



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**COUNCIL OF TERRITORY CO-OPERATION**

Members:

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

Advisor:

Ms Lesley Taylor

**PUBLIC HEARING**

**WEDNESDAY 25 MAY 2011**

Witnesses:

Professor Graham Vimpani, AM      Chair of Child Protection External Monitoring  
and Reporting Committee

**CHAIR:** We'll get going I think, otherwise we have no idea where ... we know she's on the way, so we'll take it as it comes. So I'd like to welcome Professor Graham Vimpani, it's good to have you here today. I need to make an opening statement first before we get on with some of the more ... the reason why we're here.

So I declare open this public meeting the Council of Territory Co-operation and welcome Professor Graham Vimpani, AM, who is Chair of Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee and thank you for appearing before us today. I'd also like to welcome Robyn Lambley, MLA, who comes from Alice Springs and has a great interest in child welfare.

To assist the CTC in its oversight of the Northern Territory Government's child protection reform package also present today is Lesley Taylor and Lesley Taylor is from NAPCAN. If people don't know who Lesley Taylor is then they haven't been in child welfare for a long time. Lesley's been around a long time.

The CTC asked her to help us with our enquiries into child protection because of her extensive background in the field. Her role is to provide specialist advice to the CTC on Family and Children Services matters. Whilst she is not a Member of the CTC Lesley may ask questions or Members may ask Lesley Taylor for her comments or views of evidence given to us by you today.

I thought it useful to make sure, Professor, what her role with the CTC is and I'd also like to welcome you and Lesley back to the CTC.

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 to the House itself.

I remind the witness 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, please state your full name and positions before commencing your evidence and 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.

So good afternoon Professor, and I'm just wondering if you could perhaps give your name and your title and maybe give us a little bit of a background on your area of expertise, please.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Thank you, Mr Wood. Graham Vernon Vimpani, I'm Clinical the Chair of Kaleidoscope the Hunter Children's Health Network and also Professor of Community Child and Family Health at the University of Newcastle. I also do two days a week as senior clinical advisor in child protection and wellbeing for the New South Wales Health Department.

As you've indicated I'm the Chair of the Monitoring and Reporting Committee that the Government established to oversight the implementation of the reforms from the report last year.

I guess I've worked in child protection for 25 years; I've had a particular interest in the prevention of child abuse and neglect and particularly in the role of home visiting programs, to that end but as a paediatrician in Newcastle. I've been the senior paediatrician involved about our child protection team so I kind of see it at the pointy end as well as at the policy end concerned with prevention and ensuring that the systems are developed that are able to respond appropriately to the needs of these children and young people but also ensure that systems are actually focussing on preventing where possible these problems from occurring.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Professor. I also should have welcomed Lynne Walker, Member for Nhulunbuy, that's the other Member of our CTC and Marion Scrymgour will be here soon.

**Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL:** No, Marion's here.

**CHAIR:** When did you sneak in?

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** We do have lights on at the moment so Marion Scrymgour, Member for Arafura.

**CHAIR:** Sorry, Marion. I was concentrating. I just wanted ... another sort of general question, Professor. The Committee's been going since last year and I think you've already had your first meeting. Could you perhaps give us some idea what stage you're up to?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, as you know, we had our first meeting in February and we've got another meeting scheduled for Alice Springs tomorrow that's actually a two day meeting.

First day will be a business meeting hearing about progress in the Department of Children and Families and we're also talking with the Public Service Commissioner, I think it is, who I might have the name wrong but who has some responsibility for salary packaging of people in remote areas to look at what more can be done to make working in remote areas more attractive for Child Protection Service staff.

And then on Friday we've got a number of visits to agencies and we're spending the last hour or so with the Department of Children and Families staff in Alice Springs so I think that'll actually give us a good opportunity to actually get some views from the field, from the front line in terms of how well people feel the changes are starting to roll out.

I mean, we're at the very early stage of the implementation of a raft of major reforms, I mean, obviously in ... just as a bit of background, I'm engaged in New South Wales with the reform from Keep Them Safe that followed the Wood Inquiry and the Government's response to that was announced in March 2009, and here we are now some two and a half years later still engaged with implementing a number of the reforms that followed there.

So I think the reason for that reference is to illustrate the significance of the reforms that are planned for the Northern Territory are going to take time to roll out and we need to be patient in terms of expecting too much too soon because we're not only talking about recruiting and not only talking about investing new resources in a system but also trying to promote and facilitate a change of culture and getting a greater sense that child protection is everybody's business, and I think that was really

brought home to me today by your Children's Commissioner, Howard Bath. I've been at the College of Physicians meeting, it's the first time it's actually been held in Darwin and it's here this week and down the hill at the Convention Centre and Howard Bath, your Children's Commissioner, spoke this morning and I think it was very helpful, he portrayed the context within which we are trying to implement these reforms and the extent to which some of the broader issues will influence the outcomes for children and young people, not just in terms of our treatment but a whole range of outcomes affecting their educational progress.

And the sad thing from some of the data that he produced was that things have actually got worse over the last four years here in terms of things like school attendance rates where there's been actually a decline in the proportion of children attending school over this period.

So against that kind of background the kind of changes that we are trying to achieve through improving the systems are really very challenging.

**CHAIR:** Because your role is to basically monitor and evaluate what the Government is doing. Is it difficult to keep that role as distinct from, say, becoming part of the reform and, you know, is there a distinction there that has to be made?

**Professor VIMPANI:** I think by the fact that the committee is largely made up of people from outside the Northern Territory, I think that that is a clear indication to me that the Government wants this group not only to be seen to be objective but is objective. I think it's very, very easy when one is working with a government, working closely with a government department to, I mean, to get sucked into the departmental view on things and that's why I think it's really important and we're glad we were able to take the opportunity this time to actually meet with other people so that we can get a better sense of the extent to which what seems to me to have been quite significant progress that's been made over the last six months, whether that sense of progress is shared by the frontline.

**CHAIR:** Alright. I'll open it up to other Members. Marion?

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Yeah, Professor Vimpani, I mean, you're saying whether that view is being shared within the staff... and you talked about the culture that has to change from within but also in the broader community. In your time overseeing that, have you seen any shifts happening at all?

**Professor VIMPANI:** I think it's honestly too early to make that judgement. We haven't met with any grassroots people as yet, Friday will be the first time we'll have that opportunity but I hope, from my perspective, I don't intend that to be the last so at least we're able to take the pulse now, as it were, now of what some of the people on the frontline feel is happening, you know, and that's going to be important to be able to do that over time.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Sorry, Chair, if I can just ask a question following from that. You also say that the manag ... or the members of the committee are all external to the Northern Territory ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Largely.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Largely. How many from the Northern Territory?

**Professor VIMPANI:** There's two, there's a person from Foster Carers NT<sup>1</sup> and we've had Charlie King although I think Charlie is probably going to have to withdraw because of conflicting priorities.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Okay. So once you determine ..

**Professor VIMPANI:** And Donna Ah Chee has been the other member.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** And she's just been appointed to the head of NACCHO so ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** And she's going to Canberra ... yeah, so there's two Northern Territory people that we're going to have to look at replacing. But the others, with the exception of the NT Foster Carers' members are from outside the State ... outside the Territory. There's SNAICC, Frank Hytten and Terry Murphy from the Department of Child Protection in Western Australia<sup>2</sup> and myself so it's kind of, I guess when you think about it, it's probably fairly evenly split between Territorians and people from outside.

**CHAIR:** Lesley, like to ask a question?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Thank you, thank you for the opportunity. In Alice Springs you're talking about that opportunity to work ... to talk with frontline staff and to gauge a perception of what's happening. My sense from the very beginning of this process of exploration into making changes within the culture of child protection in the Territory is that the sense of that frontline staff from the government see as being issues versus the frontline, you know, foster carers, non-government organisations such as Family Support Services, they are very, very different perceptions and I was wondering whether or not you would be able to gauge that sense of difference when you speak with departmental staff, and have that same opportunity for those people on the receiving end of the department's interventions. Might be a very valuable balance.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Fair comment, but I don't think we're going to be able to do it this time but that's something to consider for future meetings.

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Thank you, that would be great.

**Ms WALKER:** Mr Chair, if I could just ask Professor Vimpani, you are, as you said, meeting in Alice Springs tomorrow and you've highlighted the need to engage with people at the frontline so does that mean when you meet you will be moving around locations in the Northern Territory?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, we haven't really decided that yet but, I mean, my view is yes, we should, and I think the fact that we're having our second meeting in Alice Springs is a, you know, would have been just as easy to have held it here seeing I'm already up in Darwin for the first three days of the week. But I thought it was important that we actually not restrict ourselves to having our meetings here. I would hope we could get out to some of the other remoter areas than Alice Springs to get a feel for the kind of additional challenges that people face working in those remote areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa Neihus and Professor Sven Silburn from Menzies

<sup>2</sup> And Jacqui Reed from CREATE

**Ms WALKER:** Being two Members of the Parliament from remote areas.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Also in the Top End if you could. [Laughter]

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, well, I wasn't just meaning the remote centre.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Not just Alice Springs.

**Professor VIMPANI:** No, not the remote. Yeah.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** It's an important issue and it's an important area but certainly the whole of the Northern Territory. Lynne, have you ... ?

**Ms WALKER:** Hmm.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** I just want to ask, if I could, Lesley, are you right?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Yes

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** You also talked about the committee had met and had some discussions about staffing and the issue of staffing and particularly recruitment into remote areas to try and keep workers on the ground in those communities. Has the committee looked at or had discussions on the local recruit policy in the Northern Territory because it's not just about recruiting people from elsewhere into the Northern Territory but particularly staff on the ground in those communities, particularly Aboriginal staff who have worked in this area for a long time, whose employment entitlements are completely different for ... and yet they may be working side by side doing the same statutory functions as other external child protection workers. So has that been something or will that be something the committee will certainly ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, it's something we'd like to take on notice, yes.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Yes, if you could, because it is a major issue in terms of retention and retaining of staff in ... in the community.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Sure.

**CHAIR:** Lesley, you have a question there?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** I was just wondering about access to ... what access to information you have outside government sources of information, I suppose it's an extension of the previous question is, are the sources of information about circumstances and circumstances relating to children?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Could you be a bit more specific about some of the sources ...

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** I suppose in terms of departmental reports, outside of departmental reports.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yes, but what sort of things did you have in mind that is available that we could actually have a look at?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** That's about those conversations with people in the, you know, foster carers themselves and Create Foundation, for example, that information rather than formal reports that are available. So it's those conversations with key stakeholders.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, my understanding is we're meeting with some of the foster carers in Alice Springs this week, so ... but that's, I mean, I think it's a very good question and I think is one that we as a committee should look at as to how we might access other sources of information other than that being provided to us by the Department. Other than site visits as we do in meeting with people.

**CHAIR:** I've just got a question in relation to the ... there's the volume 1 report that's come out from the Government, been released called *Child Protection Reform Progress Report*. Has your committee had a chance to look at that yet or is that part of your schedule in Alice Springs?

**Professor VIMPANI:** We have been ... we were sent it, we've had a kind of prior earlier version of this, we looked at it about February and, I mean, there's the strategic framework document as well that came out about the same time and both of those together with an updated report on the progress with respect to the strategic framework is being made available to the members.

**CHAIR:** One of the chapters was on the Aboriginal peak body. I just didn't know whether – and you can tell me if this is not an area that is something you're going to look at – but if you set up an Aboriginal peak body and if you look at Recommendation 4.5 in the *Growing Them Strong Together Report*, it says the inquiry endorses the Aboriginal child placement principle and recommends that it is interpreted and applied in such a manner that the safety of the child is paramount. I think a couple of people have mentioned this before but the safety of the child being paramount basically means you're not concerned about what cultural background or religious background, the important thing is the safety of that child. If you set up an Aboriginal peak body, is it likely that that could get put to one side and there's a great ...there's more of an emphasis on just putting somebody with a person of Aboriginal descent rather than making sure that the safety of the child is important? Is there a chance that you could be looking at people want to be seen to be doing what might be culturally appropriate but from the point of view of safety may not be appropriate?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, I think safety's got to be the paramount consideration, and I think that's perhaps reflected to some extent in the existing distribution of children, Aboriginal children in out of home care in the Territory at the moment between those who are with Aboriginal carers and those who are with non-Aboriginal carers, it's about 50/50. And whether that is because of difficulty recruiting Aboriginal people into the care role or whether it's concerns about the safety of some of those who put forward their names might be able to provide, I'm not sure. I mean, I think the establishment of the peak body is a major challenge that Clare Gardiner-Barnes is working with and so is Frank Hytten with the AMSANT around what's the best way to actually set this body up. We'll be having considerable discussions, I think, about this at our meeting tomorrow.

But I think the short answer is safety's got to be paramount, but we need to look at how we might be able to grow a carer workforce within a greater, a stronger carer workforce within Aboriginal ... amongst Aboriginal people.

**CHAIR:** I suppose I see one of the difficulties in that is that, from the point of view of the conditions of people, how they live in those communities, especially from

a housing point of view, and I'm thinking from one of our other meetings we've had in relation to SIHIP, the Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program, I think we asked the government, and Lynne might tell me if I'm wrong here, but we asked that a couple of houses be set aside for carers, and we weren't given a positive on that at all. And so there are some, you know, there's some fundamental issues that are going to make that concept of trying to increase the number of carers in communities ...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** There was never a formal answer, I'm sorry.

**Ms WALKER:** It's not that it wasn't positive, we just haven't actually received a ...

**CHAIR:** I thought ... well, that's what I was backing up about.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** There hasn't been a response back from the government on that, just to make sure that ...

**CHAIR:** That's alright, that's why I asked you. But yeah, we weren't given any indication that that's what they would prefer to do. But that's where some changes have to occur. Yes?

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** You were actually talking about the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, Mr Chair.

**CHAIR:** That's right, I am. I've got it right in front of me.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** It's actually part of the legislation that has to be adhered to. But I think if you have a look at, and Professor Vimpani, it might be something that would be a useful exercise for the committee to have a look at the urban myth in Darwin or with certain commentators is that the Department or Child Protection workers use the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle as a means to hide behind, and if you have a look at the number of removals that have actually been done in remote communities it hasn't been based on colour but rather the child is at risk and there isn't an immediate family to look after that child therefore in the interest of the child or the safety of the child that child should be removed. And I'd find it astounding if the Department ever made a decision in removing a child based on that child's colour to place it. But that's the urban myth but it'd be an interesting exercise for the committee to have a look at, you know, in terms of that removal policy or the mechanisms under the *Act* in which a child gets removed from a community into Darwin and placed with carers outside of their immediate family.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I mean, I think those children suffer, sort of, double penalty, don't they, if they're placed with non-Aboriginal carers in a different community, not only have they lost their cultural connection, they've also lost their base connection.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** But a lot of the time you'll find, I've yet to see any non-Indigenous carers that actually take the care of Aboriginal children insensitive or uncaring in terms of that child's cultural wellbeing. You actually will find a lot of the non-Indigenous carers actually care more about that than if that child was placed with an Aboriginal family. And that's in my experience of working even in the health sector prior to coming into this, that it's hard to get good people and I think that that's one of the bigger challenges for the Northern Territory to find good people to be actually caring.

I just want to go to a question that the Chair was asking in terms of the peak body in the Northern Territory. Has the committee had, I suppose, any preliminary discussions as to whether AMSANT, rather than creating a separate agency that the Aboriginal Medical Service aligns, because as I understand with AMSANT a lot of the substance abuse services are now integrating as part of that membership as well as the peak in the Northern Territory that they could also be part of, you know, monitoring and assessment rather than, you know, creating a separate vehicle, given that all of the members of AMSANT are individual medical services that are at the coalface dealing with this issue.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I mean, the committee really hasn't given this consideration yet but will be at our meeting tomorrow because it's clear that there's a divergence of views that exist on who ought to be, you know, who ought to be represented on the board and so we kind of need to have a look at that.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** My concern, Professor, is that it doesn't become Darwin-centric or Alice Springs-centric that it is ... that there's regions that surround, you know, these major towns and that whatever you get, you know, peak bodies that they do pick up those concerns and views out in remote community. Lynne?

**Ms WALKER:** No, you're right.

**CHAIR:** Professor, the other question I've got is about KPIs. I just went down to a Parliamentary Accounts Committee meeting in Perth where all the Parliamentary accounts people met and you might think it's a bit dry but one of the topics that came up was the effectiveness of KPIs and I just wondered what your thoughts were because you could tick the boxes and make everything look good but really are they the way to judge what's happening here when it comes to child protection or should we be looking at really down-to-earth sort of other approaches which really reflect what's happening on the ground?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, I think KPIs are kind of useful, provided they're not carried to extreme, I mean, I heard it said that the Chief Executives in the former area of health services in New South Wales had a, you know, several hundred KPIs they were supposed to report on and that determined how well they went in their annual review by the Director General. I think KPIs are not enough, there shouldn't be too many of them, I think getting qualitative information is also really important. But I think there would be some ...

I've been thinking about, you know, in the New South Wales context, if I can divert to that for a moment, in terms of looking at the success of the Keep Them Safe reforms, what are some of the KPI measures that one might consider valuable and things like looking ... particularly valuable on a population level because that's really what we really need to focus on is as a result of all of these reports the population of children in the Northern Territory safer. And things like, you know, percentage of vulnerable children on the AEDI, you'll know it as the Australian Early Development Index, that's been rolled out across the country and, I mean, at the moment the proportion of children who are vulnerable on one or two or more aspects of the AEDI is really quite horrendous, particularly the comparison between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the Territory but non-Aboriginal kids are probably doing marginally better than the rest of the country.

But seeing whether an index indicator like that is sensitive to changes in the ability to provide a safer environment for children, I mean, other things that, I mean,

there are a range of other things that we sort of thought of looking at in New South Wales particularly in areas like physical abuse, where one of the markers that we've been toying with is children who present to an emergency department under the age of one with a fracture because pretty unlikely that a pre-mobile child can actually fracture a limb or a skull without either an element of neglect or an element of intent being involved.

So I think we need to consider whether there are some measures like those that might be just as applicable in the context of the Northern Territory. We haven't had a discussion about KPIs as yet but I think certainly given that you've put in on my agenda I think it's something that we need to have a look at over the course of the next few months.

**CHAIR:** Just also in relation to seeing how things are actually going on the ground, it says in Recommendation 117 it talks about inter-agency collaboration but it talks about rolling out community child safety and wellbeing teams and child safety and wellbeing planning processes across the 20 Territory Growth Towns, it mentions that a number of times. The Growth Towns don't cover lots of the Northern Territory. I'm hoping to go out to the eastern part or the southern area of the Barkly Tablelands out through Utopia this week and next week. Now, there's no Growth Towns in that area. Will you be, perhaps, going out there and perhaps evaluating as time goes on to see, you know, whether there's any changes in those areas that are outside the Growth Towns that it may be sort of less contacted by maybe these wellbeing teams? They might go out there, I'm not saying they won't, but these areas, there's no Growth Town in that area.

**Professor VIMPANI:** I think you raise a valid point and it's something we should actually look at. I mean, I think what is really very interesting in the way that the Chief Executive has crafted her report to the committee for tomorrow is that this section of the report relating to the supporting and strengthening families and enhancing family support system and issues around community and child safety and wellbeing things, that's actually got some billing, it's got top billing in her report so that the focus ... I think what that underlies for me is that the focus of the system has to change from being reactive towards looking at ways in which we can prevent abuse and neglect from occurring.

But I take your point that, I mean, those teams initially will be in the Growth Towns. Only five of the teams will be led by Department of Children and Families child protection workers, the others will be led by members of other government departments, so I think it's going to be interesting to look at the differences that might exist between Growth Towns on who's the kind of lead agency. But I think also the impact, if any, as you've raised, of changes that might occur there on some of the smaller settlements that are not kind of in the Growth Town ambit.

**CHAIR:** And there's quite a few of those.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Lesley? Just a moment while I just ask ... It just slipped out of my head there but ... Go ahead, we'll come back.

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Just while we're talking about the community child safety and wellbeing teams, looking, because all of this will be linked in with the Local Implementation Plans, there's discussion about how they sit together. It's just that the child protection component in just about all of the LIPS that I've seen, it's really

light-on in terms of child protection focus in those plans already, the ones that have been signed off. So it's like probably a weak point of those Local Implementation Plans as the welfare part of that planning process, the child part of that process.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I mean, I think part of that has been, I think, around getting the policy framework around their work clearly enunciated and ...

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** It could be about timing, couldn't it, but the LIPS came out before the child and wellbeing teams were even established or ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I mean, I think the speed with which work is occurring in this area is not unexpected. The priority it's getting, I think, is good to see but bringing about these changes will take time but you kind of need to get the policy framework right for the way in which child protection workers were to operate in those terms.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** But is it also an indication though, Professor, that that culture from within the bureaucracies haven't changed, that you've still got people operating as silos, given that if we're saying child protection reform and getting that reform happening on the ground in communities and you talk about the Australian early childhood, you know, the index that, you know, well, the one area that should be brought into that is education, and so, you know, education, child protection, you know, FACS and all its agencies because it's not just about child protection. There is mental health, you know, child and adolescent mental health is important, so there's another of ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, but my understanding is that those teams will include people from a variety of government agencies including the ones you've mentioned but also the NGO sector where it's relevant. So it certainly intends ... it's still at the planning rather than at the roll out stage, I think. Although that ...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Do you have a feel about where that's at, or maybe that's a question for, I suppose, Clare and Mike.

**CHAIR:** Yeah, I think we've got to remember that we're about monitoring and evaluating. I don't think there's anything wrong with some of the questions we might ask, Professor might pass them back but his meeting's tomorrow but generally speaking we're trying to find out how this committee will operate, what, I suppose, mechanisms they're going to use to evaluate the programs but also to highlight, I think, some of the issues of concern that we might have that we think perhaps hasn't been touched on and maybe you could take some of those concerns back.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Sure.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Can I ask, can I go back, Mr Chair, if that's the case then to talking about staffing and the issue of staffing, Professor Vimpani. I know it's not your mantle but if the committee's role is to monitor and to evaluate within the department, will you be monitoring the recruitment of staff or the numbers of staff recruited through the regions?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yep.

**CHAIR:** And retention?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, well, I mean, we've already, in the report we were looking at this week there's already indications there that both the new recruits but also the separation rate of people who have left. But fortunately it's positive, I mean, we're ahead in terms of ...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Would you provide to the committee and maybe you can take this question on notice if you could, would you provide to the committee, and I'll ask this same question to the CEO of the Department as well, we've got a meeting coming with her. Would you provide to the committee what the numbers of Aboriginal staff recruited into the child protection region, by region, and also how many of those staff are on contract versus permanent placement, would be a good thing.

**Professor VIMPANI:** The data that's provided for the Committee suggests that this Department is actually ahead of the game in terms of the proportion of Aboriginal staff that's currently employed.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Yeah. I want to know how many are on contract and how many are actually ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, sure.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** ... and how many are actually working towards the department, working towards permanent placement because the concern is are they just there on short term contracts or is there a commitment to extend those and make them permanent, particularly in our remote and our regional areas.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Sure, I'll take that on notice.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Thank you, Professor.

**Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL:** Can I just interrupt, Chair, it may be easier for Professor Vimpani if I get that data from the department directly because Professor will have to get it from Clare Gardiner-Barnes in any event?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, still won't stop me raising it with her...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** But the Professor was saying that this is something that they're going to be looking at ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, we can raise it at our meeting.

**Secretary Ms Helen CAMPBELL:** Okay.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** I don't care, however we get that information, it would be good to get that.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Because I will be reporting to the committee on the outcome of this meeting we're having now.

**CHAIR:** I just thought of what I hadn't thought of before.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Alright, and then I'll go back to staffing.

**CHAIR:** Okay. We were talking about KPIs and how you evaluate things, Professor, but one of the important areas and Lesley has said it all along is that we've got to do a lot more work on parenting skills. Now, that's a sort of fairly global sort of sounding idea but I think it's really important that early intervention, especially teaching parents how to parent, is important. Now, how would you be able to evaluate and monitor that and is this the sort of program that has got a danger of going for, say, three years because of funding and then disappearing off the map, or would this be something that – my personal feeling is it should be something that keeps going for ever and a day – but how would you sort of evaluate, you know, what ... where parenting skills programs are heading?

**Professor VIMPANI:** There is some good work going on in this area in conjunction with Menzies and Sven Silburn is a Member of our committee. Actually at the meeting that I've been at this week Sven presented some data on a new WHO/UNICEF program that Menzies are rolling out. The Council of Family on Care for Child Development, and they'll be obviously evaluating how well that goes, the preliminary data suggests it's going extraordinarily well, it incorporates a lot of the kind of philosophy and principles that are embedded in the David Olds' nurse family partnership home visiting program which you'd be aware OATSIH are piloting in several Aboriginal communities in Australia including Congress in Alice Springs.

I'm not sure how that program's going but the principle of the Council program, Council of Family, is around the importance of the relationship between the person providing the program and those people who are in receipt of it. It's a group based program, and also includes ... I had the good fortune – just let me tell an anecdote here – I had the good fortune to sit down with Pila Baca who was the nurse that David Olds' employed, she was a woman of Indian/Latino/Anglo-American background and she was responsible for training nurses who were involved in David Olds' program as it rolled out to a number of sites beyond the original trial sites which were in Memphis and Elmira in Upstate New York and Denver, Colorado, and Pila said to me, "You know, for our nurses, advice is a dirty word", and what she meant by that was that what was needed in the relationship between the nurses and the mothers that she was visiting was kind of a coaching relationship, not an expert, not "I'm the expert – you do what I tell you" – kind of model, which I think within health professionals is often the position we come from unless it gets broken out of us.

That's the kind of approach that's embedded in this WHO/UNICEF program that Sven and his group are rolling out and the kind of skills that one needs to engage in this kind of way with families are not something that we automatically acquire with our professional degrees.

It's interesting, one of the other paediatricians at this meeting said, "Well, what on earth do you need to do this sort of training for because I would have thought that people have these skills when they come out of university". Well, I can tell you, the university training I had did not focus on communication skills in that way and certainly did not focus on the way in which you might build a genuine partnership relationship rather than an expert recipient relationship. And the other program that's been happening in Australia and I think it's happened up in the NT ... you probably know whether it's happened in the Northern Territory is the Hilton Davis' program, what we call Family Partnerships Training which most of the child and family nurses, maternal and child health nurses around Australia have actually participated in this sort of one week workshop spread out over five weeks, which actually gives nurses and other health workers the skills to interact in a much more respectful way with clients than in the kind of traditional way in which health practitioners have often emerged from their professional training.

**CHAIR:** If you've brought up a new model, now, how does that sit – I'm not trying to be critical of it – I mean, what you say, I mean, anything that can help parents parenting I reckon, and raising children better at an early stage must surely end up, I think, having less kids in ... people in jail in the long run and all that sort of thing. But if you've got these good ideas and you're a part of an evaluation and monitoring committee, are you able to, you know, recommend and keep your independence because you might have ideas and Menzies School of Health might have ideas, there's also, I think, I just couldn't find it in a hurry, I think they were reviewing an early intervention program in these recommendations, I don't know whether any decision has been made on it, but are you able, as a committee, to sort of drop hints or recommend that perhaps the department looks at things because it'd be terrible if this particular document becomes very rigid if there are better ideas going on at the same time.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, I mean, the program that this Council, the Family on Care for Child development, coming out of a WHO/UNICEF sort of stable is focussed very much on the needs of developing countries, so I think it's got that ethos about it.

I think Sven's in a different position from the rest of us on the committee in that he's obviously involved with both the development and the evaluation of this program but the number of us with quantitative research skills on the committee will be, you know, looking pretty closely at data that is available that supports this program and saying are they, you know, let's go for it or no, there's some issues that need to be dealt with here.

I mean, I think it's really ... I think that's what's important about this particular program is that it's being trialled first before kind of, you know, a new beautiful idea that gets kind of rolled out as a panacea for everybody. Yeah.

**CHAIR:** Do you see the Committee's role whether you're still there or others have come and gone but it's something that really should stay for a very long time, because we're dealing with from birth to, well, it's youth but youth can go up to, I don't know what age – 18? And a lot of our youth do get into trouble and my concern is that numbers of youth getting into trouble is increasing, the ones in jail, our Don Dale Centre has got record numbers in it at the present time. So is there a need for the sort of committee that you are running to continually keep watch on what is happening in government to see if the outcomes are supposed to be ... are going to occur actually in the end are proven with things like less young people in prison just as sort of a basic sort of guideline?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I think there's ... whether it's our committee or another committee - but I think there is value in having an independent body interrogate not just this department but the other human service departments – education and health – around the work that they are doing and whether it is actually delivering what is purported and what is designed to occur. I mean, I think that's, I think, one of the underpinnings of the move under the current government in New South Wales to establish local district health boards, district health boards who will interrogate the executive staff of the health service around what they want to invest their resources in. I think a body like this, I'm not saying necessarily this body but I would also broaden its reaming not to just be looking at outcomes in this particular portfolio but the other human service departments as well like education and health.

**CHAIR:** Does anyone else have any questions? Lesley, have you got a question?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Sydney was part of the Menzies Symposium that introduced the Care for Child Development Program which is sounding very exciting in terms of really practical skills that actually help parents engage better with their children. The Territory delivers a lot of parenting support without a lot of substance attached to it. I mean, there might be but it's difficult to gauge any pattern to the parenting and family support that's been delivered, so the introduction of a tool is the start of a ... and that's, I suppose, what you're saying, it's just the start, isn't it, it's something that's got real substance that it's a practical tool that when you're delivering a program you can say, "What do you deliver?". "Well, these are the things that I deliver", so you've got one starting point.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Look, I think, you know, having an evidence base to what you're doing is critical, I mean, we saw it in America what happened when a kind of pale imitation of David Old's program without the rigour that went into the way he set that up, the way that was implemented as part of, you know, Healthy Families America where the results were quite inconsistent, there were some places that did very well and some places where you couldn't really tell the difference between those who were recipients of the program and those who weren't.

So I think, you know, good research around what works for whom is important but then the rigour with which that is then rolled out is also important and, I mean, we're engaged in this same risky business in New South Wales at the moment with the roll out of the Sustained Nurse Home Visiting Program which is a modification of David Olds' program but was very much tailored, we felt that there was some issues with David Olds' program in the Australian context so made those changes and then have done a randomised control trial out in Miller in South West Sydney which showed that the program, this modification of Old's program actually worked and worked with a broader group of women than Old's ... his program was targeted to single first time teenage mums. Whereas this ... the Miller program now being rolled out in New South Wales is a program called Sustaining New South Wales' Families, targets a broader group of people.

But I think also this kind of research needs to be done with programs for children who have already been abused, kids who are in out of home care, what you actually need in the way of supports and services for kids who have been so traumatised by their earlier life experiences that they need to be in out of home care and kind of it's equally important in that area that what we're doing is not just wishful thinking or, you know, or thought to be a good idea but there is a sound evidence base for it.

**Ms WALKER:** I just had a question through the Chair, Professor Vimpani, we've talked about the challenges of recruitment and retention of staff and you mentioned that in Alice Springs in your next meeting tomorrow, you'll be meeting with the Commissioner for Public Service about salary packages. Beyond the sort of, you know, conditions of service and quantum of the salary package, what about that focus on supporting people professionally, you know, for some people it wouldn't matter how much you paid them, if they're not professionally supported and particularly out in remote communities, with the isolation factor but with the cultural challenges as well, and given that there's quite a ... you know, there's been an enormous recruitment exercise, a lot of people coming from overseas into those roles. So what's your view, what's the committee's take on that sort of support for people?

**Professor VIMPANI:** We'd certainly support the Department and its view that these people need good supervision, not only managerial supervision but professional supervision as well, and I think the challenges of providing that for people working in a remote environment are difficult. Roll on NAB, you know, because I think that once communication between the senders ...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Did you mean NBN?

**Professor VIMPANI:** NBN, National Broadband, sorry.

**CHAIR:** National Bank's had a few communication problems with its ATMs recently. [Laughter]

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** But you're right, the broadband ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** The broadband. The benefits of that, I think, the potential benefits of that to people working in remote Australia, you know, we just haven't got any more than an inkling at the moment, I think.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Can I just ... from my previous life in the health sector, Professor Vimpani, the Division of General Practice have quite a good model in terms of where they've placed doctors in remote communities but also nurses, so there is a model there in terms of what you need to do and I think that given you're talking about a department that sits, you know, quite closely with the health sector, that that model of, particularly we're trying to retain, you know, recruit but then retain good doctors on the ground in those remote communities, that same model should be applied in terms of good child protection.

**Professor VIMPANI:** No, well, thank you for that, I mean, I think that's something that if the Department hasn't already looked at would be worth something exploring. Might even be able to share resources.

**CHAIR:** Just on some of those ... the agencies or probably more than the agencies but when you go through these recommendations you find agreements and there's certain bodies been set up here and there, like, you have the Train the Trainer program, you've got a creating a partnership agreement with foster care, there's lots of things out there happening but are you able to monitor, I suppose, how much bureaucracy is being built up through these changes and are you able to monitor to say have we got too much bureaucracy and not enough effort going in on the ground, in other words there's advisory bodies, there's a peak body and there's another body over here, by the time you finish reading even these recommendations, by the time you read it all it gets fairly ... you get a bit lost in translation here about where we're going because there seems to be a lot of things happening. That may be necessary but is there a danger you can get over bureaucratized – if that's the right word?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, well there's always that danger, I guess, but I think you're absolutely right, there's a lot happening, there's a lot of systems that have been put in place to try and drive the reforms, some of these are temporary, and I think it's probably important that they do have, some of these governance arrangements do have a limited time on it and then they roll the ongoing support of a particular program gets rolled in with the mainstream management. I mean, it hasn't struck me that it's, I would say, overly bureaucratized. I guess I say that with my

reference frame of what I know has been needed in New South Wales to roll out the Keep Them Safe reforms there. It doesn't sort of strike me as unduly top-heavy.

**CHAIR:** So it's not a case of too many chiefs and ... ?

**Professor VIMPANI:** No, I mean, I think it's an incredibly ambitious program of reform because, you know, they're innovations on so many different fronts and that's a huge challenge to keep all of that cohesive.

**CHAIR:** When I was younger there was lots of, like, church groups doing things in relation to families and you'd have marriage guidance groups and all those sorts of things so there was a lot of emphasis more on, you might say, we didn't call it NGOs then, it was probably just church groups. Should there be a stronger role or a lesser role for NGOs in this whole debate? Is it better that some of these NGOs run some of these programs rather than the government?

**Professor VIMPANI:** I think the report certainly supports that and, I mean, you know, however you try and dress up a statutory child protection agency within government, the view of many people will always be it's the department that snatches kids, and so it's often very difficult then for people working in that agency to work with families in a way which is positive, which they perceive is positive. I mean, it needs to occur but I do think that there's a great role for NGOs in many of the preventive programs that are operated. This happens in, I think, all jurisdictions in Australia with a lot of the preventive work actually does get moved across to become the responsibility of NGOs and a lot of the care, the foster care work is transferred to NGO responsibility.

**CHAIR:** And will you be able to evaluate and monitor those groups?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, certainly, you know, it will be important that the Department keeps tabs on the contracts developed between the Department and the NGO provision of a particular service and there will be accountability and reporting arrangements, I would imagine, in relation to those contracts and that's going to be important for the Department to be able to look at what is happening and whether what is happening is value for money and is effective.

**CHAIR:** Because there's been some changes to the Auditor-General's powers in the Territory which allow the Auditor-General to follow, you know, money moving into NGOs whereas sometimes that's been difficult before and I just wonder whether your case you could also track the performance and valuation of some of those NGOs or you think you would go through the Department to evaluate that?

**Professor VIMPANI:** I think we need to make sure that the Department has got the systems in place to monitor that and then we have a responsibility to have a look at that.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** And vice versa.

**CHAIR:** Yep.

**Ms WALKER:** Could I just ask, Professor Vimpani, how your committee reports and works with the Minister who's ultimately responsible and obviously has a vested interest and clearly wanting to know how things are progressing, so if you could describe to us how that reporting process works?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, after our first meeting in February, I drafted a letter on behalf of the committee which we forwarded to the Minister indicating support for what we had seen, the evidence that was before us suggested the progress that had been achieved in the first three months was considerable. We are due to report six monthly, major reports so after the meeting we have this week will be a more lengthy report to him of what our impression is of how things are going and what other evidence we've got from meeting with other people other than the information provided to us by DCF. So it's a six monthly reporting ...

**Ms WALKER:** And those reports become public?

**Professor VIMPANI:** I honestly don't know, I think it's something to ask the Minister.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** The other question is should they be made public.

**CHAIR:** Yes. [Laughs]

**Professor VIMPANI:** Well, that might be a view you could express.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** To the Minister, we'll have to write, Mr Chair.

**CHAIR:** Yeah. We think the default for many things should be public unless there's good reason not to be, but anyway. Any other questions?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** Just one.

**CHAIR:** Lesley?

**Ms Lesley TAYLOR:** And it's around in order to determine that a system is ... it's not working effectively is a complaints mechanism, is a means for people to be able to legitimately and respectfully say that things are and aren't working and the Department has not been particularly welcoming, I suppose, and child protection has found it difficult to accept complaints or concerns, and I know that from foster parents, I know that from a whole lot of non-government organisations that complaints that need to be seen in the light of an opportunity to change in reform have been seen as ... seen very negatively. What I've been looking for, I suppose, is a means in the reform process for people to legitimately say when things aren't working well or when things are working well. That opportunity is so rare and it's such an important part of reform that I was wondering whether you'd be looking for that?

**Professor VIMPANI:** Interesting that you raise that because it's actually addressed very well in the report that we'll be looking at tomorrow. There are a number of complaints mechanisms that are going to be put in place both for people who are providing out of home care, staff working in child protection who want to raise issues. I think the converse of that is that there are also reward systems that are being proposed in terms of recognising people who make good suggestions around improving the functioning of the system and even a series of awards both for staff and for foster carers.

So I thought, you know, I thought it was both in terms of setting up the processes for dealing with complaints effectively was good but I think just not looking at the negatives but also the positive side of it, let's recognise and acclaim people

who are committed and who are doing well and are bringing good ideas before us to look at implementing.

I think the other thing that Clare has covered in here is the numbers of forums that are being established where management and staff, frontline staff can actually meet together and frontline staff to have an opportunity to hear about the direction the Department's wanting to go but also giving frontline staff an opportunity to say, "Hey wait, you know, we're a bit unhappy about this". I mean, this is part of the cultural change, I think, because I think ... I don't know what the previous department was like but there's a sense that there was ... and often because of the kind of environment within which child protection, statutory child protection agencies operate a kind of bunkered down protective mentality, I don't get that feeling at all with this, there's an openness towards staff being able to express views.

**Ms WALKER:** Excellent.

**CHAIR:** Alright ...

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Did you talk ... have you asked any questions prior to me coming about the backlog of numbers or ... ?

**CHAIR:** I wasn't sure when you arrived so I'm not sure when I did ... sorry. [Laughs] No, you ask the question. You're right.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Professor Vimpani, there was a backlog of investigations, it went from 870 to 17. The CTC has been told that while the backlog at the time of the inquiry has been reduced there is a backlog of new cases. What is your understanding of the effectiveness of the strategies put in place to address those backlogs and to assure that they don't re-emerge or do not re-emerge, which was part of Recommendation 14 and I was having a look at Recommendation 14 as part of the Progress Report and there's a lot of developing and implementing. Will you be ... because I think that the Chair met ... when the Chair met you in February and then we had ... and in February there was, I think as you understood, you were going to put a place in a, you know, with the evaluation framework and other things whether this was part of that ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, we've got some data in the report we'll be looking at tomorrow which actually shows that on the 25<sup>th</sup> February this year there were 250 cases in the what they call the legacy backlog but there's what existed from last year, not new cases coming on board, there were 250. On the 12<sup>th</sup> May that was down to 31, so certainly the backlog has dealt with but the challenge will be to continue to be able to deal with new cases that come on board.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Are you able to analyse, say the 250 legacy and you say ... what did you say it was down to, on the 12<sup>th</sup> May it was down to 31 ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** Thirty-one, yeah.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** ... analysed what services or what happened to those 250 kids or ... yeah, I mean, if they got them down, what services or ... yeah, did they get pushed out of, and then what is that monitoring from the Department in terms of making sure that those children are actually getting the benefits of that.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Yeah, I mean, that's one of the things we'll be sort of asking tomorrow. I mean, this is not a unique situation of the Northern Territory as

you can appreciate, I mean, we have the same problem in New South Wales even where a case is accepted by the FACS helpline as risk of significant harm, the capacity of the system to actually investigate all of those cases adequately is limited and the ones, the high priority ones can be guaranteed of an investigation but not all of the others will, so what processes do you actually set in place then to ensure that those children that you've not actually been able to do a kind of home visit on, what can you do to ensure that those kids are not at risk of significant harm. So other processes need to be looked at to deal with that issue.

**CHAIR:** And the difficulty in the Territory is distance, and those lower priority people just simply from where they live may be more difficult to get ...

**Professor VIMPANI:** And the other thing is, you know, is to what extent other services provided for these families might be required rather than a kind of statutory child protection response.

**CHAIR:** Alright, any other questions? Well, thank you, Professor Vimpani. I just might ask that maybe our Secretary will keep in contact with you and maybe we can work out a suitable time to meet you again when perhaps you're further into your life as a committee and then you'll have probably some more detailed information. So if you're okay with that and we'd love to meet you again at another stage.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Thank you for inviting me, I mean, I regard it as a real honour to actually have the role that I have with this and I certainly welcome the opportunity to keep the Council informed as to how we're going because I think we're scrutinising the Department and the reform process and I think it's just as valid that there's scrutiny of our work as well. Keeps us honest.

**CHAIR:** I also think that it's an opportunity for the public to hear because generally speaking they'll only hear what's reported but here people can come, the media can come here and listen to what you have to say and I think that's one of the important roles of this Council, to spread the word, you might say. So we certainly appreciate you coming today.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** Before you close off, because I think it touches on, Mr Chair, that issue that or the question that Lynne asked in terms of your travel, because there are many people living out in the regions and remote communities that won't have and don't have that opportunity to talk to someone or talk to people, you know, they're on the receiving end of health, education, child protection services, I mean, all of these services and sometimes those services aren't addressing nor, you know, they're not connecting with those services. They need to complain too, and, you know, they end up in the system after a child has been hurt or something's happened and then they're in the system for all the wrong reasons rather than proactive. So the question that Lynne asked in terms of, you know, to look at some of your remote communities would be a good opportunity.

**Professor VIMPANI:** No, I think I certainly take on board the view that the number of meetings we hold in Darwin should probably be in the minority.

**Ms SCRYMGOUR:** That's good.

**CHAIR:** And maybe even some of those meetings could be open to the public. Will that be a ... ?

**Professor VIMPANI:** You may like to join with us at some of these places.

**CHAIR:** Yes, I think ... yeah, we'd learn something as well. So look, I'd like to thank all the public for turning up today, thank you Professor, thank you to fellow Members of the CTC and I hope to hear from you in a not so far distant time. Thank you.