



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

COUNCIL OF TERRITORY CO-OPERATION

Public Hearing No 49 – 6 December 2011

Members:

Mr Gerry Wood, MLA, Member for Nelson – CHAIR
Ms Lynne Walker, MLA, Member for Nhulunbuy
Ms Marion Scrymgour, MLA, Member for Arafura

Witnesses:

Professor Graham Vimpani (*via teleconference*), Chair External Reporting & Monitoring Committee
Ms Clare Gardiner-Barnes, Chief Executive – Department of Children & Families
Mr Graham Symons, Commissioner for Public Employment

Mr Graham VIMPANI: Graham Vimpani.

CHAIR: G'day Graham, Gerry Wood here.

Mr Graham VIMPANI: Hello Gerry, how are you?

CHAIR: I'm well, thank you. We're ready to go, we've got a few people here. So we've got Marion Scrymgour, Member for Arafura and Lynne Walker, Member for Nhulunbuy and myself. We've also got Graham Symons from the Public Service Commissioner's Office and Clare Gardiner-Barnes from Family ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Children and Families.

CHAIR: Children and Families. I'll get it right. So we're all here. I've got to say a few words first, Graham.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Okay. Who was the second person, the second Member there besides Marion?

CHAIR: Lynne Walker, Member for Nhulunbuy.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Right.

Ms WALKER: Good morning, Professor Vimpani.

Mr Graham VIMPANI: Hello.

CHAIR: So there's three of us on this side of the table and two on the other and there's a lot of people in the public gallery.

Mr Graham VIMPANI: Right.

CHAIR: Thanks for attending today. I'll just do the official bit first, Graham, and then we can get into the questions and that, if that's okay?

Mr Graham VIMPANI: Yep, sure.

CHAIR: Okay, and I'll just ask – people hear that alright? Okay. I declare open this public hearing of the Council of Territory of Co-operation on child protection reform in the NT. I welcome back both Professor Graham Vimpani as Chair of the External Monitoring and Reporting Committee overseeing the implementation of NT child protection reform package and Clare Gardiner-Barnes, the Chief Executive of NT Department of Families and Children.

I'd also like to welcome Graham Symons, the Commissioner for Public Employment who is appearing before us for the first time. I thank you all for appearing before us today.

Although the Committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, these hearings are formal proceedings of the Parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself.

I remind the witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and it may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Whilst this meeting is public, witnesses have

the right to request to be heard in private session. If you wish to be heard in-camera please advise the Committee prior to commencing your answer.

Today's proceedings are being electronically recorded. Professor Vimpani, Ms Gardiner-Barnes and Mr Symons, can you please state your full name and position before commencing your evidence. As soon as practicable following this hearing, the transcript of your evidence will be uploaded to the Committee's website but not before you have proofed it. I remind Members that personal opinions should not be sought from public servants appearing in a professional capacity.

So could I start with you, Graham, could you just give us your official title and who you represent please?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yes, it's Graham Vernon Vimpani and I'm the Chair of the Northern Territory Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting committee, appointed by the Minister.

CHAIR: Thanks Graham. I've got to remember we've got two Grahams too. Graham 1 and Graham 2 here. So I'll ask Mr Graham Symons if he could tell us his official title please?

Mr Graham SYMONS: Graham Symons, Commissioner for Public Employment.

CHAIR: And Clare?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Clare Gardiner-Barnes, Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families.

CHAIR: And thank you very much for coming, and welcome to today's hearing. And my fellow Members.

We have some questions but I'm just wondering whether maybe, Professor, have you got an opening statement you might like to say? Have you got perhaps a small report you might be able to give us before we start the questions?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: I haven't got a written report at this stage. We had our 4th meeting for the year last Thursday and Friday, largely held in Palmerston. I think you'll be pleased to hear Clare's report in terms of the progress that's been achieved and I think ... we had an opportunity to meet with staff at Palmerston and also with a range of NGOs in Darwin the following day and I think it would be fair to say that staff at Palmerston are starting to notice a difference on the ground.

I think the mood of that particular meeting was significantly different from the mood of the meeting we had with staff in Katherine back in August...there've been a number of developments, I think, since that August meeting, one of which has been the appointment of regional directors and that does seem to be having a significant and recognisable effect on, I think, the way staff are feeling.

It was interesting, there were a few criticisms at the start of the meeting in Palmerston on Thursday but the mood of the meeting really shifted to one of, if I could use the expression, can-do. They recognised that there were a number of things that needed to be tackled and I think Clare in her response really said it's up to you to really take up the challenge and make suggestions to your manager as to how you'd like to see these things develop.

So I think that was very positive and we were also pleased to hear the progress that had been made around some of the issues that had been identified by the Katherine staff in August and I think that progress can be attributed to the appointment of regional directors who have been able to progress a number of matters that was difficult to do without them being in place.

I think that's probably the main things I would say at this stage, I mean, I'm sure you want to explore, and I believe you've been given a copy of Clare's report and I'd certainly be happy to add further comments after she's had an opportunity to talk about that.

CHAIR: Thanks Graham. What I might do, I've got some questions here, some relate to specifically your committee and others are probably broader where I might ask for other opinions from Clare and Graham. So just in relation to your external monitoring and reporting committee, I need just some clarification. How much admin support do you get?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Samantha Ping-Nam who is an officer in Clare's Department, I think, spends a substantial proportion of her time supporting us. We also get some support from Lisa Braid, before her, Pippa Rudd, and so I would say that what we're getting is certainly adequate and timely, I think, would be the other word I'd use to describe it.

CHAIR: I'll just ask a question that might be related to that. We noticed that your notices come out on the Department's letterheads and if you're getting someone you're more or less borrowing from the Department, do you think that may be giving not the right impression to people out there that you're separate, in other words, you're independent from the Department?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Well, I don't know what you've got but the papers that I've got and the letters that I send out actually go out on a Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee letterhead, so I'm not sure what you're referring to.

CHAIR: I think it was on the web page, so maybe it's getting ... coming through the Department what your notices are. That may be not your fault, that might be just the way notices are shown.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yeah, well, certainly letters that I've sent and I've got copies in the file in front of me at the moment that have all gone out on Child Protection Committee letterhead.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah, there was a notice of a meeting.

CHAIR: Yeah, we had a notice of a meeting on the 1st and 2nd of December which came out on the Department's letterheads.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Okay.

CHAIR: So that was just a bit of a concern, but if that's not the normal procedure, that's fine.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: I regard that as a glitch.

CHAIR: Okay.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Professor Vimpani, Marion Scrymgour. What remote communities has the External Monitoring Committee visited so far this year?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: We haven't visited what I would call remote community, we've been to Katherine and Alice Springs and Palmerston and we didn't want to risk it going further afield for our December meeting but certainly we were talking about visiting Gove and Tiwi Islands next year.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: What's been some of the barriers why you haven't travelled to date, I mean, given that the majority of the issues and the growing, I mean, that's touched on some of the reports has come from remote communities other than Gove, I mean, Gove is ... the Member for Nhulunbuy's giving me some strong looks here but other communities besides Gove and the Tiwi Islands which you are going to do early next year, what have been some of the barriers why you haven't visited any of those communities, given the importance of the Growing Them Strong Report?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Well, we only have two day meetings. I would have thought that visiting Alice Springs and meeting with people in town camps where there are a number of significant issues, I think you'd agree, and also Katherine for our third meeting. I mean, if you feel ... you obviously feel that that coverage could be improved and that's certainly ... we certainly feel that we need to visit some of the remoter communities which is why we certainly identified Tiwi. But there'll be others and we're planning to have our next meeting in March in Tennant Creek and we'll visit, hopefully, some of the communities around there when we're down there.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Look, I'm not saying that the town camps or Alice Springs are not important, I think that they are important, I'm just a bit surprised that the committee hasn't gone into any remote communities outside of, you know, off the bitumen to have a look at some of those issues that certainly I know a number of those communities. Who did the community ... who has given evidence to date to the committee in the areas where you've had meetings in Alice Springs, Katherine I think you've mentioned?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yeah. Well, in both of those sites we met with ... we met with staff of the Department of Children and Families and we also met with a range of NGOs in both of those sites and also foster carers associations and then of course we did in Alice Springs and in Katherine a number of site visits to services around the towns. But I mean, I take your point and that point will be dealt with in the coming year.

CHAIR: Graham, Lynne Walker.

Ms WALKER: Professor, can you just remind me which are the three regions? There's obviously Top End and Central. Where's the third region sit in between there?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: In terms of regional directors?

Ms WALKER: Yeah. I'm wanting to understand where the third region is. What areas it touches?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Perhaps Clare might be best to answer that.

Ms WALKER: Thank you, yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So the three regions we have in the Department ...

CHAIR: Sorry Clare, just give your name ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Sorry, Clare Gardiner-Barnes, Department of Children and Families.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Sorry Gerry, I can barely hear Clare.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: I'll speak up. Is that better, Graham?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: That's better.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: The three regions start with Alice Springs, Central and that goes up to Tennant Creek. Then we have Katherine and Northern which covers Nhulunbuy and remote locations and then Greater Darwin which is basically Darwin and Palmerston areas only.

Ms WALKER: Okay. So how often would the regional manager, say, in the Top End, be visiting Arnhem Land, north-east Arnhem Land to Groote Eylandt and Nhulunbuy, Elcho, those communities?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: The regional director for Katherine, that comes under her responsibility and she has a manager based in the Nhulunbuy office and it would be expected as the line manager that she will have face to face visits to those Top End remote communities a couple of times each year.

Ms WALKER: Right, okay.

CHAIR: Just getting back to Professor, a couple more questions. When you go out to ... when the committee's going out to talk to different, say, NGOs or different committees, do you have Department representatives with you or do you go out and try and talk to them independently from any other bodies?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: When we've met with Departmental staff, the Department Executives have been with us. That doesn't seem to have inhibited the range of comments that we've received from staff. They let us have it with both barrels, both in Katherine and Alice Springs, and certainly the NGOs and foster carers have also been quite open in their comments. The committee does meet, some of the time by itself and if we've got concerns about wanting to get some further information from people independently of the government officials we do that.

CHAIR: So you don't feel there's any problem with the Department being involved in some of those meetings?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: I don't think so given the openness that has existed and the willingness to be quite frank and fearless that these agencies have demonstrated. I think both the agencies and staff.

Ms WALKER: Can I ask a question?

CHAIR: Lynne.

Ms WALKER: Can I just ask, and this is either Professor or Clare. In these meetings that you are holding with staff around regions, what are the sort of general themes of the feedback that you're getting from people?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Clare, do you want to go first on that?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Alright, Graham. The key issues for staff have been in relation to workload, and then complementing that because we have actually had, for example, in the Katherine office when we visited this year, they have had their full complement of staff for the first time and they are very overcrowded in their current office space as a result. So practical issues like access to vehicles to go and visit families, access to phones, desks, people were hot-desking around the office and that was obviously making it difficult for them to do their work. There were issues in relation to the interview room provided for families and children, that it didn't have enough space and in fact in my report to the committee that I presented last week, I went through each of the issues that staff raised in that meeting and I asked the regional director to prepare a response around what action had happened in response to each of those issues and that report's there for your information.

So there are, in the Alice Springs office, there were also issues of overcrowding; there were issues around the need to better communicate and work with the non-government sector and share information. There were very strong issues of workload again and the need to improve communications both in the office and about the reforms with staff in the office. And similar issues again with the Palmerston staff this time around workload issues. There were a number of staff in that office who had recently selected to move to the mobile child protection team because of the workloads that they're carrying at the moment in the Palmerston office.

Ms WALKER: So those issues around the logistical stuff about overcrowded offices will be addressed, there's a budget to address, that sort of thing, Clare?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: We're working within our existing budget to accommodate the growth at the moment, yes.

CHAIR: Have you got anything to add to that, Graham?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Only that in Palmerston staff are anticipating moving to new office accommodation which will consequently double what they have available at the moment. That's early next year which will be terrific for them.

CHAIR: Could I just stay on the case loads issue. I don't know whether Graham or Clare could tell me. What is the preferred number of cases per position? Is there a sort of ballpark figure?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's Clare Gardiner-Barnes here responding to that question. Following the Board of Inquiry report that was handed down to government, there was a recommended case load for Darwin area which was a range of 15 to 20 cases per worker and for outside of Darwin 7 to 14 cases per worker as the recommended case load given that those staff outside Darwin have enormous distances to travel to ensure appropriate access to families.

CHAIR: Clare, isn't ... thank you for those figures but the figures you've given us show that the average case load per staff member for Darwin and remote is 51, there are 12 established positions and only five filled. For East Arnhem there's ten positions and only three filled and average case load of 68. Katherine 14 positions, 11 filled, 23 the closest you would get to the required case load. Barkly has four positions, only one filled, average case load 68. Casuarina, 26 positions, 16 filled, average case load 41. Palmerston 17, actual positions filled 16, case load 26, again the closest to what's required, and Alice Springs 32 positions, 22 actually filled and case load of 34. Isn't that what we're trying to turn around, and why aren't we sort of, you know, what's stopping us from bringing that down to a lot lower numbers?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's a couple of ... sorry Graham, you go.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Well, I was just going to say that I think the turnover of staff is quite considerable, around 32.8%. Now, you know, we reckon that's too high and that the question then arises in terms of what is an appropriate benchmark for the Northern Territory. One of the things we've asked the Department to have a look at is looking at other government agencies to see what their turnover rate or, for example, police, teaching and health services because that will give us an idea as to, you know, how comparable we are with some of the other departments. Certainly there are more staff on the ground now than there were 12 months ago and I think that needs to be recognised as a plus.

One of the other issues that contributes to it, the staffing issue, is of course, housing, and particularly housing in remote areas and we were really pleased at this last meeting to hear that an additional nine houses in the growth towns for staff have been identified and so that will have a significant impact on the ability to recruit into those settings. Clare, did you want to add some more?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Only that the Department is very conscious of the case load pressures being put on staff. Part of that has been caused with the backlog being addressed so in such a short time frame and those cases moving from investigation stage to frontline case work which has caused, obviously, a huge increase in the number of cases needed to be managed.

At the same time we are getting a gradual increasing demand every year within the Territory and we are continuing with our recruitment processes at both a local level and internationally. We have an additional 15 international recruits yet to commence who were recruited as part of the previous recruitment campaign overseas and our local strategy continues to be used and be successful. We have engaged with Charles Darwin University to ensure that we get graduates from Charles Darwin into our Department and have opportunities for scholarships now available for the first time.

CHAIR: Marion?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah, just following on and continuing that stream. Professor Vimpani, this can either be your question or Clare or Graham Symons, and maybe if we looked across police and education and with child protection we all know the issues and how hard it is to recruit but also retain staff in remote communities. What strategy is the Department putting in place, Clare, and going up to Ministers in terms of the change, so this is a twofold question, sorry, first for you. What is the Department doing in terms of growing their own and encouraging more Aboriginal recruits into remote communities?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: In relation to the Growing Your Own strategy, we have a project officer that is about to commence very shortly specifically working on career pathways within our Department, and that will have a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island staff. They make up a huge proportion of our workforce and we need to ensure that they stay in the organisation and have access to training and development opportunities
...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: What's the percentage, do you know? At the moment.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It depends what figures we use, but somewhere between 21 and 23% we think of our whole Department workforce are Indigenous.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: And is that, I mean, if we were to exclude administrative or other positions but look at child protection positions, what's your percentage of child protection staff at the coalface that are Indigenous?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There are quite a number of child protection frontline staff in the non-professional stream that are Indigenous. They undertake duties such as Aboriginal family community workers in remote locations, they are case workers, support workers in each of the child protection frontline offices and they also undertake ... there are also Aboriginal community workers who work supporting our frontline staff who in fact have a career pathway that leads them to earn more than a professional in some instances when they're a senior Aboriginal community worker. So we do have some pathways to recognise those Aboriginal workers who have been in the Department for a long time and have developed skills and qualifications to support them.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Alright, outside of Darwin though, outside of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, what is the Department doing in place, or doing, in part, and I suppose that part of this covers your area, Mr Symons, as the Commissioner for Public Employment, addressing the local recruit policy which I have raised before and I know that I have raised with Professor Vimpani. If we are to retain Aboriginal staff in remote communities, let's get out of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, I can understand that there are Aboriginal staff in the Department that do work and do visit but what are we doing in terms of trying to retain and support staff that work outside of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs that actually work in the bush or come from those remote communities but because of the local recruit policy does not have the same entitlements as other staff that are recruited outside of that community?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Can I just perhaps start off by saying that I've written to the Commonwealth Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Ms Macklin, about the issue of accommodation in remote places and raised with her the possibility of the Commonwealth being able to provide some assistance with housing in remote communities for Aboriginal staff. I haven't had a reply to that letter as yet although I have had a conversation with her and she was certainly keen to explore that. So I think Clare would have some ... and Graham as well, I'm sure, would have some more things to add.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: In relation to Department positions that are located in remote locations there are two key positions: one is the remote Aboriginal and family and community worker position and the second position are the safe place staff. So the safe place staff are AO3 positions and they are generally Aboriginal workers within the community that live there on a daily basis and have certificate level qualification and the remote Aboriginal family and community workers are an AO4 position and the same, they are generally people within the community who have a certificate level qualification.

For the first time we are allocating now one professional position in each of the remote locations and we would be encouraging Aboriginal qualified professional staff to apply for those positions and as part of that package they would be allocated a house.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: And is that a house that is, I suppose, belongs to the gov ... I mean NTG, it's not a Territory Housing house that's part of the public house system but a ...

Ms WALKER: Government employee house.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... a government employee house?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: That's correct.

Ms WALKER: Can I just ask ... ?

CHAIR: Yes, Lynne?

Ms WALKER: Can I just go back to the staff turnover. Currently you said it's at 32.8% which is very high. What was that turnover this time a year ago? Would you have that or would you need to take that on notice, Clare?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: I would need to take that on notice.

Ms WALKER: And could I also then, the previous year to that, prior to the Board of Inquiry's report.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

CHAIR: You want that as a formal question or Helen, have you got that ... ?

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: Yep. That it's a question on notice.

Ms WALKER: Okay, yep, thank you.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: And can I just clarify the question? That is in turnover data in relation to child protection professional staff on the frontline, or general Department turnover?

Ms WALKER: I think I'd probably like to see both, if that's possible.

CHAIR: Yeah, that'd be good. Yeah, to see whether the turnover's at the front or ...

Ms WALKER: And I appreciate that might be difficult to capture data since the agency has separated out from health, Clare, but ... yeah, whatever you do would be good.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: We'll do our best.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: What's this? Turnover of staff?

Ms WALKER: Turnover of staff but staff as a whole and professional staff as a separate figure.

CHAIR: Just so ... I'm trying to keep a little bit of order. Just if we stayed on case loads, is that alright? Or you want to go to something else, Marion?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Well, we were doing case loads but I was also looking at the staff for remote communities. We can go back to case loads, I just don't want to ... I'll come back to Commissioner Symons in terms of the local recruit policy and where that is at, given that it's been raised a number of times.

CHAIR: I think we can ask Graham Symons that question, and also perhaps ask him, you know, what is it your Department or your area are doing to try and reduce the turnover rates and do you play a part in trying to achieve better retention of staff?

Mr Graham SYMONS: Graham Symons, Commissioner for Public Employment. Yes, the local recruit housing policy dates back a long time. My memory from the time I was involved in housing, I think it dates back to the Housing Commission days actually. It was

conceived not in a remote community context, as I understand it actually, but for Darwin and regional centres so the idea was that if ... it was in the days the Northern Territory urban population was actually growing quite rapidly and government housing was actually used to attract and house people in the Northern Territory under what became known as the Government Employee Housing Scheme.

So the idea was that if someone was recruited from the location where the position was, the assumption was made that they already had housing. Whereas in the housing market that existed at the time if you came from outside it was quite difficult to get housing so housing was provided as part of some of those positions.

So that's the origin of the policy, as I understand it. Obviously the context has changed significantly since then and the situation on remote communities, those communities where there's a housing shortage, the assumption that policy makes has obviously got some problems.

So I suppose the question is, is the provision of government housing an important part of attracting and retaining staff on remote communities for the Department of Children and Families, and if that's the case, then that's obviously a good argument for reviewing the policy. My understanding is the Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services is currently reviewing that policy and my office is quite happy to work with them and assist. I mean, as you would appreciate, the fundamental problem then will be the actual ability to provide for the housing.

Ms WALKER: The availability of housing stock.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Oh, to actually provide it, yeah.

Mr Graham SYMONS: So there's an issue of service land availability and funding for staff housing.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: But I suppose housing is one and it's a major thing, but there are things like there are, as you'd be aware, Mr Symons, there are other subsidies like float subsidies, electrical subsidies, there are many subsidies that other workers get that an Aboriginal worker wouldn't get, and this is the issue that I've put to the CEO of the Education Department, because there are Aboriginal principals who work or have a co-principal in terms of a non-Indigenous principal who gets these subsidies and this, you know, gets these entitlements and yet the Aboriginal co-principal isn't entitled to it because of that policy. I mean, wouldn't you see that as discrimination and we should be moving forward on that?

Mr Graham SYMONS: The housing one, you know, the origin of the policy certainly isn't discriminatory but I can certainly understand how local Indigenous people on remote communities might see it that way in terms of what they're entitled to. The local housing policy is a potential issue. I'm not aware of other allowances that aren't available to local Indigenous people, but, if there are such things then that's something we'd want to look at.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: It would be ... so would it be something that, Mr Symons, you would take on as the Commissioner for Public Employment to look across those various agencies as to that inequity?

Mr Graham SYMONS: Sure.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Or perceived, let's say perceived inequity rather than, you know, making it an honest...

Mr Graham SYMONS: Sure, yeah. Sure, sure. And I've already had a couple of conversations with the Department Housing, Local Government and Regional Services about housing, so we're looking at that one.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. Case loads, if we can go back to case loads. I just want ... before I forget this one question, sorry, Mr Chair. Clare, it's come to my attention recently in terms of case loads being pushed out from the regions into remote communities, that particularly in relation to outstations and homelands that children are being removed from communities and relocated onto homelands with very little support. Are we able to ... are you able to ... can you take that on notice in terms of providing the information back to the Committee, whether it is in-confidence or as to what numbers, what numbers of children are then relocated out of communities and are relocated with families on homelands, and what support services are put in place by the Department to those families that are on homelands caring for these children?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes, I'm happy to take that on notice.

CHAIR: Lynne?

Ms WALKER: Can I ask a further question in a similar vein, Clare, where there are juvenile offenders in the corrections system, homelands are from time to time, I don't know if this is what Marion's actually referring to, as, you know, safe places to keep them away from trouble spots. I'd be interested to know what sort of processes and communications between Corrections and Children and Families around ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: And the Department, mmm.

Ms WALKER: ... managing those young people and who's supervising them, who's paying, you know, feeding them and ... yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So just to be clear, this is a young person who's on a corrections order but may not be in the care of the Department?

Ms WALKER: Yes.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Ah, yeah, but it's not just corrections. I mean, it's not just juveniles coming out of the corrections system, there's a number of children that are under the care of the Department and being relocated out of communities and placed with families on homeland. A lot of those families are saying that the kids are being dumped, put out there, out of sight, out of mind, and there's no follow up from the Department. It'd be good to get that information from your Department where that is occurring in the different regions, and I know that Nhulunbuy around East Arnhem, West Arnhem and some of the regions that that seems to be an increasing thing that's coming ... or comment that's coming through from those communities.

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: So basically there's two separate questions there?

Ms WALKER: Yes, yeah.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah, ones the corrections, and what liaison is happening with corrections, with the Department in terms of monitoring.

CHAIR: Thanks, Marion. Just getting back to case loads, and this probably is reflective of the lack of staff that you've got in that area. Your report on page 23 under the heading "Every Child in Alternative Care Receives a Face to Face Contact Every Four

Weeks,” says that a recent report captured children who had not received a face to face visit between the 1st of October 2011 and the 31st of October 2011. This report identified 323 children where a worker had not reported undertaking a face to face contact during that period.

Now further down under the section which says, “Every child who is the subject of a child protection investigation receives a face to face contact,” it said recent data produced on the 1st of November 2011 showed that out of 1,688 open child protection cases, 265 had not received the face to face contact from the case worker within the 28 days.

I suppose the question is now, is this an improvement or are we going backwards, because obviously these are some of the areas that are really important in relation to changing the way things have been over the past. I don’t know whether Dr Vimpani also looked at that section and had any comment to make as well. So I don’t know whether we could get a comment as to why that’s happening, and maybe even where it’s happening, is it worse in some places than other places?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Clare Gardiner-Barnes, I haven’t got a breakdown in figures around that. What we’ve presented through this report for the first time is a whole lot of baseline data, and this will form part of our ongoing reporting to the Committee as part of the performance measurement and monitoring and evaluation program that the Department’s committed to that will be overseen by the External Monitoring Committee.

So we have been working with a subcommittee of the External Monitoring Committee to look at what performance indicators would help measure over time the key areas for improved performance for the Department, and this is one of those areas. So we can try and get some historical data if it’s available, and try and demonstrate whether there’s a trend that we can show over time, but certainly this is the sort of information we’d like to report on a regular basis.

CHAIR: Have you got any comments on that, Dr Vimpani?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Only to say that the Northern Territory data are not out of kilter with that which exists in some other jurisdictions of Australia.

CHAIR: Okay. Any other questions in relation to that?

Ms WALKER: No.

CHAIR: And it would be just fair to say that the only way some improvements will occur is if we get full numbers of staff that are required.

Ms WALKER: Actually, can I ...

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms WALKER: ... I have got a question, it’s in relation to a tabled document that we’ve got here, Clare, around Child Protection Crisis Response Incentives Package for New and Existing Professional Stream Employees. I’m just looking at the bottom two sections on that table between Katherine and remote locations, there’s a fortnightly ... there’s a location allowance fortnightly provision which for Katherine region totals \$12,000 per annum, and for remote locations totals \$8,000 per annum. Why would it be less in remote locations than Katherine? Is that accurate?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: The rationale for that difference is based on our retention and attraction data for the Katherine office which over time has demonstrated that it is the hardest or has been the hardest office to staff, and retain staff in, and so in fact that package is what seems to have had the biggest impact on getting Katherine staffed fully for the first time.

Ms WALKER: Okay. And then my next question, Mr Chair, is about the professional learning commitment component there on a reimbursement basis, employees can across all areas up to \$1,500 per annum. As part of the attraction and retention strategy, are you looking at other options around study leave, for instance, Department of Education and Training have a study leave provision for teachers who serve a certain amount of time in remote locations, on an annual basis you accrue a certain number of points at which time you can eventually take study leave for either six months ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: A sabbatical.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms WALKER: ... or 12 months on half pay? Is that sort of thing that you would look at, is it viable?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Given we're just getting for the first time to staff in remote locations really.

Ms WALKER: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: This is a new area of business for us ...

Ms WALKER: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: ... and if we have difficulty in retaining staff, it'll be definitely something that we look at.

CHAIR: Could I ask what's wrong with Katherine? Do you know why there's, you know ...

Ms WALKER: I love Katherine, I lived there for two years.

CHAIR: ... Katherine's a nice town but why aren't people staying there? Is there something about the place that's not keeping people there?

Ms WALKER: It's hot.

CHAIR: It's always hot, so is Kununurra, so is, yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Well, I guess the information that I have about staff wanting to stay in Katherine is very similar to staff moving on in other regions, it just seems to be heightened in that area. And I think you have to be a committed person to want that lifestyle. The Regional Director who is there appointed to the Katherine region specifically asked to be located in that region because she likes doing remote work. And I think part of building the culture in our agency is developing a workforce of people who want to do long term remote work, not people who want to come from interstate and have a remote experience for 12 months and then go home again. So I think that's part of our difficulty, is developing that long term culture.

CHAIR: So when we say we're going to work on growing our own, are the people who live and born or lived for a long time in Katherine putting their hands up as well, you know, at least ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Katherine's a great region to live and work, I mean ...

CHAIR: Yeah, but I don't know whether you're recruiting people from that area, not just Darwin, but are people coming from within Katherine, there's 10,000 people?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: But it's a region of great reform. It's probably the only region where there has been great health reform, and I think it's sold wrongly in terms of some of the, you know, some of the incentives and benefits that you would get with working within a team with ...

CHAIR: And you were part of that health reform, weren't you? You smile because ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: I stick up for the mob in Katherine because I think Katherine is a great place to ...

CHAIR: That's right.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... live and work. I would think ... I would like to know whether Katherine, Tennant Creek and whether the issues, and just how easy it is to recruit. Are you saying that Tennant Creek is easier to recruit to and retain somebody in Tennant Creek than it is in Katherine, or is it because the Department doesn't focus on Tennant Creek, they have their staff in Alice Springs and then it's a visiting service in to Tennant Creek, Clare?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's more about the size of the problem. The Katherine office needs a lot more staff than the Tennant Creek office, and as it happens at the moment we happen to have a husband and wife team in Tennant Creek who have been there long term. Now if they happened to leave we'd find ourselves in a big pickle in Tennant Creek. But at the moment, we need a lot ... we had needed a lot of staff in Katherine, so it's the bulk of the issue in that location.

CHAIR: Alright. Can I move on to a couple of other issues? Maybe this one goes to Clare again, but I know there was a lot of criticism about the cooperation between NGOs and the Department, and I think that's one of the key things that needs to be changed. Have you seen a change in attitude between the Department and NGOs, and what do you do to sort of continually improve that relationship?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: I will comment and then I think it would be good for Graham to comment given that each of the Committee meetings have had NGO stakeholders present to the Committee. There have been significant changes with some key NGO stakeholders. The most important one for me has been with Foster Care NT. The foster carer workforce, for me, is one of our most critical ones, and our partnership and our respect and our attitude of Departmental staff and how we work with foster carers is absolutely critical to how we do our business.

It was only yesterday that I was meeting with Foster Care NT at their new premises out at Lyons, at the Community Centre there, and the President of that Association said, "I cannot believe the reform that's happened within 12 months."

CHAIR: Could I just butt in there for one second?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yeah.

CHAIR: On page 29 you mention that the Department's commenced an expression of interest process to attract a Non-Government Organisation that processes enquiries. Now those enquiries were a partnership you had with Foster Care and Life Without Barriers to encourage more people to get into foster and kinship care.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: Why couldn't Foster Care do those enquiries themselves? Is it not big enough or ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: This is about actually starting the whole registration process. So we wanted an organisation that had skills and expertise who have done it in other jurisdictions, for example, to undertake the follow up enquiries and commence the registration process. So we're just finalising those arrangements at the moment because our alternative care team is a very small team and it would have taken them forever to get through those. So it's really about expanding our capacity.

Foster Care NT is more of a peak organisation that helps advocate for parents and support them rather than get involved directly in the registration process.

CHAIR: Okay.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: So who does the registration ... oh go on, you wanted to question Professor Vimpani?

CHAIR: Did you have any comments on that, Dr Vimpani, the relationship between NGOs and the Department?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Only to say that I think it's improving and, I mean, my basis for saying that is that there was a fair degree of criticism in Alice Springs of the Department and its capacity and willingness to communicate with other agencies. And certainly that wasn't evident in our meeting we had with NGOs in Darwin where people did comment on changes that the Department was ...

I think there's been a significant improvement in communication between the Department and its stakeholder network. I think there's been a significant attempt to improve the frequency of content of communication with other agencies, and I think that's actually starting to become evident in the attitude towards the Department.

CHAIR: Marion, you had a question?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Well, it's going back to that original question that I posed to Clare about carers on homelands, and foster carers, you know, where do these carers that are resident on homeland sit in terms of, you know, caring for children that have been handed to them from the Department and they're not given any support?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So, it's Clare Gardiner-Barnes. One of the key reform areas for the whole reform across the Department is in the residential care and out of home care space. One of the key components of that is around Kincare, and we have a policy in place that means that kinship carers who are registered should be getting the same supports financially and otherwise from the Department as all other carers.

We need to ensure as a Department that our frontline staff are complying with that policy, are giving accurate information to carers about what they're eligible for, and that's some of the work that we have been working with Foster Care NT on improving.

So we're redeveloping our whole Kinship Care and Foster Care Handbook, so that information is available to staff and carers. Foster Care NT then becomes the link to the community to ensure that their rights and access to information and services and financial assistance is put in place by the Department.

So we still have a long way to go, particularly in remote communities where there may not be a formal care arrangement put in place. We need to act on that and ensure that any child who in fact is in need of care has access to the support that they require.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Look, I understand the whole Kinship Care stuff but it's ... and look, I'm not ... I think that maybe this is probably beyond the Department but maybe something that Mr Symons takes up as part of the Commissioner for ... or somebody needs to take up. Professor Vimpani talked about he wrote to Minister Macklin in terms of housing and I think it goes to the heart of housing and leasing and ...

CHAIR: And we've written too.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... I mean, with Working Futures and growth towns, and I mean, a lot of those policies I think there needs to be a look across those areas but just where do carers and others fit within this. We saw this in CTC ...

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... there'll be, you know, houses for foster carers in remote Aboriginal communities. I mean, what's, you know, Housing and Local Government, you know, we got a response back supported but not actioned. I mean, how do we encourage foster carers and other people in remote communities if we don't see this fundamental change in relation to policy? I mean, I just think we're just chasing our tails around and around unless we get serious and put a commitment to ... that's why we're not getting Aboriginal foster carers on the ground in our communities, because why should someone put their hand up in a house with 20 other people when if they had a house that they could, you know, that was given to them as part of an incentive to be a foster carer, which is what we ... I think we got a lot ... that was certainly the sentiment that was coming out in a lot of our deliberations.

CHAIR: You're right because we also asked about whether some of the houses could be set aside for foster carers ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: ... and Marion's right, it's no good putting kids into an overcrowded house.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Mmm.

CHAIR: But we didn't get either a great response I think on the ground ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Mmm.

CHAIR: ... in the communities. I gather they said, well, this will be a, I think it's the reference group. Well, I think sometimes governments may have to step up a bit higher than that and say, "Well, hang on, this is the issue we've got and houses are important if we're

going to achieve something.” So that’s something we’re going to have push and maybe the Department’s got to keep pushing as well.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So that issue I have raised with Ken Davies as the Chief Executive of the Department of Housing to look at how we prioritise housing to ensure that where there is a carer in a remote community who’s able to care for kids, they get access to the priority housing ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Mmm.

Ms WALKER: Mmm.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: ... where possible.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Because it’s not just child protection, you know, there’s disabilities ...

Ms WALKER: That’s right.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... there’s mental health, there’s all these areas which, you know, Clare, there are people that are caring ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... for individuals with some of these problems, and they can’t get any, you know, there is no support in a lot of these areas.

CHAIR: Well, we’ve gone on to carers, could I ask a question, it’s probably related to this and whether there’s, you know, places for people to be cared by Aboriginal carers. Now the tables on page 23 show that there is an increasing number of children who are placed with non-Aboriginal carers, and I make it clear from my point of view and I think Marion said the issue is about safety, that’s a priority so I’m not in any way criticising what’s here, but we’ve also got another table 8 which shows that now, that in 2007 33.2% of Aboriginal children were cared for by non-Aboriginal carers, and if I read this incorrectly let me know. In 2011 that’s nearly doubled to 61.3% are being looked after by non-Aboriginal carers, yet we now have this ... you’ve got a fair section in this report on Aboriginal child placement principles. Is it ... or do you know the reasons why, is it simply they have ... is it simply just not enough suitable Aboriginal people? Has social dysfunction increased? Why are the reasons, do you think, that there’s less children going to Aboriginal carers than non-Aboriginal carers?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Might be because they’ve got 20 other kids in the house.

Ms WALKER: Yes, overcrowded houses.

CHAIR: Yeah, that’s right, but ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: It’s not that they don’t care, I think because they’ve already got 20 kids in their house.

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: One of the Board of Inquiry recommendations was to establish a Kinship Care Unit within the Department so that we had a focus on this as an activity. And it’s also a priority for the new Aboriginal child care agencies that will be

established as part of the Board of Inquiry recommendations that will be supported by the new peak Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Children and Families organisation that has recently been established.

In other jurisdictions, these Aboriginal organisations provide enormous support to connecting to Aboriginal families in the community where they might provide a safe place for children and potentially become registered foster carers.

At the moment, depending on the Department to undertake that role when we don't have close connections always with potential foster carers, I think ... and kinship care is part of our issue. So having those Aboriginal agencies up and established and focusing on building those networks, building the skills, ensuring that Aboriginal carers get access to the information they require and the skill development they require, get access to housing improvements if that's what blocking their capacity to be an approved carer, all of those things will play a role in improving our capacity to attract and retain kinship carers. But the key part will be our relationship with those carers so that they feel valued and can contribute to the decision making around the placements of those children.

CHAIR: So you haven't got any understanding as to why this is happening?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's about the growth in numbers of Aboriginal children in our child protection system, and our lack of growth to parallel that in the Aboriginal foster care and kinship placements that are available.

CHAIR: And have you looked at the reasons why there's not enough Aboriginal people putting their hand up, and I understand what Marion's saying, overcrowding might be one reason, but are there other reasons?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Anecdotally the rationale for a lot of this is that potential carers are already caring for a lot of other children, relative, informal arrangements and so they might already have eight or nine kids in their house, so they don't have the space to take on any more kids. So those children haven't been taken into care, its family who are taking responsibility for them, and so we're stretching already what is a very scarce resource.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Stretched families. I think, and I don't know whether the Department will look at this. I mean, I think the Department needs to look because this is quite a serious issue that you've raised, Member for Nelson, particularly on the ground where you've got ... because families are being affected but they see the family that's caring for seven or eight kids. And there is reluctance amongst families to put their hands up to become kinship carers because they just feel that the system lets them down constantly. It's not that they don't want to take on those children or care for them, I think because they see the bad experiences and the issues that come, you know, it's not just being let down from the Department, there's also payback implications from the other family members in those communities, so it's a lot more complicated and complex.

CHAIR: Well, could I just ask in relation to that, you speak about how there's a dire shortage of people who to want care for people in need, younger people in need. So you have a section called alternative care. Now is that really ... is that perhaps the approach that's going to be required by governments, because years ago you had orphanages, or you had places where people would have to go, homes? Is this a more ... a similar thing but you might say was a less structured and I suppose a more 2011/12 approach to what is perhaps the only alternative where you do not have enough carers to take people into individual homes?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: The alternative care term is used to encompass a whole range of different type of care arrangements, so from kinship and foster care right through to a family group home which are two homes we're looking to establish in both Katherine and Alice Springs where we have parents in a house caring for up to six children.

Then we have a residential care model where we have workers employed to care for kids who often at a teenage level, age level, they don't want to be in a foster care arrangement anymore, and so we have houses with teenagers in them together, living in what we call a residential care arrangement, and we have a number of those houses, particularly in Darwin and Alice Springs.

And then we have other more informal placement arrangements, particularly for older children who are transitioning out of care and are trying to develop their own independence.

CHAIR: So if a child ... if you haven't got a foster carer but the child is required to have some ... to be looked after, are there times when there's nowhere to take those children?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There are times when we have difficulty placing children, so we have emergency care placements. They are in residential houses often. We have foster carers who are willing to take children on emergency placement, and we use our networks as much as we can to try and find a carer match, because that's the other issue that you can't put a male child with sexualised behaviours in a house with other young children. So it's about trying to create the most appropriate care arrangements, to ensure all children are safe.

CHAIR: So does everyone get looked after or are there people that fall outside the system and they're just let loose? I mean, are you able to cater for everybody?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: We're required to cater for everybody so we have to find a solution, and at the moment the residential care houses are the fall back position if we can't find a home-like environment for the kids.

CHAIR: And so that residential alternative does that look like something that will be expanded?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Our preference is to expand foster carer care because that's most like family. We have a number of privately organised placements that are outside the foster care arrangement that we rely on. An example is Kentish Family Day Care that provide an emergency placement or a long term placement for a child that we can't place in foster care, but those placements are a lot more costly to the Department than a foster care placement. So foster care really is our key strategy that we want to grow.

CHAIR: Could I just ... when you said that the other method is the most expensive, you use a lot of FIFA service providers and they're usually the most expensive. Are you looking at negotiating with NGOs to provide an alternative way of looking after children?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes, we are. So as part of the residential care review that's going on at the moment, we're looking ... we've just done an audit of all of our kids in care using a tool from South Australia to assess their level of need. Because normally what would be happening is those young children with the highest risks and the highest needs are put in the highest cost placements with therapeutic support around them.

We haven't got that yet in the Territory, we're working towards it. So we need to have a proper assessment of level need and risk, categorised, and so we can properly place

children, depending on their level of need and put the skills and supports around them that is required. So those children with the most challenging behaviours have the supports around them to manage that well.

CHAIR: So would you be moving to look at people like Centre Care, Anglicare, Smith Family type bodies ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: ... to start to move into this foster care area?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There are a number of organisations already like Life Without Barriers, Lifestyle Solutions that work in this space, not for profit Non-Government Organisations and that have similar services in other jurisdictions and we're looking to continue to build that in the Territory so that we have a skilled workforce in this space.

CHAIR: Yes, I'm just checking, what time ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Go on, Lynne.

CHAIR: ... I haven't got the time.

Ms WALKER: No, you're right.

CHAIR: What time do we finish now, just to make sure we don't ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Because the start was ...

Ms WALKER: One o'clock.

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: One o'clock.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... we've got SIHIP at one.

CHAIR: One o'clock, that's all right. And do you want a break at all for five minutes? Sorry, yes, Professor.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Before we do break if we're going to, can I draw your attention to the note on page 10 of Clare's report, item 3.8 and note that the number of children from Katherine who are now in care in Darwin have reduced quite significantly over the last three months. When we visited Katherine there were 53 Katherine children in out of home care in Darwin. The number is now down to 30 so that is a really significant improvement.

CHAIR: And it says that's due to recruitment of kinship carers. Is that ... yeah.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yeah, yep.

CHAIR: Well, that's good anyway, yeah. Would you like to pause for about five minutes ...

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yep.

CHAIR: ... and we'll get back to it? I hope you're all right there, Professor Vimpani.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yep.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: I'd like to go back to human resources again when we come back.

CHAIR: Okay, we might have to pause it yet. We'll do human resources when we come back. Just have a five minute break.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Okay. All right.

CHAIR: Thanks Graham.

BREAK TAKEN 12:09pm

CHAIR: We are coming back now, I might just come back to one question Clare. I should say Dr Vimpani, that Graham Symons is gone for the moment, well not for the moment he is gone. So we won't get our Graham's mixed up now. I was just going to ask Clare about the housing for foster carers. I mean what pressure is your department putting on the government to provide those houses. Because without those houses, again this is the practical side, you are not going to achieve much.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Are you referring to foster carer's houses in remote communities?

CHAIR: Yeah, yep.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: I have met with as I said Ken Davies to discuss that matter. We have also engaged the Commonwealth in those discussions and at this point in time it is really about a local level prioritisation process. So if it has been identified that there is a foster carer available in a remote community, then that is to be made known through the prioritisation decision around the allocation of houses. With the department having a professional working in the community for the first time that will probably help escalate that knowledge and background information to inform decisions in a more timely way. But we have a lot of work to do in getting people trained up in foster care skills so it's not going to be something that happens quickly.

CHAIR: But by the time, if you don't allocate houses now you won't have them, because this flow of new houses, once they are full they are finished and you are not going to be able to kick people out. So surely the department should be saying, we need to have two houses, or whatever, at least a minimum number of houses that must be retained for foster care. So there is no move in that direction or is it just relying on people on the ground in communities to say whether they support the idea or don't support the idea?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: At this stage it has been a community level driven initiative so we haven't been specific around the number of houses required at each location.

CHAIR: Well should you be more specific from the department's point of view? Should you be actually saying that there will be houses? There is no argy bargy, there will be some houses kept for this particular purpose. If this is such a high priority?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Well I can put that to the Department of Housing as a priority that they will then consider as part of their process.

CHAIR: Does the department think it is a priority?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes it is a definitely a priority for us if we are going to ensure that kids are kept in their local community with their local language and their local culture that is definitely the way we need to go.

CHAIR: So in Wadeye where I think there is 89 new houses, something like that, any of those houses being kept for foster care?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Not that I am aware of.

CHAIR: So if there was a need for foster care houses there wouldn't be any there now?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Correct.

Ms WALKER: 110 at Maningrida at 90 at Galiwinku, there just the ones off the top of my head.

CHAIR: Well we are meeting with Ken Davies this afternoon and I suppose what concerns us is that we are saying there needs to be changes, and we know there is issues out in remote communities and if we are not going to have the materials, in the form of houses, then we are not going to get far are we?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: No.

CHAIR: Right. So we have to work together.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: The CTC is quite happy to make a noise but I presume you as the boss have also got to make noise...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

CHAIR: ...and something has got to change.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yeah.

CHAIR: All right. Sorry where you...?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: No, no when you are ready. Human Resources.

CHAIR: I'll just go back to the non for profit NGO service providers.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: Will they get a contract and how will you achieve this process of getting the NGOs to run foster care, will you give them a package? How is the process going to work to get those people involved, like Centrecare or Smith Family or Life Without Barriers?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So once we have done the groundwork around the level of complexity of the children and the type of placements we will then organise a funding contract that will be opened to the market who will say for example in Darwin we're looking for providers who will provide 15 beds for highly complex children aged 12 to 18 years. Then we'll have the next category down, so it will go to the open market, providers from across the country will be eligible, but what we will be looking to do as part of all of our NGO

funding in the future is that if an organisation comes in from outside the Territory, they're asked to partner with a local provider to ensure that there's some local intelligence and knowledge from the start-up date.

CHAIR: Ta. Marion?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Just human resources, Clare, and we go to page 26 of your report to Professor Vimpani. Page 24 of the DCF report to the External Monitoring Committee in relation to client information, quality officers and care and protection policy and program development business analysis. Are these positions new or have they replaced previous position titles?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Those positions are brand new and were the result prior to the Board of Inquiry announcements by the Minister following the Coronial investigations that were conducted last year. So there was 76 additional positions announced and 20 of those were in relation to improving client data and information.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. Can we get a breakdown as to, I mean, they're all Darwin based, is that right, or are they regional based or ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: No, they're regional based in the centres where we have frontline child protection staff.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Alright, so that's the three regions, Alice Springs, Katherine and Greater Darwin, so you get three ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes, and so we'll have some ... there's an officer based in Nhulunbuy and there'll be someone servicing Barkly as well.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. How many local Indigenous people have been employed? And if we could get information, I noticed your report you have got, and I thank you for the last time where we got the updated workforce data for December 2001, you've got established super nummary the FTEs and your vacancies in terms of child protection and alternative care professional streams. One of the questions, and I'll have to go back ... you say that 14% have been identified on PIPs as being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and then you've got your comparison of your families.

Are we able to, now you may not be able to, but on top of what you've provided here, be able to break down community by community or town by ... or region by region in terms of Indigenous staff employed within the child protection stream?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: We can break it down by location in each of the 20 ... in each of the places where we have a service. We have got some information that talks about whether we have a safe place in that location and whether or not we have an Aboriginal family community worker etcetera, so I can provide that information to you based on each town.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: No problem, thank you. Yeah, that'd be good. Thank you.

CHAIR: Could I just ask a technical question about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, why is it, I mean, you either tick the box that says you're Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or you don't tick the box?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Some of them don't want to identify.

CHAIR: Yeah, but the point is that if you don't tick it, well, you're not counted in the statistics. So why isn't just an accurate figure that says people who have ticked the box are this much, this many because you've got this figure between 168 and 200?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: That is because there are some non-English speaking people are part of our workforce who won't be always skilled at filling out forms, and in fact they might have assistance in filling out forms. They might not be filled out correctly. There are some staff who don't understand, I guess, how that information is used and the importance of ticking the box, so they will show up for a workshop that we're having for Indigenous staff but they don't appear on our PIPs system. So it is about information collection, people understanding why it's important to tick the box and how we ensure that our data is kept up-to-date.

CHAIR: It's not a case that people don't want to tick the box?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Some of it is.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: That very well might be the case ...

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: ... but if they're willing to come to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander forum or professional development exercise or identify themselves as Aboriginal with their line manager. It implies that in fact that's not the case, it's more to do with making sure on the HR system the box is ticked.

CHAIR: Okay. Thanks. You keep going?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Is that alright?

CHAIR: Yeah, that's all right. It just seemed the two of you ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: We'd already gone through, Mr Chair, some of the issues of the local recruit policy, but again with the human resource, and I'm not sure if you asked this, Mr Chair, or the Member for Nhulunbuy but the turnover of rates when we look at the reports is at 32.8% in terms of turnover, which, you know, you can argue is high or not high. But what proportion, Clare, if we could get, is senior staff and what proportion is frontline staff, and what proportion of that 32.8% turnover is from remote and regional areas?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Okay. I'll have to take that on notice.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. Do you want me to repeat that or ...

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: Yes, please.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. Turnover rates are outlined in the report is at 32.8%. What proportion is senior staff, what proportion is frontline staff, and what proportion is for regional and remote community?

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: Remote ... regional and remote, okay.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah.

Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL: Okay.

CHAIR: Lynne, do you have a question?

Ms WALKER: I have. Clare and Graham, it's in relation to recommendation number 124 and it also links to recommendation number 128 and it's to do with the employee perception survey which I see staff have responded to very recently ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms WALKER: ... and you have had a really high response at 70% of employees responding to that survey. So I would take it at this stage it's too early, you haven't seen results yet as to what the emerging themes and messages are? And my question would be, two things: will you release to your staff the entire contents of the report including statistical data, and so the qualitative and the quantitative feedback?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Absolutely. It will be a transparent process, and in fact the consultants that undertook the survey I met with earlier this morning about, they're the same group that are working with us to develop our strategic plan that we're looking to consult with staff on early next year. So what we're looking to do is use the data from that survey as a bit of a baseline for providing some context around the key points in our strategic plan that we will consult with them on.

Ms WALKER: Yeah, okay. And I take it, it will for the foreseeable future become an annual thing so that you can benchmark and measure improvements, would that be right?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes. So one of the issues with collecting that information online is that a lot of remote staff don't have access to computers. The majority of those are Indigenous staff, and so early next year we're actually going back to that group and doing face-to-face surveys and paper based to ensure that we've got interpreters available and ...

Ms WALKER: Yeah. That was my next question, yep.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: ... that we're actually collecting data that's more in-depth from those staff and giving them an opportunity to speak in their own language about their issues.

Ms WALKER: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So whether we do that every year as a complimentary process is yet to be determined, but certainly the online survey is something that we can work on every year.

Ms WALKER: And when do you expect to have KPMG report to you, and can the Committee members have a copy of the ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Once we've got the final report, that will be provided to the Committee. Initial data will be provided to us in February and the final report in March, I understand.

Ms WALKER: Okay. Great. Thanks, Gerry.

CHAIR: Thanks, Lynne. I had another question, I'm just trying to find the table because there's a few tables going around here. I may not be able to find it but it was in relation to, I think, it was how ... the number of cases that have been reported have increased steadily, we know that, and Dr Vimpani might be able to give us also a comment, that one of the key recommendations, it doesn't get ... there's not a lot of numbers behind it

in the sense, you know, one, two, three, four, five recommendations, but it's about parenting. There is a section in here on page, let me see, the right page, on page 31 of 5.2 Supporting and Strengthening Families, but I don't get the feeling there's anything specific about parenting itself, because obviously we don't get early intervention, we don't get young people with better skills, these numbers are going to up.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

CHAIR: So where do I see a focus, a strong focus on the parenting aspects of changing things around?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's two major contributions through the NGO sector around family support occurring at the moment. The first is an announcement by the Commonwealth Government when the Board of Inquiry Report was handed down to invest in intensive family support programs, and so there are five locations across the Territory that the Commonwealth is investing in Non-Government Organisations to provide intensive family support, and those families will be provided with support following a direct referral from our Department, particularly focusing on neglect cases, including cases where the families have been referred to income management.

In addition to that, as part of the Board of Inquiry funding allocation to the non-government sector, this financial year \$800,000 has been allocated specifically for family support. The Department undertook some work with Treasury to do some analysis of need across Territory families, and using the AEDI index of need and the Barkly area was identified as the area of highest need in the Territory for families where children were most vulnerable.

So the Department is now working with Non-Government Organisations in the Barkly area to allocate those funds to ensure there is a duplication, that there's priority access for families most in need. We're doing this in collaboration with the Australian government so we're not duplicating their service provision, and that we're ensuring that there is a strong mapping of all service providers across the spectrum of need required to support families who are in need of support as a result of neglect. So that may include alcohol and other drugs, mental health services etcetera, so it will be a range of services that will be available in that Barkly area. And this is the first time the Department's undertaken an evidenced based approach in collaboration with the Australian government and NGOs at a place level to determine priority of funding initiatives.

CHAIR: But where is the emphasis on parenting skills? So if you've got young people who've had a ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

CHAIR: ... got a baby and they're all a bit sort of not really concerned about the world out there too much and they don't know how to raise a family, who's out there to sort of give them those skills?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So an example of how that funding would be used would be Child Protection Notification comes in, it is substantiated neglect. The matter is referred to a Non-Government Organisation who is given either enhanced funding or a new organisation on the ground. It may be that it's a new mother with a six month old baby and a two year old, and with the new arrival of the baby, it's become difficult for them to parent, and so the service can provide in-house parenting skills in that location and that might be about food preparation, it might be hygiene, it might be about routine, it might be about

managing their finances to ensure that all the bills are paid on time, the whole spectrum of family support and parenting can be provided through those initiatives.

CHAIR: But the impression you gave then is there has to be some neglect before you act. Is there a ... surely we should be getting in far earlier than when neglect occurs, we should be in there ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Proactively.

CHAIR: ... yeah, proactive, yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So there's another recommendation from the Board of Inquiry called the Dual Pathway.

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: That Board of Inquiry recommendation is about addressing all those cases that currently receive no service where there might be a report of harm to the Department, but they don't actually get screened in for a service as a substantiated case. It might be that the level of neglect isn't significant enough, but still the Department can see that the family would benefit from a service. At the moment, those families get nothing.

The dual pathway is about referring those families on to an NGO and providing a service upfront at the earliest possible time that they're aware of that program, and it may be that that those referrals happen at a community level as well through central intake. We're undertaking consultations this week with the non-government sector in Katherine, Darwin and Alice Springs to look at what that model will look like and we're looking to implement it in three trial regions from July next year.

CHAIR: But you've still got this sort of neglect side of it. But surely we need to be in there before that, so either ... in the old days we used to have Community Health Centres when I was a tiny person, I can't remember when I was taken there. But, I mean, there was help for mothers bringing up children. You've also got, in theory we've now got people working with families in new houses ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

CHAIR: ... and you got health centres in those communities. So, and it's not only in remote communities, I'd say there's lots of kids in the urban areas that probably need some help, that's why we see them running around at night. But so where's that approach, besides all this, where's the approach to encourage ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So the more universal parenting services are provided by NGOs in partnership with, well, in funding partnerships with Department of Education and Training because they have key responsibility for early childhood, so they fund some initiatives and our Department fund some initiatives for the more generic service provision. There's not a lot available, but some of the major things that are happening are the development of the child and family centres, integrated child and family centres in the remote locations, and the employment of the child and family leaders which is about providing universal, generic parenting type skills up front.

CHAIR: That's one of the key recommendations because we're trying to get in early ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

CHAIR: ... and yet you're saying the money is coming from a different department, the Education Department, who really ... I mean, what's their input into this whole business we're doing now with child protection? Are they part of it? Are they getting extra money to be part ... run their programs to be part of trying to turn things around, or are they just continuing on with their normal programs that they've had all along?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: One of the things that we have been working on across Department of Health, our Department, Education has been the development of an early childhood plan. That's being finalised at the moment and that is meant to highlight all agencies' commitments to this space including parenting programs, because the Health Department plays in this space as well. And it's important that all of us understand what we're doing both directly and through funding service providers to provide services around parenting.

Ms WALKER: Yeah.

CHAIR: Dr Vimpani, what do you think about the early intervention of getting, you know, developing more parenting skills?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Well, I think, I mean, I think the money's got to be there but I think it really is more often than perhaps more appropriately a role for other government agencies like Health and Education, but also the NGO sector. That's certainly the case in other jurisdictions with which I'm familiar. But I think we've got to ensure that there is funding available for those NGOs and other government agencies to do this work.

CHAIR: I ... sorry.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah, I was just going to say, Professor Vimpani, Lynne Walker and myself, we've been recently going throughout the Northern Territory with the Youth Suicide Committee and talking to a lot of NGOs as well as government agencies, and one area which is emerging, and not just in remote communities but certainly in our urban centres, are schools, and just how pivotal schools are becoming in this whole space in that you've got a captive audience from 8 o'clock in the morning 'til 3:30. And, yes, curriculum's important, but ... and no-one's, you know, I mean, we wouldn't ... that's why kids go to school, but what we're not looking at is the collaboration with Health, with Child Protection, with all of these different agencies in terms of trying to get a better education focus across all these areas, and a great education program, MindMatters, which Lynne knows about is something that we've been talking to the Department about, with, you know, trying to build that resilience of children but encourage families as part of that resilience so ...

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yes. There's another model in New South Wales which may be worth looking at, the Schools as Community Centres which is doing exactly the sort of things you're talking about, it's based in a classroom that's superfluous to the school's needs where there's basically a family group facilitator who works with parents of children in the school, and brings in other agencies outside.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Mmm.

CHAIR: Yeah, look, I mean, Dr Vimpani, I suppose I'm concerned, the Department's called the Department of Children and Families ...

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yep.

CHAIR: ... there's more than just feeding a child, of course, there's all the issues in raising the child and hopefully ... and I'm not a Professor but I was always told from naught to three years is probably the most important time of a child's development, so if the skills aren't there because mum and dad are at the pub every night or they're watching TV and the kids are out in the backyard sort of, I don't know, throwing stones or something, you know, you wonder where we're going to go unless we turn some of those attitudes around, because it's obviously a lot of the problems we have in later life are caused by the problems when they're young.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Yeah, I mean, we're certainly advocating a strong public health approach to the issues of the Northern Territory by which I mean exactly the things we're talking about, it's strengthening universal services, strengthening services for vulnerable children and families before they enter the statutory system, and that requires a partnership across government and with the NGO sector, as well. But the resources have got to be there to enable these agencies to do their work in conjunction with DCU.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: And I think in fairness to Clare and her Department, I think that those staff members, and I'd like to feedback some positive, I don't think it's all dire out there and I think sometimes Department of Children and Families often get lumped with everything when there are other agencies, Professor.

There is a fantastic model and I think one that we should be advocating for the Northern Territory and it's called a Family Responsibility Commission, and it is used in Cape York and it is quite an extensive model that has got outcomes in terms of strengthening families, Mr Wood.

CHAIR: Yes, I know about it.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: And I think if we were to advocate something, maybe that's something that we should be advocating to our Federal Minister because throwing a blanket across all these problems ain't going to work.

CHAIR: Well, yeah, and should I say, one of the Commissioners or judges that's been to see me about that system ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah.

CHAIR: ... but ... Can I just ask a fairly broad question then, Clare? When I read the recommendations and read through here, there's a lot of groups, and I suppose the question is, why are there so many units and groups? I'll give you just an example of what you've got to look after, you've got the Changed Management Communications Committee, the DECS Structure Consultancy, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group, Family Support Services Working Group, the Community Child Safety and Wellbeing Teams, the Multi-Agency Assessment and Coordination Teams, the Intensive Family Support Service, the Save the Children and Good Beginnings, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Youth and Families Peak Body, Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Subcommittee of the Child Protection External Monitoring Reporting Committee. I know there's even a few others, one that tossed in here was about the data not being perhaps up to standard and you've got a, I think it's called CIQO or something, it's called the Client Information Quality Officers ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Services.

CHAIR: ... yeah, and so, there's also the Care and Protection Policy of Program Development Business Analysts. How do you keep track of all these, you know, there must

be plenty more of these, I imagine? How do you keep track of all this and can this whole process of child protection get drowned in bureaucracy, and can we actually eventually make it simpler? I'm not saying human life is simple, but can we make it so that there's less bureaucracy and more effective programs on the ground trying to help children?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: That would be lovely. [Laughs] In this world of openness and transparency and accountability, one of the key issues for me as Chief Executive coming into this agency and setting it up was a lot of the Board of Inquiry recommendations were about frontline service delivery and funding of the NGO sector. They weren't necessarily about improving the systems and processes in place to ensure people can do their job well and do it easier.

The Department's got a long way to go to ensure all of those back-end systems that make life easier for frontline workers are sailing smoothly and running in a way that people get access to information when they need it, get paid when they need to be paid, get the services that they need when they need it.

In addition to that, there's a whole lot of work that needs to be done to support our relationship with the non-government sector. A lot of those groups that you read out were in fact Non-Government Organisations, so they're not within the Department but they're certainly key players for us to do our job well.

We're only a very small agency when you compare us to agencies like Department of Health or Education. Our capacity to change the system is very limited, and our focus has been, this year, on the statutory system and building relationships with the NGO sector.

Next year the emphasis needs to be changing, how we do business on the ground. We put a lot of effort this year into the policy and program and planning area, that needs to shift so that kids and families who are experiencing trauma actually see themselves getting a better service. So I understand it looks quite complicated, but some of those things had to be put in place in order to get the frontline supported better to do their job well.

I have to say that the Regional Directors being in place has made a huge difference already. They have met with the Non-Government Organisations in their local area, they are building networks, they are looking at poor practice in their office and fixing it where it needs to be fixed. They've had the HR team down in their offices fixing all of the HR problems and the budget issues, so they're proactively addressing those core issues that staff find debilitating when they've already got a whole lot of workload pressures facing them on a daily basis, and a very exhausting and traumatic work profession anyway.

So, yes, it would be nice to make it simple, but we need to get those systems and processes in place first.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: I was looking at a lot of that and I agree with you, Member for Nelson. So, Clare, are you saying that nothing's ever ... I mean, this is a Department that's had reform after reform, that's had, you know, substantial budgets put, are you saying that nothing's ever, I mean, that only now that reform has been happening or outcomes in terms of the Department, or what's happened previously?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There weren't good systems in place, so when I arrived last year there wasn't a HR resource allocation model based on need, so that I couldn't say this is how many child protection cases were in that area, and as a result this is how many staff were being allocated. They didn't have that basic form of business infrastructure.

Right now, I can't get out of our information system a data report that tells me where the child protection notifications are coming from by location. So there's basic information needs that still aren't being met.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Mmm. So what happens if you've got a child ... and that's interesting that because it's an important issue. So just say a child enters or comes into the mental health system ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yep.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... so it comes to the attention of mental health, and but how do people within the mental health system know that this child is actually a child in care through the same CCIS because it's the Community Care Information System...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: So are you saying that this information system still isn't able to say, okay, Mary-Jo that's just come in because of reports of whether it's self harm or whatever, and that's just hypothetical, into the mental health team. So the mental health team or, you know, that team that deals with it can't ... so that they can't access information in the community care that if child has come from ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So for the first time ever this year, a flag has been put on the CCIS system that allows mental health staff to see that the child is known to the child protection system. Before that they didn't know.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's a new enhancement that's just come to us.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Oh, that's good, yeah, yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes. A pretty basic thing, but that's where we're at.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: No, because it was an issue that has been ... where children had come in through one entry point and where's the flags in these other points to be able to say, well, this child might be a child that's in care or has come through this point. Oh, that's good.

CHAIR: Can I just ask you, you just said before Marion asked you the questions there that you haven't got any way you can tell where a person comes from?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Where a notifier is reporting from.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Notifying.

CHAIR: So how do you tell where they've come from? Ring up the person.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So we take information about the child and that's really our focus. So we couldn't really do ... we can't do an accurate report on where notifiers... we have other information like whether they're in the school system or whether they're a health professional, whether they're a community member etcetera, but information about where that call is coming from, that isn't on our system.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: But if you're someone sitting outside and you see something happening and you ring up the intake team, say you get on the phone, you ring up, so do you provide your information then or no?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: So you ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: But it's all written into ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... provide your information to that intake team, you're saying that you can't get that information ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So it's all ... it's not a specific field that we can do a report on. So it might be typed into the system but we can't analyse the system and produce a report.

CHAIR: And that will change?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Over time, yes.

CHAIR: What sort of time?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's a whole range of system enhancements that we need to put in place to have better information about our kids in care including where their school ... what school they're at to ensure that they're attending regularly, that their immunisations are up to standard, there's a whole range of enhancements that we're now working with.

The information system is owned by the Department of Health. We pay Department of Health to provide a shared service arrangement for us around our IT, a lot of our HR and finance services. So there's still a purchaser provider relationship now set up to ensure that those things are prioritised for us as an agency.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: I'm still confused as ...

CHAIR: Confusing, yeah, when ...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: There's probably a number of questions in all of that, but ...

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: ... I think that, I mean, once the notification's done, surely when someone reports and then goes to ... doesn't it then ... isn't it passed to ... isn't the intake team then the ones that build the case in terms of whether a notification ... whether the allegation is either substantiated or not, and isn't that part of the developing of that ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So the central intake team do the assessment to determine whether or not it requires an investigation.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Yeah.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So they might do enquiries, they'll get a report, they might follow up with the school or a health practitioner to get additional information, then they'll make an assessment, yes, this meets the threshold for an investigation. Then it will go out

to the office where that child is located to undertake the investigation, and then the investigation then determines whether the harm has been substantiated or not.

CHAIR: Yeah.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Okay. So does the file and the information then ... is that where the detail's falling down, is that where ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's all along the line.

CHAIR: But is it stopping your investigation, that poorer quality data collection?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's a whole range of data reports that we can't extract yet from the information.

CHAIR: But is it making your job more difficult and therefore harder to investigate? Or is it a really a statistical issue rather than an on the ground practical issue in relation to investigation?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: This particular matter is about statistical information that might help us to understand more about our clients. So information like how many children have been removed from remote communities are now living in Darwin, that sort of ... and then when do they return to their community, and are they on constant orders through that whole period?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: But is that a computer, is that a software issue or is it a human resource issue?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: In order to be able to pull that information out of the system, it needs to be put in to a field that allows for data extraction and we don't have those fields available at the moment.

CHAIR: Can that be purchased?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yeah, so we're continuing to build a range of enhancements.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: But isn't it a simple modification of it, I mean, what's that going to cost, another a couple of million dollars just to put ... I'm sorry, but so are you saying that ... I mean, there are a couple of fields that need to be put into an IT system to be able to give us substantive information on a child in the system that we're not ... with all the computer techs that we have, and, you know, Health has got probably one of the best information systems here in the Northern Territory in terms of CCIS that there can't be modifications to build the fields that you need to get that information or ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes, there are modifications being made and they're being planned and there's many of them.

CHAIR: So how long have you know there's been a deficiency? Since the Department started?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes, and that was part of the Board of Inquiry information that was submitted.

CHAIR: Dr Vimpani, have you had a look at that as well, do you see that as an issue?

Professor Graham VIMPANI: Well, I can't say we have at this point.

CHAIR: Right.

Professor Graham VIMPANI: But we could look into this.

CHAIR: Okay. Well, we're just about of time, so I might just ask Lynne, if you've got a question there, Lynne.

Ms WALKER: Okay. I've got one last question. All of the recommendations were ranked one, two and three, one being most urgent, and they're all labelled either commenced or completed bar two. So recommendation 110 has not commenced and I'm just asking why not? It's a report on compliance with section 70, 71, 73, 74 and 76 of the Act with respect to care plans. Now I've been reading my folder on the plane this morning so I haven't cross-referenced to the Act, so I'm just wondering why this particular ... what's holding this one up?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: It's probably a data problem in our capacity to report.

Ms WALKER: Oh, okay.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So we'll need to ensure that our capability around building those reports are in place before we can commit to doing that.

Ms WALKER: Okay. The other one was around recommendation 39 which has not commenced, but it does state that there's a review to commence within the next six months, and this around Aboriginal community workers ...

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: Yes.

Ms WALKER: ... and they role that they will play in case management. So where's that one at?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: So what we've done is prioritise the commencement of recommendations one and two, that will require to commence with 18 months, so ... and category three within two years. So I think there are three recommendations we haven't yet commenced, but we are looking to commence them all in the early part of next year to meet the time frames of 18 months.

Ms WALKER: Okay.

CHAIR: Just two quick questions, have you got still many current cases that haven't been investigated? Is there any left over from the original group?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's none left over from the original group. There are currently 113 cases in the backlog of uninvestigated cases. They are, in the main, in the Casuarina office, and we're in the process now of putting a team of agency staff specifically into that office until the backlog's gone.

CHAIR: So how long do you think it would take to process that backlog?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: We hope that by April next year it's completely gone.

CHAIR: And just the other question, right through the recommendations it talks about ... there's a section there about the legislation. Where are we up to in regards to the upgrade ... I don't know whether they're going to update the legislation or is there going to be completely new legislation?

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: There's two further legislative amendments that are planned. The first is in relation to the information sharing provisions, and we're looking at this stage to introduce those legislation changes in the first sittings of Parliament next year. We're recommending that the information sharing provisions are based on the New South Wales model that allows for information sharing in relation to child protection and wellbeing issues between government departments and Non-Government Organisations.

And the third piece of legislation we're looking at introducing by the earliest April next year, which is a huge number of reforms to the whole Act. Many of the recommendations relate to legislative change and in addition they're a whole range of recommendations from previous coronials that are going to be wrapped up through that, and a number of system enhancements that we want to see in place as well.

CHAIR: So will there be a new Act or be an amended Act?

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Amended Act.

Ms GARDINER-BARNES: At this stage an amended Act.

CHAIR: Amended Act. That's all right. Because sometimes if you've got so many amendments it's nearly worth starting again. Yeah. That's all right. Any other...

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Don't even put that on the table.

CHAIR: So any other questions there? Okay. Thanks. Look, thank you, Dr Vimpani, for your patience. You probably had a lot of listening to do there. We appreciate you giving us your time this afternoon. And we'll probably contact you some time in the New Year when we've all recovered over Christmas.

And I'd like to thank Ms Clare Gardiner-Barnes for your answers to our questions. I think there's still lots of questions out there that I think need answering and certainly the one about foster carers, certainly about the number of people employed. Case loads appear to be still very high and I think they are some of the issues that CTC will be reporting to the government, but I think there needs to be ... I think we've got a role to play too, if there's no houses available for foster carers I think that's the key priority of this Committee again.

So look, thank you very much for coming today. Thank you members of the public for turning up as well. And with that I'll close the Committee meeting. Thank you very much.

Ms SCRYMGOUR: Thank you.

Ms WALKER: Thank you.

CHAIR: And we'll be back in half an hour or so, is that right?

Ms WALKER: Yes. 1.30.

CHAIR: Okay.

MEETING CLOSED 1:04pm