seemed to her to be legal advice about whether the settlement sum was reasonable in the circumstances of her legal claim.

Michelle told us:

"They called themselves representatives...I thought this meant they were lawyers, because a lawyer represents you."

- 6. While the FW Act recognises the difference between lawyers and paid agents in its definitions, section 596(2) of the FW Act makes no distinction between lawyers and paid agents when it comes to applying for leave to represent a party in FWC proceedings.
- 7. Similarly, there is a single FWC form used for representation⁴, regardless of whether the representative is a lawyer or paid agent. As set out in our recommendations, whilst section 596 remains, the FWC should improve the information which it publishes and the processes which it uses, to help parties understand the difference between paid agents and lawyers. The FWC should clearly inform Applicants that being represented by a paid agent means not be represented by a qualified and admitted non-lawyer, and explain the consequences to the Applicant of that arrangement in terms of their rights and protections.

Quality of advice and representation

- 8. Michelle's story highlights the risk to clients of receiving advice from paid agents which is legally inaccurate and not tailored to the circumstances of the client's case. We are concerned about a one-size-fits-all approach of lodging everything as a general protections claim, regardless of the details of the case.
- 9. Where, as in Michelle's case, an Applicant has a genuine choice between bringing a complaint in the Australian Human Rights Commission (**AHRC**) or the FWC, the client must be appropriately advised of the benefits and risks of each avenue in order to make an informed decision about how to proceed. Instead of giving Michelle comprehensive advice about her

⁴ Form F53

options, the paid agent actively discouraged Michelle from pursuing her complaint in the AHRC, and gave Michelle the impression that she was receiving considered legal advice.

- 10. We suspect that because paid agents are not permitted to appear in conciliations before the AHRC, they may be far less likely to advise their clients in an appropriate case, to pursue this avenue.
- 11. By encouraging Michelle to pursue and settle her complaint in the FWC, the paid agent deprived Michelle of the real possibility of achieving a higher monetary settlement through bringing a sexual harassment complaint in the AHRC. At the time, and prior to the inclusion of section 527D of the FW Act, sexual harassment was not even a matter which fell within the general protections defined by section 351 of the Act.
- 12. Unlike lawyers, paid agents do not need to be registered or possess any qualifications to appear in FWC proceedings. Further, there is no regulatory body that can deal with complaints about the conduct of paid agents. In appropriate cases, individuals may have recourse to remedies available under the Australian Consumer Law against a paid agent. However, these claims under the ACL are difficult to establish, and clients may need to pursue costly and risky litigation to obtain a remedy against the representative which they have already pad to act for them.

Unqualified legal practice

- 13. The services provided to Michelle and Trent by the paid agents who they engaged may be in breach of the prohibition on engaging in legal practice by unqualified entities, as contained in the Legal Professional Uniform Law (**Uniform Laws**).
- 14. In Trent's matter, the paid agent's terms of engagement included the following scope of work:

The scope of the work undertaken by [paid agent] on your behalf shall involve representing you in an application before a Tribunal against the Employer (Application) by determining the correct Tribunal and most appropriate type of claim to bring on your behalf, preparing and filing the Application in the Tribunal on your behalf, reviewing documents provided by yourself and the Employer, considering and implementing a strategy for the prosecution of the Application, appearing on your behalf at a conference or mention on a date and time set by the Tribunal (subject to (i) leave to appear being granted by the Tribunal at the conference or mention if required; and (ii) the date and time of any conference or mention being agreed to by [paid agent] and which may be subject to change at any time and for any reason), and engaging in any settlement negotiations with the Employer on your behalf.

- 15. In accordance with these terms, the paid agent:
 - (a) prepared and lodged Trent's general protections application in the FWC, and corresponded with the FWC and the employer on Trent's behalf; and
 - (b) negotiated on Trent's behalf at the conciliation, and advised him to accept the settlement offer of two weeks' pay.
- 16. Similarly, in Michelle's case, the paid agent:
 - (a) gave advice⁵ about the relative worth of Michelle's prospective legal remedies against the employer, including that a sexual harassment complaint would be worth "*no more than \$5,000*" and that she had a "*strong*" general protections claim;
 - (b) drafted letters of demand on Michelle's behalf;

⁵ which was inaccurate

- (c) prepared and lodged Michelle's general protections application in the FWC, and corresponded with the FWC and the employer on her behalf; and
- (d) negotiated on Michelle's behalf with her employer to reach a settlement agreement, and advised Michelle about whether the settlement sum was reasonable in the circumstances of her legal claim.
- 17. It is frankly impossible to characterise these tasks as in any way different from what a lawyer who is practising law does when representing a client. The paid agents are engaging in unqualified legal practice.
- 18. Unless this type of conduct is brought to the attention of the Legal Services Commissioner in a timely manner, applicable time limitations may prevent the Commissioner from prosecuting individuals and organisations that may be in breach of the Uniform Laws. For example, charges for summary offences must generally be commenced within 6 or 12 months of the offending behaviour.⁶

Fees and settlement payments

- 19. Clients who we have assisted have also reported concerns with the fees they were charged by paid agents, including the lack of transparency in the agent's fee structure.
- 20. After Trent discovered that he would not recover any of the settlement sum, and owed the paid agent almost double what he was to be paid in settlement, he said he was "*in shock*" and that he felt like a "*stupid idiot*" who had been "*scammed*". In our view, experiences like Trent's may cause participants to lose confidence in the FW Act and the FWC's processes.
- 21. Michelle reported being misled by the paid agent's initial claim that she would be "*out of pocket*" by no more than \$440. Following the FWC conciliation, the paid agent:
 - (a) nominated itself to receive Michelle's settlement sum payments from the employer; and
 - (b) retained a portion of each instalment as payment for its services, before transferring the balance to Michelle.
- 22. The paid agent retained \$4,440, being 44% of the \$10,000 settlement sum, in addition to the original \$440 payment made by Michelle. The paid agent provided no explanation for why it retained more than 40% of the settlement sum, as set out in its written terms of engagement, nor did it issue Michelle with invoices or bills prior to retaining these fees.

⁶ See, eg, Criminal Procedure Act 2009 (Vic) s 7 (12 months); Criminal Procedure Act 1986 (NSW) s 179 (6 months).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 23. On a general level and subject to further consultation and consideration, we support all of the Options described in the Options Paper, save for Option 7 which is discussed in further detail below.
- 24. These submissions outline some additional recommendations for the consideration of the Working Group and the FWC.

Referrals

25. We agree with the sentiment of President Justice Hatcher, Deputy President Wright and Commissioner Crawford in *Samuel Howell v Elite Elevators Corporation Pty Ltd* [2023] FWCFB 265, that:

[32] ... the Commission has an overriding obligation to perform its functions and exercise its powers in a manner which is fair, just, open and transparent (s 577(a) and (c)). The proper discharge of this obligation would not, in our view, permit the Commission to allow paid agents who have been granted permission pursuant to s 596 to conduct themselves in proceedings before the Commission in a manner which is significantly inconsistent with the applicable professional obligations of lawyers in equivalent circumstances.

- 26. Consistent with the FWC's obligations under the FW Act, and in light of the concerning behaviours by paid agents identified in the Options Paper and in these submissions, we recommend that the FWC and relevant government agencies implement internal procedures to ensure that Applicants are no longer referred to paid agents for assistance.
- 27. To ensure that particularly vulnerable Applicants are adequately supported, we also recommend that the FWC and government agencies deepen appropriate referral pathways to pro bono clearing houses, Legal Aid and the community legal sector across the country.

Education

- 28. As a priority, we recommend that that the FWC takes further steps to educate Applicants about how to:
 - distinguish between lawyers and paid agents (and in particular to understand that a paid agent is not a lawyer, and is not legally qualified to provide advice about a client's legal rights);
 - (b) seek community legal, Legal Aid and pro bono legal assistance; and
 - (c) make a complaint about paid agents, including under the Australian Consumer Law and to the Legal Services Commissioners.
- 29. The Options Paper notes that the FWC has:
 - (a) published information on its website with tips about how to choose a lawyer or paid agent, and information about how to complain about a lawyer or paid agent; and
 - (b) for a period, named a particular paid agent that had been the subject of numerous complaints.
- 30. However, in respect of the FWC's webpage on "Tips to choose a lawyer or paid agent"⁷, we note that:

⁷ <<u>https://www.fwc.gov.au/apply-or-lodge/legal-help-and-representation/where-find-legal-help</u>> accessed 20 March 2024.

- (a) the page is found under the broader sub-headings: "Legal help and representation", and "Where to find <u>legal</u> help"; and
- (b) the "tips" do not differentiate between a paid agent or a lawyer.
- 31. This theme continues in the FWC's Benchbooks and Form F53, which repeatedly conflate representation by "lawyers and paid agents" as somehow the same thing.
- 32. There is a real risk that these FWC materials, in their current form, may further entrench Applicants' beliefs that paid agents are legal representatives. In our view, these materials should clearly distinguish between paid agents and lawyers and include information about how Applicants can seek legal advice.
- 33. As part of this process, we suggest that the FWC updates Form F53, so that paid agents are required to complete a separate section (or potentially even a separate form). This aligns with proposed Option 1, under which the Commission would review application and response forms to identify where a lawyer or paid agent is named and provide all represented parties with a fact sheet about representation before the FWC.

Regulation

- 34. As outlined in the Options Paper, there is no regulatory scheme governing the qualifications or ethical conduct of paid agents.
- 35. We hold some reservations in respect of proposed Option 7, being to:

Invite paid agents to voluntarily agree to a code of conduct, and publish the details of agents who have done so on the website. The website would make clear that the Commission does not endorse these paid agents, nor check or regulate compliance with the code, just that they have agreed to behave in a manner consistent with the code of conduct. Administrative processes would need to be developed to consider complaints about failure to follow the code of conduct, including when the Commission would remove a paid agent from the website.

- 36. Despite the proposed disclaimer, we consider that a voluntary code and list of paid agents on the FWC's website would, in essence, be an unofficial endorsement of those paid agents' services. This is troubling, especially in circumstances where the FWC is unlikely to have any powers to investigate alleged beaches of the code, nor to take any disciplinary action in response to breaches of the code.
- 37. We consider that the FWC should advocate for legislative amendments that ensure paid agents are subject to professional standards, accompanied by appropriate investigate powers and disciplinary sanctions. While the scope of these standards will require in-depth consultation and consideration, they might require paid agents to:
 - (a) act in the best interests of a client, and to provide services with the care and skill expected of a legal practitioner acting in similar circumstances;
 - (b) avoid unfair terms in their terms of engagement and authority forms;
 - (c) refrain from entering into 'No Win No Fee' arrangements which are conditional on the client:
 - (i) communicating or not communicating with any party or with the FWC;
 - (ii) not withdrawing or discontinuing an application with the FWC;
 - (iii) accepting or declining settlement offers; or
 - (iv) not seeking independent legal advice; and

- (d) provide clear disclaimers to clients that the organisation does not provide legal services prior to providing any services, and prior to entering into terms of engagement with the client.
- 38. The FWC might also consider supporting legislative reform to existing legal profession uniform laws, to extend the limitation periods in each jurisdiction applicable to offences relating to unqualified legal practice.

Complaints

- 39. The Options paper notes that the FWC has referred information about complaints and parties with complaints to the ACCC.
- 40. We recommend that the FWC:
 - (a) establish a referral pathway with the Legal Services Commissioner in each jurisdiction, to facilitate complaints of unqualified legal practice by paid agents; and
 - (b) strengthen and streamline existing referral pathways to the ACCC in relation to complaints of misleading and deceptive conduct engaged in by paid agents, including in relation to online advertising materials.

Should you wish to discuss any of the matters raised in this submissions, please do not hesitate to contact us. We would be delighted to speak with the FWC's Paid Agents Working Group.

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21 March 2023

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