



# ***COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Ms CP McMillan MP—Chair  
Mr SA Bennett MP  
Mr MC Berkman MP  
Ms CL Lui MP  
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

**Visiting Member:**

Mr LA Walker MP

**Staff present:**

Ms L Pretty—Acting Committee Secretary  
Ms C Furlong—Assistant Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2021**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**TUESDAY, 19 OCTOBER 2021**

**Aitkenvale**

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**The committee met at 9.35 am.**

**CHAIR:** I ask Donah Ellin to welcome us to country.

*Ms Ellin then gave a welcome to country—*

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Donah, sincerely. It means a lot to the committee to be welcomed by you and we feel very honoured to be here on your lands. Mr Francis Tapim, would you like to say a prayer to open the committee hearing this morning.

*Mr Tapim then prayed—*

**CHAIR:** Amen. Thank you very much. Good morning to you all. I declare open this public hearing for the Community Support and Services Committee's inquiry into the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Bindal people and the Wulgurukaba people, and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. I especially acknowledge our aunts and uncles who are here this morning and I greatly honour the fact that we are on your land. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share. I also acknowledge my great colleague the member for Cook, Cynthia Lui, who is a First Nations woman. We are very blessed to have her on our committee. I also acknowledge Mr Les Walker MP, member for Mundingburra, and thank him very much for being with us this morning.

On 15 September 2021 the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021 was referred to this committee for examination, with a reporting date of 12 November 2021. My name is Corrine McMillan, member for Mansfield and chair of this committee. My great colleague Mr Stephen Bennett, the member for Burnett, is the deputy chair of the committee. The other committee members with me today are Mr Michael Berkman, member for Maiwar; Ms Cynthia Lui, member for Cook, who I welcomed earlier; and Mr Robert Skelton, the member for Nicklin. Our colleague Mr Jon Krause MP, sadly is not able to be with us. Jon is the member for Scenic Rim.

The purpose of today's hearing is to assist the committee with its inquiry into the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. The committee is a committee of the Queensland parliament and its hearings are subject to the rules of the parliament. We are here in Townsville today because our committee absolutely wants to hear the views of the community. We take this opportunity to allow you to share your thoughts and your experiences and to provide guidance and feedback to our committee in relation to this bill. I ask that everyone respect the rights of others to hold and express their particular view. When speaking, please take care not to refer to ongoing court matters or to the naming of children.

The hearing is being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and speakers should be aware that a transcript of this hearing will be published on our webpage. For any media present, I ask that you adhere to my directions as chair at all times. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from the committee staff if required. Please also note that you may be filmed or photographed and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please advise us if this is an issue for you. I ask everyone present to turn mobile phones off or to silent mode.

**JEVAHERJIAN, Ms Jasmine, Acting Law Reform and Advocacy Officer, knowmore (via teleconference)**

**STRANGE, Mr Warren, Chief Executive Officer, knowmore (via teleconference)**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome witnesses from knowmore on the phone. I hand over to Warren and Jasmine to make a brief opening statement, after which I am sure our committee will have many questions.

**Mr Strange:** Good morning. Our line seems to be very bad. It was quite hard to hear. I presume that was the chair speaking then. I am happy to get underway and we will let you know if we have any difficulties in understanding any of the questions that the committee has.

I thank the chair and the committee for the opportunity to make a submission and to appear this morning. Before I make any opening comments, I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are all meeting today and pay our respects to their Elders.

As our submission notes, we are broadly supportive of the bill that the committee is considering. Our submission is not particularly wideranging and we have not purported to address all the aspects of the bill. We have focused on those that are most relevant to our client group as a group of people who are survivors of child sexual abuse.

We are particularly supportive of the aims of the bill in seeking to strengthen children's voices in relation to decisions that affect them. We work with a group of people who, as survivors of child sexual abuse, often did not have a voice in relation to their own care or actions that were undertaken that concerned them and, as a result of that, they were placed in unsafe situations and unfortunately frequently experienced child sexual abuse. These were observations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, there must be an opportunity for children to express their views and they must be taken seriously when they do.

Beyond that, our submission addresses the reforms in the bill in the context of the recommendations of the royal commission. I simply wanted to close by noting the importance of always looking to implement those recommendations and to implement them in the way that the commission intended. They are an extensive and evidence based range of recommendations that relate to all aspects of children having experienced child sexual abuse in institutional settings and they are a comprehensive guide to the way forward and best practice, so we would always encourage the government to continue its work towards fully implementing all of those recommendations. That is all I wanted to say by way of opening comments.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Warren. Jasmine, did you want to say anything?

**Mr Strange:** I am sorry; it is very, very hard to hear.

**Ms Jevaherjian:** I am sorry, too. I could not quite pick up your question.

**CHAIR:** I will turn to the deputy chair for the first question. We might have to wander up to the phone, deputy chair, but I will give you the microphone and see how we go.

**Mr BENNETT:** In your submission you talk about the importance of children's voices. That is one of the main parts of the legislation. It would be really good for the committee to hear about your experiences and just how important you see this reform in taking this legislation forward, particularly in relation to children.

**Mr Strange:** Many of the survivors that we work with are survivors of historical child sexual abuse in institutional settings, but it is a very common feature of their experience that they had nowhere to go or no independent person or mechanism through which they could make a complaint. If they did make a complaint to institutional officials, that was a very hard thing to do in the context of those types of institutions and they often were not taken seriously and unfortunately, in many cases, were victimised as a result of coming forward. It is really critical. The royal commission spoke about that context and the importance of children having opportunities to speak up and to speak to people with whom they have a trusted relationship. They addressed that at length in volume 12, I think it was, of their final report, and everything they said about the barriers that faced children and ways to overcome those barriers—it is critically important in preventing child sexual abuse and in responding to it appropriately if it does unfortunately happen.

**Ms LUI:** This bill will allow children to have more say in decisions that affect them. Do you think this is a good proposal and do you have any concerns?

**Mr Strange:** I might go to Jasmine to answer that. She has looked at the legislative proposal in detail.

**Ms Jevaherjian:** In terms of any concerns that we have around the proposal, knowmore's view, as Warren stated, is that we believe the bill could go further, to specifically embed the royal commission's recommendations. I know that it was raised in a previous hearing by witnesses—I think by PeakCare, and QFCC Commissioner Lewis—regarding the best interests of a child and concerns around the discretion and subjectivity that that may provide in practice. We also believe that this bill is an opportunity to define what 'best interests of a child' looks like, specifically looking at recommendation 6.4 of the royal commission, which states—

All institutions should act with the best interests of the child as a primary consideration. In order to achieve this, institutions should implement the Child Safe Standards identified by the Royal Commission.'

The child safe standards are outlined in recommendation 6.5, and recommendation 6.6 expands on them. Recommendation 6.8 then further states—

All state and territory governments should require institutions in their jurisdiction that engage in child-related work meet the Child Safe Standards identified by the Royal Commission.

Recommendation 6.9 clarifies that the child safe standard should cover child protection services, including out-of-home care, accommodation and residential services for children. In line with those recommendations, we believe that the child safe standards should be embedded in Queensland legislation. We believe that the bill could go further to meet the intent of these recommendations and, in doing so, better inform what the best interests of children looks like.

**Mr BENNETT:** Warren, we have heard a lot about the five-steps principles in child protection and the framework in the legislation. The committee has heard a number of times about the use of a preferred method of 11 steps in the USA. Are you in a position to comment on that, please?

**Mr Strange:** Not personally, no. I am not across the detail of that. Jasmine, I am not sure if you have had any knowledge or looked at that at all.

**Ms Jevaherjian:** I have not looked at the specifics of the 11 benchmarks that were suggested. I think ATSILS spoke of that in mentioning QATSICPP's submission. In a similar vein, with regard to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, although we are supportive of the move from 'having regard to' to the proactive concept of 'active efforts', we also have concerns about what this could look like in practice. Similar to previous submissions and evidence given to the committee, we believe that guidance would be important here.

In terms of the explicit details of the 11 proposals in QATSICPP's submission, we have not looked at them to be able to say that we support them, but we do believe that that decision on what guidance looks like should absolutely be made by Aboriginal community controlled organisations. Also with regard to looking at 'active efforts' or implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, we remark in our submission that we believe that a monitoring mechanism is essential and that having some kind of monitoring mechanism would help evaluate the extent to which full implementation and compliance with the principle is reached, and that would form an integral part in assessing the data collected to ensure that the amendments are achieving their intended purpose and that that could identify and address any specific shortcomings.

Further to that royal commission, recommendation 12.20 states—

Each state and territory government, in consultation with appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and community representatives, should develop and implement plans to:

- (a) fully implement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

more pertinent to the committee, I would say, is 12.20(c), which is—

develop outcome measures that allow quantification and reporting on the extent of the full application of the principle, and evaluation of its impact on child safety and the reunification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with their families.

That is what we have outlined in our submission in terms of the importance of having a monitoring mechanism, to really fully deliver on the intent of the royal commission's recommendation. I hope that answered that question.

**CHAIR:** Jasmine, thank you so much. We have come to the end of our session with both you and Warren. We thank sincerely knowmore for your submission but also for making yourselves available this morning. I am terribly sorry that technology was not as we would have hoped, but certainly your guidance, support and advice is greatly appreciated by the committee.

**Ms Jevaherjian:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear.

**CHU, Mr Charles, Social Policy and Advocacy Officer, Australian Association of Social Workers (via teleconference)**

**SCARFE, Ms Angela, Senior Policy Adviser, Australian Association of Social Workers (via teleconference)**

**CHAIR:** Welcome. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, after which committee members will have questions for you.

**Ms Scarfe:** Thank you for the opportunity to address you all. I want to commence by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which this inquiry is taking place. I am speaking today from the land of the Wurundjeri people and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

The Australian Association of Social Workers is the professional body representing more than 16,000 social workers throughout Australia and more than 3,000 here in Queensland. Social work is a tertiary qualified profession, recognised internationally, that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers consider the wellbeing and protection of children within the broader (inaudible) and clinical context, promoting their best interests and demonstrating social workers' commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Before going any further, we need to say that we at the AASW acknowledge the past role of non-Aboriginal social workers in contributing to the mass child removal within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The AASW recognises that social workers were agents of enactors of forced adoption practices that were antithetical to the values and ethics of the social work profession, including the value of respect for person, human rights, social justice and self-determination.

Today, social workers are identifying, responding to and working in partnership with children, young people and families. We are drawing on our understanding that child abuse and neglect is interwoven with other really complex issues such as poverty, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, disability, homelessness, education, mental health and the legacy of colonisation. In that context, we support two particular aspects of this legislation. I will hand over to Charles, who will address them each quickly for you now.

**Mr Chu:** The first we want to talk about is the requirement that active efforts (inaudible) to implementing the Aboriginal child placement principle. The AASW knows the vital importance of maintaining children's connection to community and culture. We welcome the legislation specifying active efforts. We believe that the Queensland government should actually work in partnership with SNAICC, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, and QATSICPP to implement this. We agree with what previous speakers have said about what it is in practice. These organisations are Aboriginal community controlled organisations and they will have important insights into the ways in which these active efforts can be effective in maintaining connection to culture and community.

Secondly, AASW knows the importance of building collaborative relationships with the people we work with, and this extends to children and young people. Collaboration means ensuring that children have a say in what happens next. In our submission, we actually went further than supporting what is in this bill. We said that we believe every child should be offered their own support person to support their decision-making and their participation in decision-making.

The last point relates to the broader child protection reform. We are concerned with the status of the social work profession as a whole across Australia. The social work profession right now is not a registered profession under any state or national body. Coroners' reports highlight the importance of ensuring that every child in the system receives support from highly trained and skilled professionals and that there are accountability frameworks in place.

The South Australian parliament is about to introduce a bill to register the social work profession. This will be a groundbreaking reform which will ensure that every worker working as a social worker has completed an accredited social work degree, that they have acquired competency for working with vulnerable children, young people and their families. They should maintain their level of skill through professional practice supervision and continuing professional development. For that reason, we recommend the Queensland government to introduce a social work registration here in Queensland to protect children and families in the (inaudible) system. Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide evidence.

**Mr SKELTON:** In terms of recognition of cultural connection and kinship, do you support the suggested amendments in the bill to clarify the definition of 'kin'?

**Ms Scarfe:** That is something on which the AASW would absolutely defer to the local Indigenous groups that we would recommend the Queensland government partners with. We mentioned SNAICC and QATSICPP, and certainly we would think that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection agencies would have a definition of kin. We would absolutely defer to their leadership on this.

**Mr BENNETT:** I am interested in two issues. I had great difficulty hearing your last part about the registration of social workers, but I do note in your submission you reference the Mason Jett Lee case and some of the issues. I would really like you to talk to the committee about how you would see that. Also, in the context of the term 'cultural safety' with First Nations children, I would be really keen for the committee to hear your thoughts about that.

**Ms Scarfe:** Can we talk about registration first and then come back to cultural safety? The situation is that at the moment social work as a profession is not registered the way other professions are with Ahpra. We are a self-regulating profession. That means that people employed in social worker jobs do not actually have to have a qualification recognised by the AASW as a social work qualification. The term is not regulated. You often hear people on the news describing themselves as a social worker when they do not actually have a social work qualification. Similarly, if people are in social worker positions, there is no framework around what has to be provided in terms of their ongoing skill development. The AASW does regulate the practice of AASW members, but it is possible to have a social work qualification and not join the AASW, and in some places it is possible to describe yourself as a social worker without having a social work qualification that the AASW recognises.

The coroner's report into Mason Jett Lee is similar to other coroners' reports in other states where appalling outcomes have been experienced by children. They have resulted in child death. The coroners have realised that this lack of clarity around what social work is, who can call themselves a social worker and what they do when they are in a social work position actually is contributing to the appalling outcomes for children in the system. The AASW is working with all state and territory governments, advocating that social work be a registered profession, with the direct outcome for children as what we are hoping for as a result. It is a very complicated situation and very difficult to describe in this context. We can provide written work to back up the point we are making, if you would find that helpful.

**Mr BENNETT:** It has been passed in South Australia, Chair.

**Ms Scarfe:** Can I say more about that, or would you like to go onto the point about cultural safety?

**CHAIR:** Angela, we would really love for you to continue chatting about that. The deputy chair has just noted very accurately that South Australia has introduced some legislation around that issue, but certainly go on.

**Ms Scarfe:** Charles, would you like to say something to enlarge what I said? I feel that I probably was not as clear as I could have been.

**Mr Chu:** One point that I think is pertinent to the Queensland context is the coroner's report relating to the workforce in child protection. Obviously personal misconduct took place, according to the coroner's report into Mason Jett Lee's case. Having a registration system would put an accountability framework in place to make sure that people are held accountable for their professional practice. As Angela has said, anyone can call themselves a social worker, they can commit professional misconduct and we need to count on their employers to take action on a determination of their employment term or to do something about that. Having registration would put a structure in place to make sure that those people who commit professional misconduct are actually held accountable for their actions.

**Ms Scarfe:** At the moment we certainly have compliance mechanisms and there are consequences for AASW members, but because not every social worker is an AASW member there is a group of social workers over whom we do not have any leverage. More concerning is the fact that it is possible to call yourself a social worker without actually having a social worker accredited qualification. The AASW is a body that accredits qualifications, so we absolutely have a say about what social worker graduates have learnt and what they have done in their course, but we do not have control over everyone who is claiming to be a social worker. While we are incredibly concerned about the level of professional practice that vulnerable children are exposed to, the scope of our control is at the moment much more limited than we would like it to be. We think becoming a registered profession is a way of getting more control over both of those two problems that I have laid out for you.

**Mr Chu:** In addition to what Angela has said, when we talk about the social work role, it could mean a diverse range of positions that are currently employed under the Queensland government. It could be case management; it could be the leader for the case management team, the practice lead. Those titles would be performing what the social work role is expected to be. I guess there are some nuances about that and we really want to work with the Queensland government to basically kick off this registration scheme in Queensland.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Charles and Angela. Unfortunately, our time has come to an end but we really appreciate the feedback you have been able to provide for us. Thank you for bearing with us during the challenges associated with technology. Our committee appreciates the work you do and the contributions you have made.

**Ms Scarfe:** Thank you for the opportunity and we wish you well with this important legislation.

**CHAIR:** We are going to move to an open mic session in relation to the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. I invite community members to come forward to provide some feedback on the bill. Is there anyone who would like to come and talk to us about the work you are doing with our children?

### **OUI, Ms Sandra, Private capacity**

**Ms Oui:** I was only given information about this session a couple of days ago. I am going to talk to my own personal experience and it is coming from a cultural background as well. I raised six of my grandchildren, traditional adoption, but I did not get the support I should have got if my children had gone through the system. I raised them and put them through school. The youngest one is 17 and is graduating in a couple of weeks. They are all out working now.

The issue I had was not about abuse; it was more of parents facing their own demons in life. It was their choice, both mother and father, and I say it was a privilege. To this day, my grandchildren are very grateful that I played a cultural and family value role in their life and extended that to them. My problem was that, when I put them through schooling and the health system seeking health support for them, I had to get permission from parents. I said that I was the grandmother and I was looking after these children, but I was not legally their guardian, their mother or their father. I said that I would find out in Brisbane or wherever the parents were and get the authorisation, but in the meantime they were denying my grandchildren the right to get basic health care. That was a major issue.

I cannot fault the schooling system. All of my grandchildren were at the Aitkenvale school just up the road, and the teachers and the education system were fantastic. I raised six of them and they came from different types of home environments. I did say there was not abuse, but it was not abuse from the parents; it was abuse from other family members and I had to take them away from that. To this day, like I said, my grandchildren cannot thank me enough for the change I made in their lives.

I thought the most important thing was the health issue, because it was under cultural adoption and it was not recognised back then. Like I said, the youngest one is graduating very shortly. When we make decisions on a holistic view that are in the best interests and giving our children a voice, then we need to make sure that they are heard. Do not let them sit in silence and suffer. That is where we need to make that change for the betterment of our next generation.

I was born in this community and I have seen a lot of damage from different families within the community. Because I have gone down that road, I have just given them my support. I help anyone and everyone. This organisation has an open-door policy—if we cannot do it, we refer to the appropriate section. My own experience with my grandchildren is that the health system failed them and failed them big time—to the extent where I could not even get basic dental care for my grandchildren. If I had to get an immunisation needle for them, I was told that I was not the parent. These are the things I would like to make sure you take into consideration as well—that extra need from a cultural perspective.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. The story that you shared is not an uncommon story across Queensland and across cultures, across social demographics and across families. On behalf of the committee and on behalf of the government, we thank you sincerely for listening to the kids and for removing them and giving them the life that they deserve. You are absolutely correct that the more we listen to our children and we genuinely hear what they have to say, the quicker we can intervene and provide them the life that they deserve. Thank you so much for doing what you did for your grandchildren. They should be very proud of you. You should be very proud.

**Mr BENNETT:** I am keen for other service providers or people who have a passion for this subject to tell us about their organisation and some of their experiences. You do not have to talk to the specifics of the bill. You have obviously come along because you have a passion for this subject, so take the opportunity.

**CHAIR:** We do have a number of organisations here so please come forward and tell us about the work you are doing. Any support you provide for our children is a story that we need to hear and we want to hear.

**Ms Oui:** In my journey with my career, it has taken me in different directions. I used to do a job working with primary school students. The basic need to work with primary school students was the fact that my children were young, I was a single mum and keeping them safe was obviously the best thing to do. So for 24 hours a day, I would do an afternoon session looking after any child who would come to an after-school program, as well as vacation care, and included in that was my own children. During that time, I also had the privilege of being a foster mum. What I identified then was there is not enough of our people being foster parents. I saw that disconnection of our own culture from our next generation. I think the emphasis there was to make sure that everyone has a right to know their own identity and where they come from.

I got so attached to some of them but I only did it on a short-term basis because I had my own children to raise, amongst fostering and doing respite care during that time. What I did identify was that, when they would come home to my place for a weekend or a week, they did not want to leave.



It broke my heart, but the fact is they were going to a non-Indigenous home. I think the emphasis there was they just wanted to be with their own people. I thought we needed more foster parents from our own cultural background, but the biggest thing I found was that it was an invasion of privacy. When I had my own family come over, everybody had to go through the system. Everybody had to have a blue card or whatnot. At the end, I made a choice that I did not want to do foster care anymore. It was sad because I was letting down our children.

There was a prime example of three young girls. If we are talking about children having a voice, then we need to know what they are thinking when they are in the system as well. We need to know the good and the bad, and then we can obviously identify the bad and make an improvement to better their future as well.

The best thing I suppose about being a foster mum was I also had the opportunity to be hands-on where I worked as an after-school and vacation care coordinator. I could put a little bit of light in their world that was pretty dark. This is what I am hoping your representation is going to do—to take it back to parliament and take our children, no matter their ethnic or diverse cultural background, from the dark and put them back in the light so they know they are worth every bit of the air we breathe together to make sure they have that good journey in their life as well.

**CHAIR:** That was well said.

**Ms LUI:** We have heard from past speakers about the phrase ‘in the best interests of the child’. Do you have a view around that term? Also, this legislation, if passed, will give children more capacity to make decisions. What are your thoughts around that?

**Ms Oui:** I think you have said it all. It is about making sure our children have a voice. It is about making sure that when their voice is wanting to be heard someone is going to be there to give them that 100 per cent support that they are comfortable with. Like I said, we all come from different diverse cultural backgrounds and one shoe might fit one person but not necessarily fit another person. It comes down to trial and error as to how we are going to support our children in the future.

**Ms LUI:** Do you have any suggestions around practical measures that we could use to implement some of the initiatives?

**Ms Oui:** I am going to go back to the cultural side of it. Our kids are being damaged. You talk about giving a voice, but do they have a voice? How do you hear what they have to say? I think early stages to make connections and give them choices—whether it is drawing, speaking or whatever, but meet the individual age group and what best suits them and try to get it. They have to find someone comfortable in their life that they are going to disclose to. I am talking about counsellors, family, friends—whoever. I think that needs to be emphasised. In this organisation we are not for profit. We do not have government funding. We do everything from the heart. At the end of the day, a smile on the face of someone who has achieved an extra step that is positive in their life is all that we need to see. I have to throw over to Les and thank him, because at the end of the day we address all sorts of issues from youth, elders and those with disability in the community. We have an open-door policy. At the end of the day, with the youth we do sit down and we listen and if we know that there is a need for support then we find the appropriate service or the appropriate person that really matters in getting information.

**CHAIR:** Well done. Just while you are there, Aunty, could you talk to us a little bit about how that listening and hearing happens? How do you facilitate the child’s voice? What sort of approaches or avenues do you take? When, where and how does that happen?

**Ms Oui:** Definitely not in an office. If you want to get information, you have to go wherever that young person is comfortable, whether it is in a playground, a park or wherever. It is meeting their needs first and foremost and making them feel comfortable. Counsellors will say go, but at the end of the day for our people it is the shame factor. When you are seen walking in the doors of the counsellor’s room they are going to say, ‘This person wompa,’ you know? Assumptions happen so we need to do things in a secretive but down-to-earth, friendly environment, basically.

### **TAPIM, Mr Francis, Private capacity**

**Mr Tapim:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I would just like to talk about child care. We used to have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care here in Townsville. When it first opened I was one of the first workers there. We went for training to the department of children's services. We got training in child placement principles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. We had training to do social work and go out in the community and check for child abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. We got training to go to the courthouse to do court reports for the magistrate. I was one of the officers, as a court officer, that would go and report to the magistrate and make recommendations to the magistrate about children getting into trouble and sent to detention centres. There were no detention centres at that time in Townsville. They got sent down to Brisbane.

One of the things that came out of that was that we had been doing a good job here and all of a sudden the government has cut funding. This is why we have a big problem here in Townsville. The children have nowhere to go; there is no agency for them. The only agency now is Child Safety and most of them go see Child Safety and then attend Cleveland. When it opened up, I was one of the training officers at Cleveland. There were four of us Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training officers. I went from there to a senior training officer. I put in a report to the department of children's services saying that we need to change the system. The kids were doing petty things outside in the community, coming in and enjoying a good life, a resort—three meals a day, swimming pool, sports. You name it, Cleveland had it. I said we need to change it because they were going out in the community and telling their own peers, 'Get back to Cleveland. It is a good place. It is a resort for us.' I put in a report to the government but the government said they cannot do anything, so I put my resignation in. They would not listen to a blackfella. That is why I left the department of children's services.

The problem stems from not enough cultural teaching within the bureaucracies. I come from Torres Strait. I come from Mer. My niece here comes from Central Island. We are both Torres Strait Islanders but we come from different rules, and that is what the agencies need to understand. You get an Aboriginal person coming in from Burketown or Doomadgee coming into Townsville, coming to a different country. That is not their country. They come to Bindal and Wulgurukaba country here. You need to understand that cultural teaching is a priority for our people. You have to identify who they are. I might be a Torres Strait Islander, but I do not know how to speak Western Island language. I speak Meriam language. I speak Talim em talkem. Yumpla talkem. I cannot speak Western Island. I am not qualified to. I am qualified to talk Meriam. My people have an understanding of one lifestyle. Everybody knows Murri, all that type of thing—everybody knows that—but there are some specific things in the family that the agencies need to understand and it is a cultural difference. That is what they need to understand. Don't just think we all have curly hair and black skin so we come from Torres Strait. We come from different parts of the Torres Strait.

We have been talking about isolation of children. We have to listen to them and talk to them in a cultural manner and way—teach them their own culture so that they can understand. We have no cultural organisations here. We used to have, but the government stopped the funding for it so we do not have a cultural organisation. That is what needs to happen. Give some resources to establish a cultural organisation to teach language, to teach them culture, to teach them how to identify themselves, who they are and where they come from so we can stop the problem with isolation. They have plenty of uncles and aunties around in the community that they can go and stay with but, again, it comes back to resources. Who is going to give the grandmas and uncles and aunties the resources to assist them in going to school et cetera? That needs to happen, to give them the resources so they know they have something there to help them.

**CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Mr Tapim. That feedback to the government is invaluable, and I am sure that in our next session you will have some feedback around the issue of social isolation and loneliness. That concludes this hearing. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank all of the stakeholders who have participated today. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many submitters who have engaged in this inquiry. Thank you to Bonnie, our Hansard reporter. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's parliamentary webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 10.41 am.**