



HEALTH, COMMUNITIES, DISABILITY SERVICES AND DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms L Linard MP (Chair)
Mr MF McArdle MP (Deputy Chair)
Mr SE Cramp MP
Mr AD Harper MP

Staff present:

Mr K Holden (Committee Secretary)

PUBLIC FORUM—EXAMINATION OF THE CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AMENDMENT BILL 2017

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2017

Mount Isa

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Committee met at 10.01 pm

CHAIR: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Before we begin, I request that mobile phones are turned off or switched to silent mode. I now declare open this public hearing of the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Kalkadoon people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. My name is Leanne Linard. I am the chair of the committee and the member for Nudgee. My fellow committee members here today are Mr Mark McArdle, the deputy chair and member for Caloundra; Mr Aaron Harper, the member for Thuringowa; and Mr Sid Cramp, the member for Gaven. Today's hearing is part of the committee's examination of the Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill 2017. The bill was introduced by the Minister for Communities, Women and Youth, Minister for Child Safety and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence on 9 August 2017. The committee is required to report on the bill by 28 September 2017.

There are a few procedural matters before we start: the committee is a statutory committee of the Queensland parliament and, as such, represents the parliament. This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require evidence to be given under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. Witnesses have been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with a copy of the transcript. I remind all those in attendance today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate.

Given the sensitive issues in relation to child safety that may be raised during this hearing, I remind members and witnesses that their comments should not identify a child subject to the Child Protection Act 1999 or Youth Justice Act 1992. I am sure you will appreciate that this is necessary to protect children and ensure that their privacy is respected. Comments should also not refer to matters currently before the courts.

BUTLER, Ms Candice, Senior Practice Leader, Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak

CHAIR: I warmly welcome Candice Butler. Thank you for coming in this morning to talk to us. Would you like to make an opening statement in regard to your organisation and then we will ask some questions?

Ms Butler: Thank you. I have been with the Child Protection Peak since September 2015. My previous experience has been in child protection, youth justice and also at Centrelink as a social worker. I am very excited to be here in Mount Isa today as I do have connections to the Mount Isa area. I went to primary school and high school here, so it is very exciting to be back.

If you would like, I can provide an overview of what Child Protection Peak do. We provide advocacy and support to our member organisations. Currently we have 26 member organisations across the state. They provide services in the area of child protection, so recognised entities, family support services and also the recently established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family wellbeing services across the state. We will be looking at having 20 of those family wellbeing services across the state very shortly up and running. Our role is to provide support and advocacy to those member organisations. We do not provide front-line services. However, we do provide training. We provide support in terms of the QATSICPP practice standards and also the recently developed QATSICPP supervision framework. My role as senior practice leader is to provide supervision and ongoing support to the practice leads in the 26 organisations across the state.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Candice. We will open to questions from committee members. As someone who has not had any dealings with a recognised entity, I am particularly interested in understanding a little better the recognised entities. Can you talk a little about what they do and their key role?

Ms Butler: From my understanding, the recognised entities across the state provide cultural advice to the department. When a child is under investigation, they would go out with the department and provide that cultural advice for the department in terms of family and in terms of where the child is connected and where they are best placed. They are under section 6 of the current Child Protection Act 1999. Their role is to provide that cultural advice to the department.

CHAIR: How would they gather that advice?

Ms Butler: From my understanding, they gather that advice through their links in the community. Because they are a recognised entity, if they are a service they are expected to have staff that do identify as either Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. They have that understanding of the community that they live and work in, so they understand the family dynamics and they can provide that information about family.

CHAIR: For them to have that sort of understanding and information about a community, they must represent a fairly discrete community rather than representing a whole city like Townsville, et cetera. I am trying to understand how they would gather that information.

Ms Butler: Some of the feedback that we have received from community when we have gone out and done the reviews previously is that, at this point in time, with how the recognised entity is framed in the current Child Protection Act it does limit them to their role at the moment. It is quite limited in terms of that cultural advice, whereas what will be the new independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity will allow them the opportunity to get out more and to really explore and work with the family as to the child protection concerns and ways to address those concerns.

CHAIR: Candice, do you have any particular views about how the bill will actually enable that to occur?

Ms Butler: From our submission it is quite clear that we are very supportive of having the independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity, because it will allow the new role to really go out into community and to sit with family and really understand and build those cultural connections and identify who is connected to whom and also participate in a way that is meaningful for community.

CHAIR: What has been your experience of how community receives or perceives these entities?

Ms Butler: From my own going out into community and when we were here in Mount Isa, as well, doing the earlier Child Protection Act reviews, there were some mixed comments about what currently the recognised entity role provides. Unfortunately, at this time it is seen as a tick the box and that they more so work for the department rather than being a resource for community. At this time, it is seen as a resource for the department.

CHAIR: What will be the key change that you feel the bill will address well or maybe not so well that will allow that shift in thinking, so that the community feels this is very much an advocate them?

Ms Butler: By having the full five elements of the child placement principle, especially the partnership and participation elements of that child placement principle, and also having self-determination included in that will be a big bonus for the new independent entity. Also being able to work more with the family, I think, is something that we have definitely advocated for in our most recent submission.

CHAIR: Is that the biggest change? When I read those principles, I wondered whether the emphasis being placed on the vital importance of connection would be the greatest, but is participation equally or more so?

Ms Butler: I think it is having the full five. My personal view is that you cannot just work in isolation with one element. When you are working, for example, with connection, you are also thinking about partnerships and you are also thinking about prevention and you are also thinking about the other two, as well. You cannot work in isolation with just one element. Having all five elements is a great step towards the new entity being able to really work and strive in community and in child protection and, hopefully, reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care.

CHAIR: This is my last question on this line of questioning, because I want to pass over to my colleague the deputy chair. With regard to the complexities that can exist between different community groups in the same discrete community, have you seen these recognised entities perform a role well of not having a sense of bias, perhaps, to one particular group over another but trying to balance those tensions and being a very positive and non-biased advocate for the community? I know that you said mostly they are not necessarily seen that way, but how do they manage those tensions?

Ms Butler: Unfortunately I do not have anyone from the recognised entity here. That is a conundrum that we all face, being Aboriginal and working in community. We all face that conundrum of how we best place ourselves. I think the most important thing is that, at the end of the day, it is about the best interests of the child. I think that is how they would overcome that issue, just by reminding the family, even if it is a big family group, that, hey, at the end of the day we are here for the best interests of the child.

CHAIR: That is great. I will come back, if we have time.

Mr McARDLE: Candice, what exactly is your role in the Child Protection Peak?

Ms Butler: I am the senior practice leader. We have had a bit of a restructure with roles and where I sit. I am now known as the supervisor. I supervise approximately, at this time, eight practice leads throughout the state. I provide supervision in terms of practice and best practice and how we can really identify emerging best practice and what that means. Earlier on, I was involved in training. We have the QATSICPP practice standards and also the QATSICPP supervision framework. I was involved in that side of things, too.

Mr McARDLE: Pardon my ignorance—

Ms Butler: No, that is okay—

Mr McARDLE: Best practice in what?

Ms Butler: Best practice in child protection—best practice in the delivery of working with children, best practice in the delivery of working with families and best practice in the delivery of working with communities. For example, how do we do a really awesome cultural support plan and how do we make sure that, at the end of the day, the needs of the child are captured?

Mr McARDLE: I would like to understand more about what you and your officers do nationally in understanding the cultural needs. What process do you and your officers go through to work out the best plan going forward?

Ms Butler: Currently, in my role I use the QATSICPP supervision framework. Part of that is sitting down and identifying, 'Okay, tell me about this child. Really tell me what is it that this child needs and what is it that this family needs to best support this child?'

Mr McARDLE: Give me an example as to the departments or the family members you talk to at the moment to come up with a cultural plan.

Ms Butler: In my current role—unfortunately, I do not do any front-line work—those who I am supervising have advised that they speak with the families whom they work with. They speak with the children most importantly. I think we forget sometimes about the importance of listening to children and really hearing their voice. That is one thing that I try to advocate very strongly—really listening to children and getting the children's voices at the end of the day. They speak with their workers, they speak with the families, most importantly, and also the children whom they work with. Again, similar to the child placement principles, we cannot work in isolation. We cannot be seen as always sitting at a desk when we are developing a plan. We need to be out and about. We need to be out in the community and we need to make sure that we are visible.

Mr McARDLE: In their environment, shall we say.

Ms Butler: That is right.

Mr McARDLE: And the family is not just mum and dad, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins?

Ms Butler: That is exactly right.

Mr McARDLE: With the submission that we have before us, did you help in the preparation of that document?

Ms Butler: I did, yes.

Mr McARDLE: You would have a good knowledge of the contents of the document?

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: And the rationale behind it—or not?

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: This process began some time ago with the department issuing a discussion paper, if I recall correctly. There were two rounds of consultation and then a bill came out. Your office made submissions to all stages in this?

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: I note that, when you talk about the permanent care order, your officers are implacably opposed to that principle.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: That was raised, I take it, in the early discussions with the department and also, I suspect, in the 2017 paper, released by the department, in relation to Indigenous affairs and child safety.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: We could ask you questions about the content of the document. You would have some knowledge, but not an intimate knowledge?

Ms Butler: That is correct, yes.

Mr McARDLE: That is fine. 'Self-determination' is a term that can have different meanings depending on whom you are talking to.

Ms Butler: Sure.

Mr McARDLE: From your point of view, or your officers' point of view, what do you mean by self-determination? To me, it means inclusively having the exclusive right to make a choice. Is that what you mean?

Ms Butler: Yes, that is exactly right. I think more so it is about having that opportunity to be involved in decision-making. For me personally, self-determination means that I would have a right in having a say in relation to any child protection decision in relation to a child in my family.

Mr McARDLE: Can I just make a comment there? You are not saying that you have the exclusive right; you are saying you are one party in a decision-making process?

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: I just want to clarify that in my mind, because the term can be quite tricky depending on the context in which you use it.

Ms Butler: It can, yes.

Mr McARDLE: At the end of your submission you talk about a concern about the permanent care order being made.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: You then say that one way of getting around that, looking at the Victorian legislation, is the independent entity.

Ms Butler: That is right.

Mr McARDLE: As I read the bill, this entity does not have a quasi-legal role, but you are expanding that, I take it, to require the court to get the consent of that independent entity before making an order; is that correct?

Ms Butler: That is correct, yes.

Mr McARDLE: You would extend the jurisdiction of that body to become formally part of a legal process; is that right? If I am wrong there, please let me know, or, if you are uncertain, please say so.

Ms Butler: Yes, I am possibly a bit uncertain myself. That may be a better question to put towards Natalie, our CEO, in relation to the entity and the permanent care orders. We would see that they would play a pivotal role if the recommendation of permanent care orders were made.

Mr McARDLE: To your knowledge, was that issue raised in any submissions made to discussion papers with the department earlier?

Ms Butler: Not to my knowledge, sorry.

Mr McARDLE: Was the issue of a permanent care order raised as a concern of Indigenous people and organisations?

Ms Butler: Yes. We recently had some information from members. The new bill with the permanent care order has been an issue that has been raised, yes.

Mr McARDLE: Is the correction of a permanent care order to be used by an independent entity the only thing that you want changed in relation to a permanent care order, or are there other matters? When I read the submission, I get the sense that there are more things floating around that are not on paper yet. Are there more issues to be dealt with?

Ms Butler: Possibly. I think, again, that is probably a better question for Natalie.

Mr McARDLE: You raised the issue of the role of children in making a statement as to what they see is their future.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: How would you do that? You would give less weight to a five-year-old than a 15-year-old, shall we say?

Ms Butler: Sure.

Mr McARDLE: How would that take place, do you think?

Ms Butler: My own thinking is that, recently in Queensland, we had the rollout of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family-Led Decision Making. As part of that there were the voices of the child included in those discussions. By having that family-led decision-making process, that is how I would think a child's voice is included and maintained throughout any sort of child protection decision-making.

Mr McARDLE: What weight would the voice of the child have, given that the interests of the child is paramount in the legislation?

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: It would be based upon age, I would assume, or maturity, like the Family Court does?

Ms Butler: Yes, absolutely, yes.

Mr McARDLE: Going back to the issue of self-determination, I hear you very clearly: it is one voice in relation to a process that is required to give the best outcome to a child or children. Would you want that to be given more weight than other segments of that decision-making process?

Ms Butler: Was that in relation to the voice of the child or just self-determination?

Mr McARDLE: No, the principle.

Ms Butler: I think self-determination is something that should occur throughout the whole child protection decision-making continuum and also be included in the bill. By having self-determination, it really opens up that ability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be involved and fully participate, similar to the inclusion of the child placement principles.

Mr McARDLE: Right. I do not want to harp on this, but I want you to answer the question. If you feel that you cannot, please say so and I will stop immediately.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: Do you feel, though, that it has or should be given more weight than other principles to make a determination—or is it simply one of equal standing?

Ms Butler: I think it is one of equal standing.

Mr McARDLE: Thank you.

Mr HARPER: Ms Butler, thank you very much for being here today. You must be very proud, coming back into the Mount Isa community after doing your schooling here.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr HARPER: Whereabouts are you based?

Ms Butler: I am based in Brisbane—in West End.

Mr HARPER: I am based in Townsville. Are you familiar with the *Taking responsibility* report of 2013?

Ms Butler: I have limited knowledge, yes.

Mr HARPER: That identified about 7,500 children in Child Safety—I think that is up to about 9,000 in 2017—of whom some 50 per cent are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. We have a mammoth task in getting the contents of the bill right. I really appreciate your feedback in relation to that. You raise some issues in the submission in relation to the permanent care orders. Can you unpack that a little bit more for me as to why?

Ms Butler: Yes. From my understanding and from the submission our concern with the permanent care order is that we could be making another stolen generation. We are also concerned with the family's participation in the making of the permanent care order and also the revoking of a permanent care order. That is one of our main concerns—that revocation of a permanent care order—

as it appears in the bill. Only the DCPL can initiate the revoking of a permanent care order. Our concern is that we need to have it broader so that, if permanent care orders are made, a family or an independent entity can bring forward a revoking of a permanent care order given a change in circumstances.

Mr HARPER: The reason I brought up that figure for North Queensland—from Townsville to Mount Isa—is that there are over 1,000 children. How long has QATSICPP been around as an advocacy agency for child protection? How long have you been established?

Ms Butler: I have been here since 2015. Our CEO, Natalie Lewis, has been there for five years prior to that—since last year. That is a really great question. I think that one is more for Natalie.

Mr HARPER: I am trying to establish how long you have been working with the department. I take on board what you said before. Whilst it might seem tokenistic, it is not. It is really important that we get these things right.

Ms Butler: Absolutely.

Mr HARPER: How has success to date been with engagement?

Ms Butler: There has definitely been significant improvements in the relationship between the department and QATSICPP. I feel as though we sit in a really fortunate position in that we have a key voice in any sort of child protection decision-making. Natalie Lewis, our CEO, has a very close relationship with Michael Hogan, the director-general. We are very fortunate that, whenever there are issues similar to this coming up, we are contacted and we are taken into account, especially in relation to the recent action plan and the development of that action plan. We were quite pivotal in developing that and being involved in the Family Matters action plan, which then helped to develop the current Changing Tracks action plan.

Mr HARPER: Are there any other parts of the bill that you want to get on record as an issue?

Ms Butler: Not so much as an issue, but having the child placement principles clearly outlined and defined in the bill is a great step forward. By having that, for lack of a better word, that will eradicate people's thinking of the current recognised entity program, because it allows for that independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity to be fully involved in all participation and all decisions across that child protection continuum. By having the child placement principles, by having self-determination clearly outlined in the bill and also by having the new entity in the bill, I think is a great step forward for Queensland.

Mr HARPER: Do you think that the bill strengthens the relationship in terms of collaboration and working with QATSICPP?

Ms Butler: Yes, I believe so.

Mr HARPER: I really welcome your comments and thank you very much.

Ms Butler: Thank you.

Mr CRAMP: Thank you, Ms Butler, for coming in here today. It sounds like you have travelled just about as far as we have. I have a few questions. Some are based on your organisation's submission and some are based on what you have said. I will start with some of the comments that we have heard today. You noted that children's voices being heard is quite important.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr CRAMP: That was spoken about earlier. Historically, if we look at the Gillick competence of children of 11 or 12 being deemed competent to have a say, could you provide some insight into the cultural and traditional values? How does that fit with different communities across Queensland?

Ms Butler: I have been very fortunate not only to have grown up in Queensland but also to have had the ability to travel quite extensively with my roles in both youth justice and Centrelink—both in Townsville—and also in my current role. Even for me as an Aboriginal woman I think it is so important that we do include the voice of children in any decision-making that we are privy to. I think to not include children in decision-making is, in my mind, non-negotiable.

Mr CRAMP: Do you think there will be any resistance from communities to see children have an increased voice? This is where this legislation is very much going.

Ms Butler: Absolutely—I agree in terms of where the legislation is going. I personally do not think that the community will be—

Mr CRAMP: That is very valuable to know. I was going to speak about self-determination. You note that it is more a collective view as opposed to an individual's right. From reading the legislation and reading your submission, there seems to be a bit of both—the individual's rights, the child's, Mount Isa

mixed in with the community and taking into account perhaps the director of the department's viewpoint. I want to make sure that that is what you are saying—that they all form an equal part of that self-determination. Is that right?

Ms Butler: Yes. Most importantly, it is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities having the opportunity to participate. In the consultations that we had earlier on in the year I think that is something that was fed back—that we need to have that opportunity to have a voice and to have a say in child protection decision-making. By having self-determination included in the bill is a step in that direction, I believe.

Mr CRAMP: I picked up a comment you made before. I welcome any further feedback you have on it. It is not to put you on the spot, I assure you. It was an interesting comment. You likened the PCOs, the permanent care orders, to the possibility of making another stolen generation. Is that a personal view or is that a collective thought of the people you speak to? That is a very strong feeling.

Ms Butler: That is true. It is. It possibly more an individual viewpoint. It probably is not a collective standpoint.

Mr CRAMP: Do you find that those conversations are occurring amongst your peers in your area? This is a specialist area. You are dealing with a niche area. Are there divergent viewpoints—that people are saying, 'No, it will be okay'—or is there a general consensus that having PCOs for Indigenous communities is not a great idea?

Ms Butler: Some further comment to that is that permanent care orders could possibly be seen as children no longer being able to have that connection to family and families no longer being able to participate in decision-making. If a permanent care order is being sought and is going to be made then our recommendation, similar to what is in Victoria, is that they do include the entity in decision-making and that the full five elements of the child placement principle are clearly outlined.

Mr CRAMP: Has there been any talk amongst your body that recognised entities could be anyone other than an organisation? Could they be individuals perhaps?

Ms Butler: I think that is the beauty of the new bill.

Mr CRAMP: Obviously the legislation does state that.

Ms Butler: Yes, exactly. That is something that we reflected on as well. Currently in the Child Protection Act it does actually state that a recognised entity can be an individual. It does not necessarily need to be an organisation. I think with this new bill and the new opening up of the independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity, it does allow for that to be captured. One of the stories that I have come across is that it allows those elders and those grandmothers in community to have a real say in what is happening for those young ones who are in community.

Mr CRAMP: I have a local constituent who is a grandmother of an Indigenous child. She herself is not Indigenous but she is very keen to make sure that her grandchild is in touch with her culture and family. We are working through the custody issues in that. There is no other party and we are making sure that that child gets a family member. There was some concern about the fact that the grandmother was not Indigenous. What is the view of peak bodies such as yours if non-Indigenous people who are family members are seeking to take a proactive role to make sure that the children are connected to community and country?

Ms Butler: I think our peak body would definitely see—if that person is really trying to ensure that their child remains connected to community, connected to culture and connected to land then I think that is brilliant. We are also currently working on a kinship paper which will clearly define what kinship is.

Mr CRAMP: In your submission on page 16, you state—

Clause 49—only allowing the chief executive to delegate the powers (i.e. not a delegate of the chief executive)

In the paragraph before that, your organisation were pretty forthright in saying that it should only be the chief executive. Is there any reason behind that? Is it an authority issue or perhaps it is a question for Natalie?

Ms Butler: Perhaps Natalie would be best to ask.

Mr CRAMP: I will hold that one for her. I was also very interested in page 19 of your submission where you spoke about the PCOs, the permanent care orders—and we have discussed that at some length. Do you consider the current system of long-term guardianship sufficient or does your organisation have other ideas? From the sound of it, PCOs are probably not your desired direction. Is the current system working and sufficient or will your organisation put forward ideas in due course that would change the current system but not be a permanent care order?

Ms Butler: That is a great question. I think, again, it is something that I might let Natalie know about.

Mr CRAMP: If you could take that question on notice because she might want to have a think about it.

Ms Butler: Excellent.

Mr CRAMP: I would like to hear what your organisation has to say about that. It is one thing for this committee to recommend that the current system is fine, but if we do not hear it from organisations and specialists such as yourself then we may go in the wrong direction.

Ms Butler: That is understandable.

CHAIR: I would like to ask you specifically about permanent care orders. It is certainly something that has been raised in submissions. It is, understandably, something that people feel strongly about both for and against, to be fair. From my point of view, as somebody who does not have a background in child protection, your input is very valuable. We certainly appreciate the dynamic nature of these committee hearings and how helpful it is to understand the implications of legislation.

Having looked at the inquiry into child protection in Queensland, one of the strongest tenets that comes through in that report is that permanency is something we need to look at more. Having children continuing to be juggled—not all children, because we should obviously not put everyone in the same group, but continual rolling short-term orders are not necessarily in the best interests of the child. Then when we have a bill before us, as we do, that seeks to give effect to improving that, we have some quite disparate views.

Taking on board, to use the wording of my colleague the member for Gaven, some strong commentary from groups, including QATSICPP, around evoking feelings of the stolen generation et cetera—which is not something I think it would be fair to say anybody would ever want to move back to—the bill itself in regard to protection orders talks about two years but then also says if it is ‘in the best interests of the child’. It is not that it has to be applied—that that is what is going to happen. Also, reading through the bill, clause 7 refers to additional principles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. That invokes self-determination and connection to the child’s family and community.

Also, clause 32 refers to additional matters that must be considered and that, in deciding whether to make the order, the Childrens Court must have proper regard to Aboriginal tradition and island custom relating to the child and the child placement principles in relation to the child. You have spoken strongly about those child placement principles. Why is it then the view of QATSICPP that that is not enough protection—that such an order would not be made if it was not appropriate? Could you help me in that regard?

Ms Butler: I could try.

CHAIR: I will also ask the same question, if you like, of Natalie.

Ms Butler: Yes, please. I personally, and from conversations that we have had as a peak body, am a bit concerned that when those permanent care orders are being made there may not be that acknowledgement of the elements being included in the making of the order. That is why early on in our submission we say that perhaps there be a recommendation that the placement principles be strictly adhered to and be given a voice in terms of if a person is going to make any order that they provide a statement saying, ‘We have addressed placement by blah, blah, blah,’ or ‘We have addressed participation through this avenue.’ That would be my understanding. If a permanent care order was to be made then that the department going before the court need to clearly state how they have addressed all of those child placement principles as well as self-determination and the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

CHAIR: Candice, your submission in that regard and your comments then were very clear about that. I think it was very interesting that you proposed and mentioned the Victorian legislation. That is certainly something that I know I, and other members of the committee, want to look at more closely. Were those comments based on the fact that you do not believe the wording currently contained in the bill—which is strong; it does say, ‘In deciding whether to make the order, the Childrens Court must’—not may—‘have proper regard to ... Aboriginal tradition and Island custom relating to the child’—is still not strong enough or is it your concern that you do not know how they will do that without the mention specifically of the independent entity?

Ms Butler: I think it is more that we are unclear as to how that full participation will be extended.

Mr McARDLE: We have heard about the right of the parent or the child to seek a review of a permanent care order. The bill contains nothing about that: the only person who can is the litigation director. Legal Aid—if I am mistaken, my colleagues will pull me up—indicated that they thought that the child should have the right to seek a review. No-one has mentioned the right of a parent to seek a review. Does your body have a point of view on either the child or a parent having the right to seek a review at an appropriate time of a PCO?

Ms Butler: Yes, sure. I think our organisation would firmly support the child or a parent having the right to seek a review of a permanent care order at any stage.

Mr McARDLE: I raise the point that the legislation is meant to give permanency in relation to a PCO. That is the ultimate outcome. To get to that point is a very lengthy process. It entails a lot of people, a lot of reports being prepared, a court making a hearing. Would you have a concern that opening that up to a parent—and I use the word ‘parent’ in a wide sense in regard to the Indigenous population—or to a child runs the risk of rolling applications, again, akin to the Family Court? My background is as a Family Court legal practitioner on behalf of children. I can certainly recall files that grew very thick over five or six years. Doesn’t that erode the principle of permanency? If you would rather leave that question to Natalie, that is fine.

Ms Butler: That is a good question.

Mr McARDLE: If you would rather leave that to Natalie, fine.

Ms Butler: Yes, please.

Mr McARDLE: Okay. That is fine. That would be my concern. I understand a child might, as a child grows, but I am concerned about the rolling applications that can occur that then delay the determination of other matters and can clog up, shall we say, the court processes involved.

Ms Butler: Yes. That is understandable. Thank you.

Mr McARDLE: At the bottom of page 4 and on page 5 of your submission you talk about poor outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. You then, I think, come to the crux of what lies in the future, and that is poverty and neglect. We are again being reactive here to a situation that has been dealt with internally and extended for many years to come. You also then talk about the deficit paradigm in relation to social pathologies that focus on research and media to remedy Indigenous issues and that that needs to be transformed. Do you have, shall I say, the other end of the spectrum concept in mind as to what needs to happen?

Ms Butler: Possibly not so much in terms of what needs to happen, but one of the things that QATSICPP does when we are doing any decision-making and any community consultation is go into the community and ask the community what they would like to see and have as changes. That is how I see things. We go into the community and ask the community first and foremost what they would like and how they would see changes.

Mr McARDLE: Thank you.

Mr CRAMP: At the end of page 12 of your submission you recommend a minor amendment to section 59 of the act to require demonstrated evidence in the decision-making process for your five Ps.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr CRAMP: I think you have answered this question on page 13 of your submission where you recommend a sworn statement of adherence to and demonstration of application. Would it be sufficient for me to provide a sworn statement that I have done everything that I can and that these are the steps that I have taken? I value your personal opinion, and not just that of your organisation. You have been to all of these communities. You know their level of expectation in relation to government or authorities, especially when dealing with children. Would you consider that to be enough? If you do not know me as an entity or a person and I simply sign to say, ‘I have done everything to cover the five Ps,’ should it be taken further? Is this what the organisation has decided as sufficient?

Ms Butler: I think if it is able to be taken further then that would be great. We need to get back to people demonstrating evidence of how they are going to ensure that the best interests of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, or young person, is captured when they are making decisions. Let us be honest: when they are in the child protection system, a long-term decision is made if they are placed in the care of someone else besides their immediate parents. In relation to the demonstration of the child placement principles, it needs to state clearly how you have ensured that that child will remain connected, that there will be prevention, there will be participation, there will be the partnerships, and also the placement.

Mr CRAMP: If there were a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the way that a sworn affidavit was provided, do you think that there should be a safeguard where there is a right of appeal for authorised entities to say, 'We are not satisfied. We would like to see further evidence in particular areas?' Would that be something that the legislation could possibly provide for?

Ms Butler: If possible, yes.

Mr CRAMP: That is a question of the cuff, but this is why we hold these hearings. There is probably a reasoning that we should have some safeguards around that so that, if groups like yours that represent communities are not satisfied, they have that right of appeal to come back.

Ms Butler: Yes.

Mr CRAMP: Thank you.

CHAIR: There being no further questions, we will conclude it here. I thank you very much for your patience with our sound issues, which were resolved. On behalf of the committee, we really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you. Certainly, a number of stakeholders who I spoke to before I travelled up here spoke very highly of what QATSICPP does. Thank you very much. I declare the hearing closed.

Proceedings suspended from 10.50 am to 11.05 am

CHAIR: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I declare this public hearing of the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee once again open.

LOWCOCK, Father Mick, Chairperson, Community Justice Group

CHAIR: I welcome our next witness, Father Mick Lowcock. Thank you very much for joining us. Would you like to make a brief statement and then we will open up for questions?

Father Lowcock: Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet today and for coming to Mount Isa. It is important for us to have our little voice heard. We are not in any of your electorates or parties. Firstly, I acknowledge the Kalkadoon people and elders past and present. I cannot speak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but as chair of the local Community Justice Group, which is associated with the Magistrates Court in Mount Isa and Murri Court comes in association with that. We have over 100 men go through Murri Court in a year and probably about a dozen women in that time each year. The statistics are that roughly one-third will never reoffend, one-third will reoffend once or twice, and one-third probably become habitual offenders unless the government gives us some money to case manage them.

I acknowledge, too, the complexity of family's and children's needs and lives, which really is the result of the early histories of Queensland where culture and language and everything were wiped out. In Queensland, in particular, we notice the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here and then when you see people who come from the Northern Territory the difference in culture and background and language is really marked. I always say that I might have one issue in life where something has happened to me, but most of the people we deal with have six or seven issues. The complexity of their lives is extraordinary.

I also acknowledge the lack of understanding of the complexities of legislation. It is probably not in my real field of life to know the complexities of it, but that is more so for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trying to understand those complexities. I would like to speak to the explanatory notes that were offered to the Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill 2017. In the policy objectives, I thought it was a shame that No. 3 states 'provide a contemporary information sharing regime' for child protection. I think the word 'regime' is probably not a very appropriate word to be used when we are dealing with the history of people in this area.

While we just heard before about the complexity of short-term orders no longer to extend more than two years, dealing with a number of people whom I deal with, I think there is a need to have, not necessarily permanent, far more orders that are just not going from place to place to place. I see that in people's lives. Sometimes people are placed here and they are placed there. I would like to see something far more permanent in that sense, not necessarily permanent-permanent, but certainly something more permanent than we have at present.

Under the recent domestic violence legislation and its implementation, Mount Isa is one of the areas for special consideration. One of the things that has happened is that they have set up a high-risk team here between the departments. I think it has lots of possibilities. One of the things would be sharing of information and all those sorts of things across agencies, which has been now made possible. I remember a few years ago I said to the Premier when she visited here that Queensland Health, Queensland ambulance and Queensland police all give us different statistics for the number of suicides in this area. It varied from 14 to 24. Unless they are sharing across government agencies for starters, it just does not make sense to me.

I suppose stability for young people is one of the important outcomes. It gives me a sense of satisfaction to see those five elements of the child placement principles. The section on page 3 talks about 'facilitating the participation of the child and the child's family in decision making'. To me that is really important. An example would be that most times I see people deal with the mother and the father gets isolated. I know it is very difficult to deal with the father for a whole host of reasons, but unless we are dealing with fathers they become more and more disempowered and we see less and less possibility for men to take their place in society. Certainly the way things have been in the past we have dealt with the mother. The new domestic violence team are starting now to engage with the fathers, as well. Difficult as it is, and I understand that, unless we do that and try to empower those men there will be no real change in people's lives.

An example would be if a child wants to go to boarding school, who is receiving the child support money? Who is the parent? What do the parents want to do? A colleague of mine who is with me today, Emene Kelemete, has been dealing with trying to get children to boarding school. You

might not realise it, but Queensland police have gathered statistics that say that over 200 children in Mount Isa are not registered at any school. When we brought that with up with Education Queensland, they said that that was not their issue; their issue was people who are in school. To me, that is one example. In trying to deal with a number of those kids who are not in school, say, to try to get 20 to boarding school, a number of those kids have significant issues like being in Cleveland Youth Detention Centre already and that sort of stuff. Really we need to be dealing with them now. You can have one parent who says yes and one parent who says no. Sometimes it depends on who is getting child support. I think that connection with the federal government in terms of child support and action in that whole area is really important. Do you know what I am trying to say?

Mr McARDLE: Yes.

Father Lowcock: Sometimes decisions are made for financial reasons or could appear to be. We have had a men's group going here for over 10 years and we probably get 30 Aboriginal men every Monday night, so I am really passionate about the role of fathers. I would really like to advocate for the role of fathers in this whole legislation. I do not want to discriminate between mothers and fathers, but I want to make sure that men have a real say.

The other issue that I would like to raise is the question of foster caring. Recently, a lady, from birth, was given a child she had for 28 months and the brother of that child for about 14 or 15 months. She was given six days notice to hand them over to the department to be sent to Townsville. It was a transition arrangement to go to a family. While that is admirable, the way foster parents sometimes are treated makes it really hard. The other thing I notice is that if children have a right to the information in their file, foster parents also need to make sure that they have the right to information that is on file about them, as well. They need to be notified about that. There needs to be this whole question of what I call balance, where we talk about stable living arrangements that provide a connection for family and community and their developmental, educational and other needs. Sometimes it is really hard to establish the balance, because it depends on the number of people you are dealing with.

The process for a child who is a member of a family to contact the department to make a complaint if they believe the guardian is not complying with the guardian's obligations I think is reasonable and fair and should be encouraged. Children do know what is right and wrong innately and they should have that right, so it is really encouraged in that legislation. I commend it for that.

The child to apply to vary a long-term guardianship order that grants guardianship of the child to the chief executive: as long as that process is simple, and I know nothing is ever simple because of legislation, I am sure children do have a right. Sometimes we regard them as only half adult. Children in themselves are innately able to decide what is really good, once it is talked about with them. I do not mean just off the top of their head, 'Yes, I want to do this for pleasure', but what is really good.

When they talk about extending the plans from 15 up to the age of 25, I think as long as there are positive plans. A lot of time, if a person is not playing up they get no attention. The squeaky wheel gets the oil. Sometimes, because of resources in departments, they are so often being reactive. If we are going to extend this from 15 to the age of 25, which I highly commend, we need to ensure that it is not just those who are in trouble; we need to keep reviewing the positive plans and reviewing the whole life of that person right through to 25. They need to have a deep sense that they are cared for; that it is not just when they are in trouble that we come looking for them. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be allowed to develop and maintain connections with their culture, traditions and community.

One of the difficulties we have here is that we have a number of people come from the Northern Territory. I have said on a number of other occasions that the Queensland government should be asking for money from the Northern Territory for all the people you are caring for. Just as the chief minister in Darwin said, 'All these Western Australians should be sent home because they are costing us money', we should be saying the same thing. Once they change their legislation on alcohol and all sorts of other issues, we get the influx across the border. It is not only that: we have Lake Nash or Alpururalam just across the border. Its postcode is 4825, the same as Mount Isa's. There are a number of issues that, to me, concern the territory. In all this legislation, from a Mount Isa perspective or a north-west perspective—when you look at Doomadgee and it goes right across—we need to look at what is really happening in the territory that we can work together on. There is not much point in us getting a case plan for someone who is really from the territory and then in two months time they go back to the territory and then there is no connection with that. I know a number of government agencies are trying to do that, but I would like to see politicians more aware of the need for departments to be able to do that and to really encourage that.

CHAIR: Mick, I might stop you there. Normally we limit the opening statement to two minutes.

Father Lowcock: Sorry.

CHAIR: No. Please do not apologise. I wanted you to go that bit longer because we do not have a formal submission from your group, so that helped us to understand some of the key issues of concern to you. Thank you very much for that detail. I will open it up to my colleagues to ask questions. Just before I do that, could you answer one question for us? You are here representing the Mount Isa Community Justice Group. What exactly does the Mount Isa Community Justice Group do and who does it represent?

Father Lowcock: The Mount Isa Community Justice Group funds one worker to work in the Murri Court system. Every day we have two or three people go through the court system to enable people to make sure that they have a just outcome for their offence.

CHAIR: I think there are a number of groups that sit under your banner though that are member organisations, are they?

Father Lowcock: We are from a group that the church has put together called the North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services. That is what has funded that group. Under that, there is a women's group and a men's group.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that context.

Mr HARPER: Thank you, Father Mick, for being here today and I acknowledge the work that you are doing in the area. It is obviously a complex area. You have raised some issues in relation to the Northern Territory and the crossover with borders and a number of other issues. How long has the group been established?

Father Lowcock: The Community Justice Group has been funded probably for about 15 years. We have only received that funding in the last eight years.

Mr HARPER: You raised a couple of points. You would be aware of some of the issues on the coast in Townsville.

Father Lowcock: Well and truly, yes.

Mr HARPER: You raised the men's group. You specifically spoke about fathers being involved. Uncle Alfred Smallwood runs the men's group. We have done some work with Uncle Alfred and the Yinda program, which is an Indigenous cultural mentoring program that has just been funded to connect youth and fathers to country. It is yet to start, but we have been working with that particular group. I am looking forward to the outcomes. It is probably worthwhile having a conversation with Uncle Alfred.

Father Lowcock: We were when they were putting in for funding.

Mr HARPER: Yes. They have won that tender which is fantastic. It is complex—200 children not in school. As you said earlier offline, that is a whole generation of people who we need to get back into education, training or employment. Are there any other issues that you have identified, outside the bill for a moment, in regard to turnover of staff or case plans?

Father Lowcock: In Mount Isa—it does not matter whether it is in a school or the Queensland Police Service or child safety—there are a number of staff who are very young. Most people get their first job out here. People put a lot of work into them and then after two or three years they go as they are able to be more effective with that experience under their belt. Certainly a huge issue is the turnover of staff and the capacity to manage them because there is a lot of investment needed. People graduate from uni but that does not mean they can go into a classroom. It is the same with social work. There is a sense in which people need a lot of investment in them to train them up to work in that area.

With most of them being young, finding respect from parents is sometimes difficult because they do not want to be dealing with a young person who has not had kids. Development, particularly of ATSI staff—which I see as one of the ideals here—as a long-term view is really important. For example, we could not get a male person who was literate to work for us on Mornington Island, so we handed back the funding. To try to get people who are capable of doing this is commendable as a long-term view. A real issue is how does the community and how do departments upskill people and how do we work together to do that? It is easier to give funding to a body who fly people in and out and get the job done than it is to develop the local community. That is always a real tension.

Mr HARPER: One of the other points you raised was about the sharing of information between agencies. I think that is important. You may be familiar with the Townsville Stronger Communities Action Group. Again, they are probably worthwhile contacting to see how they are doing it. I think it is scalable throughout the communities. You talked about permanent placement. In effect, are you supporting that aspect of the bill? Do you have any concerns at all?

Father Lowcock: I like the idea from the point of view of a child knowing there is some security. In that sense I like the idea of permanent placement. On the other hand, I like the option for people to be able to appeal that as well. I do not want to see permanent placement as being that and that is it. I like to see that people have a sense of security about where they are going in life. Sometimes that does not always happen for people for a whole host of reasons. The more permanent we can make people's arrangements for the sake of the child the better. On the other hand, I know that in dealing with some men they have come good, so to speak, and they want to then start to take more responsibility but sometimes that makes it very difficult because of the situation. Sometimes men have not been given a good place in the decision-making about the child.

Mr HARPER: One of the other points you made was around objective No. 3. Can you make a suggestion on the change of the word 'regime'? You raised that particular point. How else would you describe it?

Father Lowcock: I probably should not have said it unless I had another word. Off the top of my head, I cannot think of one.

Mr HARPER: If you do, please contact us. I want to get an idea of how many people you are dealing with through the group each year on average be it youth, particularly around child safety—parking the parental men's group and women's group.

Father Lowcock: We have a number of different things. We have a child and family centre which we run here in Mount Isa which has at least six people who are doing intensive family support. Most of them have to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to be funded. I can see the great value in that. Even upskilling them to be able to do it is a mammoth job. There is the child and family centre. There is the whole justice area. We have just been funded for a youth initiative. Our application was to take 10 youth males and deal with them for a year, connect them with intensive family support and other cultural supports, rather than just say, 'We will deal with youth who come through the court system.' They will be referred to us—from eight to 10 years old from the Queensland police and from 10 to 12 years old by Youth Justice.

Mr HARPER: Thank you, Father. I commend you and the group and the work that you are doing in the community. It is obviously invaluable.

Mr CRAMP: I want to touch on something you spoke about with regard to sharing across the agencies. I know the member for Thuringowa just spoke about that. When you were speaking about the emergency services and their differing viewpoints on suicide, for instance, it sounded like it is more of a coordination issue—coordinating information. Would you suggest that there needs to be some more discussion, making sure that the facts are right, before they share the information?

Father Lowcock: No. To me it is the ability to share. They claim they could not share. Under the DV legislation, people have been given specific ability to share between departments. The high-risk team means that they have someone from each department working as a team.

Mr CRAMP: Having worked in the ambulance for 14 years prior to this role and I worked a lot with statistics, I would be concerned if I had differing statistics, regardless of what the outcome is in patient condition, to my counterparts in the Police Service or even Health. Before I shared that information with community justice groups, I would want to make sure that my emergency services are at least in the same ballpark—that we have had that discussion before we release information. Would that be fair?

Father Lowcock: Well and truly. I am not against that. It is not even about the release of information. It is how people have tended to live in silos and how we can relate more across-the-board is the issue.

Mr CRAMP: Absolutely. I think that is a very important point. You mentioned DV before. I am happy for you not to answer this. This committee has done a lot of work around DV. We have travelled the state regarding that as well. One of the issues that has come up previously—and you have spoken about it—is the ability for the father perhaps in a family situation to have a say. How does that fit in from your organisation's point of view—that the father is a perpetrator of domestic violence and the wife is the victim?

Father Lowcock: It is quite simple for me. The law system is our problem. The legal system says, 'You are the victim. You are the perpetrator.' My experience says that domestic violence is 50-50; it is 70-30; it is 60-40. There is no one victim and no one perpetrator. Both are perpetrators and both are victims in the majority of cases that I deal with.

Mr CRAMP: That is in an Indigenous community sense?

Father Lowcock: Yes, even some of the others I deal with. I think that is the issue. The law says the woman is right—if I use that as an example—and therefore the male is wrong. Therefore, the male has to re-educate himself and nothing has to happen to the woman. The high-risk team now are starting to realise some of those issues and saying, 'We need to be dealing with both cases.' I had a number of cases where the man started to change his behaviour and the woman said, 'You cannot go to that anymore because you are being a different man.' They got into that pattern of relating the way they were. They are frightened about what it means for them.

Mr CRAMP: What about where the victim of domestic violence is the child and they have been physically assaulted by one of the parents? It could be either—it is not just about men. From your organisation's point of view, what say should be had in that situation? It is very difficult for you I know because, like you said, you do not represent the views and you cannot speak directly for Indigenous persons. Has your organisation had experience in regard to that and how have you handled that? Have you taken into account the perpetrator's viewpoint when dealing with children's custody?

Father Lowcock: I think it is really tragic that that happens, but it is not unusual—which is terrible. That is why I think intensive family support is really important when dealing with children—so that they are not just dealing with an adult but also dealing with the family and asking, 'What are the issues that have been created in the family?' How they deal with that in that intensive family support becomes really important to me.

Mr CRAMP: I have one more question but I will leave it that and come back to it as a supplementary if we have time.

Mr McARDLE: Mick, thank you very much for coming in today. It is much appreciated. You raised the question about the Northern Territory and Mount Isa and the distinction between those who live there and those who come to Mount Isa. We sit here and talk about pieces of paper that say, 'This will happen' and that will happen.' On reading that, it is a perfect world, but we have statistics from Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge and Doomadgee. We can make all the orders we want through any court we want. This is Far North Queensland. It is remote. How on earth do we supervise the final outcomes? How do we assess whether the orders are viable when we are covering vast distances and remote communities? These statistics, particularly in terms of school attendances, are not that bright. You raised the issue as well about kids not going to school. From your point of view, although we make the order, how do we monitor it in this far, remote regional area? I will ask the police a similar question later.

Father Lowcock: That is a good question. I do not really have a standard answer for that, if that makes sense.

Mr McARDLE: That is a pity.

Father Lowcock: I think one of the issues is that there needs to be an ongoing role. Say I pick up someone from the bus who comes out of Stuart. We just take them to wherever they are going, or put them on the plane tomorrow morning and they go back to Doomadgee or Mornington. In a sense, that is all that happens. To me, this ongoing role is far more important than just the end of what happens in terms of these orders.

That is why I was trying to say that we need to be positive about that 15- to 25-year age group, because that is a really vital time in people's lives. We need to have a positive plan for these people. We just get them over the hurdle, get them over this parenting arrangement, we give them a few little skills, but from my point of view there needs to be a long-term commitment to people. That is probably one of the reasons I stay.

Mr McARDLE: That is fine when you are living in a place like Brisbane, or maybe Mount Isa, but Aurukun is isolated. It is a small community. You cannot go very far. Coen is the same. It is hard for the father, or the mother, who is the perpetrator, shall we say, not to be involved with the family—it is almost impossible—without leaving the community, which is not what you want to achieve. With these permanent orders that go for any length of time until the child turns 18 years of age, how do you monitor that in those tiny communities, given your knowledge?

Father Lowcock: They are really complex. You take the community of Doomadgee, which has four traditional owner groups that we have to have on the community justice group. You have to make sure that they are all represented. They are very complex issues that I think the locals can only somehow answer and give you a completely different answer to this question.

There has been a review of blue cards. A lot of guys cannot get a blue card because of their previous history. We put in a submission to say that, for example, in Doomadgee, the local police, the magistrate and the local community justice group should be able to give a card to a person to say, 'Yes, you are fit to work' in their mind. I want to see an extension of that to Normanton and Mount Isa as communities of interest. We need to leave a lot of decisions to the local community rather than have a blanket decision made by the state. What happens at Aurukun, or Coen, I am not sure, because I do not know. I will probably have more of the best interests of what happens here, or at Camooweal, or Dajarra.

Mr McARDLE: You heard me ask Candice about the term 'self-determination'. You heard Candice state that it is one limb of many limbs that come to a conclusion. Would you say that, in these remote communities, it needs to be more that way—that is, self-determination? You raised the issue before about leaving it to the community to come to a conclusion. If you cannot answer, that is fine.

Father Lowcock: No, I just think it is very complex. I think it is one of a number of issues. I will give you an example from my point of view. When Century Mine was going, a number of people from Doomadgee, or Mornington, were highly paid. They fly in and fly out from Townsville now, because it is a free flight. You leave your community and you go and live in Townsville. It is a better lifestyle. You can go to the Cowboys. You can do all of these other things that you could not do if you were living in Doomadgee.

Sometimes communities have been depleted because of what has happened. To raise the level of awareness and decision-making ability of a community like, for example, Doomadgee is very complex. The shire council has a number of issues in its whole governance. For all of that, I need to take a long-term view all the time and say, 'That's our goal, but I don't think we are anywhere near it.'

CHAIR: Thank you, Mick. I want to come back to one of our comments about sharing information. I assume that you are funded by DJAG.

Father Lowcock: Yes.

CHAIR: You referenced information sharing. I am happy for you to say, 'I'm not across that.' The bill enables specialist service providers funded by the Queensland and local government to share relevant information with each other for a number of purposes. Is it your understanding that you would fall within—

Father Lowcock: In favour, yes, well and truly.

CHAIR: You would fall within the confines of the definition of a specialist service provider?

Father Lowcock: Yes.

CHAIR: Having looked at the bill—and I think you were referring to notes—you felt that that would make your role significantly easier and maybe the outcomes much—

Father Lowcock: Well and truly.

CHAIR: Were there any additional comments that you wanted to make?

Father Lowcock: I know that there are penalties if you misuse the information of two years imprisonment and 100 penalty points. I think that should be sufficient to say to people, 'You have to treat this deadly seriously.'

CHAIR: The reason I am focusing on this is that yours is the first submission that has focused on this area. Most people have been speaking to other areas. Are there any things that you think the bill should be going further in regard to, or do you think that this bill enables you to do your role in a constructive way?

Father Lowcock: I am not here to appeal for funding for the department, but when it says that some of these things are going to be introduced and there are finite resources within the department, it is not always possible to do that, in my mind. While the answer to your question is, yes, we would like to do things, I do not know whether there is always funding to do things.

CHAIR: This would assist you to be able to get more—

Father Lowcock: Yes, because I think sometimes we are just so reactive with the case loads that we have that we do not give a lot of emphasis to moving people forward who have moved forward. We let them fall off the radar until they come back at the back door again. I think it is really important to try to keep them moving forward. They have addressed a number of issues and they have a few more to address. We need to keep doing that with them. Sometimes it is hard.

CHAIR: Both the explanatory notes and the department advise the committee that particular amendments in the bill in regard to information sharing were really about simplifying and clarifying—to make it a bit easier for entities such as yours.

Father Lowcock: Exactly.

CHAIR: It is your sense that it achieves that?

Father Lowcock: Yes—I hope that it would, yes.

CHAIR: That is wonderful. Thank you so much for coming before the committee. We really appreciate it.

Father Lowcock: I thank all of you for making the big effort to be here.

HALL, Detective Acting Senior Sergeant David, Queensland Police Service

VOGLER, Detective Inspector Anne, Queensland Police Service

CHAIR: Welcome. David, I understand that you are the OIC at Mount Isa.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: Acting senior sergeant in charge.

CHAIR: Lovely. Thank you for coming before us. Would you like to make an opening comment?

Det. Insp. Vogler: I have not prepared anything at length. I am the new detective inspector in the Mount Isa district. I have been here for two weeks, hence I have brought along Dave for more local knowledge. Obviously, there may be some things that we cannot answer but we are happy to come back to you with those answers.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Det. Insp. Vogler: At the moment Dave is in charge of the child protection investigation unit. It deals mainly with juveniles and offences—that is, juveniles committing offences and offences committed against juveniles. Obviously, this is more his expertise. My role is overseeing the crime services, which is the CIB, which is the criminal investigation branch, which deals with adults, and also the child protection investigation unit. There are a number of other portfolios that I have. I am happy to answer any of your questions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. You are one of the important stakeholders in Mount Isa that the committee invited to come along so that we hear from the people who live here. You play an incredibly important role in terms of the dynamic nature of your relationship with families and communities but also the department of child safety. Thank you for coming along and talking to us. Maybe David will have more of a Mount Isa context. Where did you come from, Anne?

Det. Insp. Vogler: Hendra—in the middle of Brisbane. I am a long way away.

CHAIR: You are. Being the member for Nudgee, that is just outside my border. I know that area well.

Det. Insp. Vogler: Nudgee was my area as well.

CHAIR: Of course, and Hendra serves my electorate. Thanks for your service there, too. I will open with a question. I appreciate that this question maybe more to you, David. I would like to understand the local context. Would you like to give us a sense of child protection? You are aware of the bill. You have had a look at what the bill does broadly. What is your relationship with the department? How does it work? What is the dynamic nature of child protection here? It would be good if you could make a few comments and then we will open for specific questions.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: I can give a fairly broad overview of our issues. As Anne was saying, our role is for investigations. Obviously, we can identify numerous areas where we spend time as investigators dealing with youth. Our most prominent factor when it comes to juveniles, which was spoken about by Father Mick also, is the truancy issue. We think that is a massive issue, which we are addressing in our capacity. Also, VSM—volatile substance misuse—is an issue. Obviously, the flow-on effects of those two issues relate to crime. Property crime is a big issue in Mount Isa and it is generally committed by our youth—aged anywhere from eight through to 17, but generally around the 12-year-old mark. We have had offenders as young as eight and offenders as young as 10 go through our justice system.

We also have issues with kids out on the street in the middle of the night. Obviously, it is a community concern as well as a policing concern. The ages of those kids, again, vary from very young to teenagers. How do we address that? How do we work with other agencies to reduce the risk to those kids? We do that through our office through our SCAN—suspected child abuse and neglect. That is where it narrows down more to do with the bill with our information sharing through SCAN and the involvement of other agencies to achieve that goal.

CHAIR: Thank you. I certainly know that the police in Boondall in my electorate do a lot of work on the ground with local Indigenous groups around children being out and family work. It is really about trying to empower those local families and communities to make decisions in the best interests of the child. This bill puts a significant focus on trying to empower Indigenous and Islander communities to have an important say in what is happening with kids and where they are going. Can you talk from your experience about whether that is a key component so that we can get better outcomes in the best interests of children?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: I think we rely on the department of child safety to be that link with the families. We are quite limited in what we can do as investigators. We most certainly try really hard to engage with families. I think that we benefit from that as investigators and in having good working relationships with the families.

As Father Mick said, involving the father is an important thing, considering that the majority of our youth offenders are male. This is obviously a personal opinion, but I have created relationships with fathers to try to break down those barriers. They are very difficult barriers to break down, especially when you potentially could be incarcerating a child and we are generally seen to be the bad person. We definitely make attempts to increase our relationships with the family and break that down but, when it comes to the child protection side of things where offences are committed, we rely heavily on those external agencies to interact and engage with them.

CHAIR: Given that you have been called to incidents of suspected child abuse, or domestic violence involving a child and the safety of that child, what comments would you make about your relationship with Child Safety given that they would be immediately called in? Is information sharing working well so that it is working in the best interests of families that sometimes you have been called to repeatedly?

Det. Insp. Vogler: We have had a relationship with Child Safety for a number of years in relation to information sharing and usually it is when a child is at risk. We have that power to be able to have that information sharing with those departments. Can we do it better? That is something obviously we are working towards. The QPS is about building relationships with families and with the external agencies and also support services. Probably the biggest push we have seen is working with Father Mick and the support services that they provide.

Mr CRAMP: I have some questions about your role here. You talked about issues of curfew, drugs, theft and property damage. Are you talking about all youth in general? Is there a difference with the Indigenous community and how you deal with them? I know all kids do it, but I wonder how you deal with that? Were you speaking specifically about your role with Indigenous communities?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: The answer to the first part of your question is that the majority of youth offenders are Indigenous, yes. Therefore, our interaction is predominantly with Aboriginals and their families.

Mr CRAMP: You mentioned a very important issue, which is truancy and schooling. Father Mick brought this up before. From the police point of view, how important a factor is school attendance in terms of the behaviour of the children? Should whether parents can keep them at home and in school be an important factor in protection orders and who has custody of the children? How far would you go with that? We have had two different groups, yourself and Father Mick, mention that. Should school attendance become a factor in who has the child?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: That is probably a question that is a bit out of the scope of what we generally do. I think truancy is probably a No. 1 issue. Again, this is my opinion, but I think it should be a No. 1 priority. It can definitely assist in a multitude of social problems and it does not have to be Mount Isa. Who takes responsibility for that? That would have to come down to more planning within the Department of Child Safety and other agencies that get involved when it comes to the point of who is taking carriage of the child or custody of the child.

Det. Insp. Vogler: Mount Isa did an intelligence assessment of truancy for 2016, which I have. It is something that we do when we find a problem. When we identify a problem, we have our intelligence section conduct an assessment and do an analysis. Obviously in preparation for today, I have had a look at this. This is in 2016. This is not just Indigenous juveniles; it is all juvenile. Juvenile offenders commit 64 per cent of property offences within the Mount Isa division. A large number of those juveniles were identified as truant. Under 'enrolled at high school', one-quarter of the juveniles were not enrolled at school at all. For us to identify that as being an issue—

Mr CRAMP: There is some correlation there.

Det. Insp. Vogler: Yes.

Mr CRAMP: I recognise it is not within the police scope to turn that around and dictate that, but it is interesting to hear a police viewpoint in regards to it. I think those statistics are probably the answer I was looking for, to see if there was a correlation with making sure that schooling is a regular foundation for a young life and how that plays into the stability of the home life, as well.

Mr HARPER: Anne, I know you have been here for only two weeks, but no doubt you bring years of experience to the job. Dave, how long have you worked in Mount Isa?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: I have been here for two and a half years. When I was a uniformed constable, I worked both here and on Mornington Island. This is coming into my eleventh year as a detective in the child protection unit.

Mr HARPER: I do not mean to 'one up' the member for Gaven, but I spent 27 years with the Ambulance Service and I have done my share of work out here. You play an important role in the community. There is no doubt that it is a front-line role. You will go to those scenes, as do other emergency services personnel, but we are talking about working with the different agencies such as Child Safety and Father Mick Lowcock. Collaboration and information sharing are important to get the settings right and to have good case management around a particular family or child. No doubt you have the same issues that we have in Townsville. Are you familiar with Inspector Glenn Doyle from the Townsville Stronger Communities Action Group?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: No.

Mr HARPER: That is a whole-of-government approach endorsed by the government that does information sharing with Health, police, Education, Child Safety, obviously, and a range of others.

Det. Insp. Vogler: With SCAN we have always had that bit of an advantage to other agencies. With domestic violence, there have been legislative changes with the HRT, the high risk team, that we have here now, so that is happening more and more. Different agencies are actually in the same office, working together. That is something that we are hoping we will see a benefit from. It has just started, so it will be interesting to see the benefit that it brings.

Mr HARPER: I made some observations when I was first elected in 2015 and Father Mick Lowcock identified some silo approaches, but I think we are moving ahead in terms of sharing information and through things such as SCAN and the stronger communities groups. In terms of permanency care orders and such things, are there any issues that you would like to raise around the contents of the bill as it sits before us? Is there anything that stands out?

Det. Insp. Vogler: We are here to prevent crime and protect the community and work along those lines, but really we need to have support from the family and we need to be able to work with other agencies to do that. The information sharing and the permanency, as I heard Father Mick talk about, I see as being helpful for the child. However, you also have a family that is taking on a child. I can imagine their stress levels rise as well, every time they come up for assessment and things like that. I heard you talk about these great documents, but unless we put something in practice and unless we have people skilled to do this and to help us, it is just going to be a piece of paper. That is really what we need to do. I heard you talk about funding and such things. I could be incorrect, but the Department of Education representative is not in Mount Isa; is that correct?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: Yes, I believe one was centralised and went to Townsville. We do not have that representative here to counter truancy.

Det. Insp. Vogler: We are talking about truancy, yet we do not have a representative from education. I am not casting aspersions there, it is just a fact: we do not have them here and that is an issue. That is something that we have identified as a problem.

Mr HARPER: Dave, is there anything specific in the bill that you want to raise?

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: No, thank you.

Mr HARPER: Thank you very much for the role that you play. There is no doubt that there is lots of work to do in a complex space. Coming from an emergency services background, I appreciate the work you do in Mount Isa. Thank you both for coming here today, as well.

Mr McARDLE: You mentioned that an assessment done in 2016 showed that well over one-half of property matters fell to juveniles committing the crimes. Can you indicate how many of those juveniles had already a court order involving the Childrens Court or prior convictions and were reoffending or were subject to some sort of child protection order? This goes back to my initial point, which I referred to you, as well: how do we monitor the success of these orders? The current regime does not seem to be working. Is simply changing the paperwork going to make a difference to the outcome? Is there any way that you can indicate how many of those children had a current order of some form in relation to child protection?

Det. Insp. Vogler: I do not have that with me. We did look at this system in relation to children who are in out-of-home care. We have identified that 37 per cent have committed offences. That is just those in out-of-home care. In relation to that, of the children in out-of-home care who are reported missing, from 1 January 2017 there were 384 missing persons reports for juveniles.

Mr McARDLE: How many of those children have since been detected or returned?

Det. Insp. Vogler: This is for 20 individuals. There are only 20 individuals that we have looked at there. Those 20 individuals have been reported as missing persons 384 times.

Mr McARDLE: From where? From schools or homes?

Det. Insp. Vogler: That includes both. In relation to out-of-home care, there are two specific residences, East Street for boys and West Street for girls. We have that broken down. Of the male juveniles at East Street, there are 39 reports of missing persons since January. At the girls' residence there are 144 reports. We are saying that whilst those persons are missing are they victims or are they offenders? Missing persons is an issue for us because, whilst they are missing, are they using volatile substances? Are they being offended against, which obviously is a huge issue for us? Then you have domestic violence, so they may be involved in domestic violence situations, as well. A priority for us is the missing persons and why they are missing.

How we fix that is something that we need to look at. I do not have the answers for that. Obviously, that is something that has been identified. We are in the process of doing an analysis in relation to that, as well. Prior to you coming to Mount Isa, that had been identified and actually is in the process, but it is not a quick statistics gathering exercise. For myself and, I am assuming, the CPIU, missing persons is a great concern for out-of-care children, because they are high-risk children and they have issues, as well. We need people or facilities to support those children.

Mr McARDLE: One would assume, and let me know if I am wrong, that those 20 children would have an order of some sort for out-of-home care or are with a foster parent?

Det. Insp. Vogler: They are in out-of-home care. Some of these children will be at these facilities. There are other children who will be in other homes—kinship or other family homes—outside actual facilities.

Mr McARDLE: They could be across the community in a multitude of dwellings or living arrangements.

Det. Insp. Vogler: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: Given the content of the bill—which I think you are familiar with to a certain extent—how does the bill address that issue? The bill is to provide stability for these children. I accept the very high level of at-risk children. Does the bill address that issue? Do you know? Can you comment on that? Maybe it is outside your jurisdictional area.

Det. Insp. Vogler: Yes. I would not like to comment on that. It is a concern that we have obviously.

Mr McARDLE: It seems to be a concern that has been ongoing for a long time. Whatever we do in George Street in Brisbane, the result here is not the beauty of the words contained on the page. There are still multiple factors that need to be addressed. We are not looking at a reactive approach as opposed to a proactive approach. How you balance the two I do not know. Would you agree with that from a police point of view?

Det. Insp. Vogler: Personally?

Mr McARDLE: No, from a police officer's point of view.

Det. Insp. Vogler: From a police officer's point of view, it has been in that George Street area. It is very different to coming out here. I can say that from a personal perspective as a police officer things are very different here.

Mr McARDLE: Hendra is not quite Mount Isa.

Det. Insp. Vogler: No.

Mr McARDLE: How big is your land mass that the Mount Isa district covers?

Det. Insp. Vogler: We have 22 per cent of the state.

Mr McARDLE: You take into account Far North Queensland and remote areas as well?

Det. Insp. Vogler: We go as far west as Normanton, then to Mornington Island and down to Birdsville and Julia Creek.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: We go down as far as McKinlay to Kynuna in the south.

Mr McARDLE: It is a massive area.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: Julia Creek up through Normanton, Karumba and Mornington Island and all the way down to Birdsville including Boulia, Dajarra and Bedourie.

Mr McARDLE: It is a long time between drinks.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: Father Mick and you both raised the issue of fathers being pivotal to an outcome. That implies a couple of things. One is that in many cases dads do not exist anymore in families for various reasons and, secondly, Father Mick is trying to bring fathers back into the fold. Is that working? Am I right in that fathers are removed in a broader family sense—in a broader family sense of how it is used up here? Secondly, has it been successfully implemented that fathers are coming back into the family fold?

Det. Insp. Vogler: I cannot comment on that.

Det. Snr Sgt Hall: I think that would be out of our scope, the way we deal with families.

Mr McARDLE: Thank you. That is much appreciated.

CHAIR: Our time for questions has expired. Thank you both for attending today and for all of our witnesses who have attended and spoken to us so far assisting us in our examination of the bill. If we require any further information, we will certainly make contact.

Proceedings suspended from 12.03 pm to 1.50 pm

CHAIR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Before we start I request that mobile phones be turned off or switched to silent. I now declare this public hearing of the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee open. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet—the Kalkadoon people—and pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging.

I am Leanne Linard, the chair of the committee and the member for Nudgee. The other members of the committee here with me today are: Mr Mark McArdle, deputy chair and member for Caloundra; Mr Aaron Harper, member for Thuringowa; and Mr Sid Cramp, member for Gaven.

Today's hearing is part of the committee's examination of the Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill 2017. The bill was introduced by the Minister for Communities, Women and Youth, Minister for Child Safety and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence on 9 August 2017. The committee is required to report on the bill by 28 September 2017.

I will go through a few procedural matters before we begin. The committee is a statutory committee of the Queensland parliament and as such represents the parliament. This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require evidence to be given under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Witnesses have been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with a copy of the transcript. I remind all those in attendance today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate.

Given the sensitive issues in relation to child safety which may be raised during this hearing, I remind members and witnesses that their comments should not identify a child subject to the Child Protection Act 1999 or Youth Justice Act 1992. I am sure you will appreciate that this is necessary to protect children and ensure their privacy is respected. Comments should also not refer to matters currently before the courts.

I now warmly welcome the Injilinj Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Children and Youth Services. I know we have a number of representatives from the organisation. I would be most appreciative if you would introduce yourselves and your role within the organisation and then make some opening comments. Thank you for joining us.

AH WING, Ms Sondra, Youth Support Worker, Injilinj Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Children and Youth Services

BENNETT, Mr Marshall, Youth Support Worker, Injilinj Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Children and Youth Services

CUMMINS, Mr Gary, Youth Support Worker, Injilinj Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Children and Youth Services

FOGARTY, Ms Sharn, Youth Support Worker, Injilinj Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Children and Youth Services

Ms Fogarty: I am Sharn from Injilinj youth support services. I have been with Injilinj youth support for the last eight months. I am a youth worker, so I work on the ground with families. We work with kids from 12 to 18. We have to get special permission to work outside that age bracket with anyone over 18 or anyone younger than 12.

Mr Cummins: I am Gary Cummins. I work for Injilinj youth. I am a support officer. My work is pretty much the same as Sharn's. Our target group is between 12 and 18. To work outside these boundaries we have to seek approval from the funding body. We help the youth in any way we can. Our main focus of late seems to be helping them to re-engage in school or helping them to stop disengaging from school.

Ms Ah Wing: I am Sondra Ah Wing. I am a youth support worker with Injilinj. I work with young people who are disengaged and also with dysfunctional families. We are not just working with the individual young person who is referred to us but we also try to work with the family. That is how we can get greater outcomes. We are working in the areas of welfare and wellbeing. That covers a whole area—any needs that the young person is seeking. We are trying to turn their weaknesses into strengths and build them up through the family to help these families from being dysfunctional to being functional.

Mr Bennett: I am Marshall. I am a new support worker at Injilnji youth. I have been there for only three weeks. I am only new to it. I will be working along the same lines as the other three.

CHAIR: Thank you for each introducing yourselves. On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much for making yourselves available. The committee wanted to come to Mount Isa—and we are also travelling to Townsville and Palm Island—because this is so valuable to us to understand. We have the legislation and the explanatory notes for the bill, but to understand what is currently happening and why you would receive this bill well or whether you think it needs to be changed is incredibly valuable for us. We appreciate your time here. We will open it up for questions. Sharn, did you or anyone want to make any particular comments? I am not sure how familiar you are with the bill or what is proposed.

Ms Fogarty: I think that long-term custodianship is good. If it is monitored and the child is happy and healthy, then those long-term carers, whether they be kinship or family groups or not, should be offered to keep the child. The child will always know their mother and father. That line will always be open for them. If they are happy and contented where they are, why move them? If you have a plant and it is a growing well in great soil and then you take it somewhere else, it may have health problems or issues. It would be taking them out of a happy environment and putting them somewhere else.

For long-term issues such as parenting skills, where the parents are struggling, I think they should have a mentor—someone who helps them to learn better parenting skills and how to deal with stress and all of that before you put the child back there. Does that make sense? You are setting them up to fail—the child and the parent. I think there needs to be more supervision for a child's re-entry into the family unit with their mum and dad if there has been a history of family issues. The mother could have been a previous child safety kid herself. How is she supposed to have those parenting skills other than by someone teaching her? That is going to take a long time, not just watching her for two years. That is going to be for life. Adopt a mother—you can use that sort of system for young parents who are struggling. If they do not have the skills and they become parents and their kids get taken off them, they are going to need that support all the way. You cannot just abandon them once you give the child back to the parents.

CHAIR: Sharn, your comments are particularly around the permanent care orders that are proposed in the bill. In written submissions but also today that has been raised as a point of concern. We had a hearing in Brisbane last Thursday and there were other stakeholders who felt that these permanent care orders were a good idea from the point of view of children not being constantly moved and having short-term orders made rather than a permanent family environment created. I am very interested to know your comments around the two years. The bill proposes that at the two-year point a court could consider—they do not have to consider—a permanent order. Something I am grappling with is that for a child being given a constantly short-term arrangement two years seems to be a long time, particularly in a young child's life. You could see why it is proposed that you would want to give them more certainty. Can you tell me what you see on the ground? What is happening in those two years and why might more time be needed?

Ms Fogarty: From experience myself, I have daughters who have had kids at a younger age. They need guidance from a young age. They should be taught from babies. From babies till they are five, I believe those years are the most crucial years of a child's life. If you see a two-year-old and they have an older sibling at three or four, they will mimic them straightaway like that. If you walk around and you do something and you do not know that these little ones are watching you, five minutes later they are doing the same thing. I think they are the most crucial years. I have had two-year-olds and you say, 'One, two, three.' They listen and they copy. They feed off one another's actions.

It is about the environment. If it is two years, in that two years they should be supporting the parents to get help because they may seem like they are ready but their actions are showing that they are not. They are saying, 'I can handle them,' but when they do put them back in that care the parent turns to drugs because of depression or stress.

I think for that child it should not just be two years. If they are in good care, the two years could be extended, but it depends on how well the parent has changed their own life. If the parent gets their kid back, there always needs to be monitoring. If they have handled stress the wrong way before, they are going to fall back into the same habit. Like a reformed drunk or a reformed alcoholic or a drug user or a gambler, they are going to fall back into that habit.

CHAIR: Sharn, say a child has been in the department's care or under their watch for a period getting close to two years and groups such as yours have been working with the young people and the family, but there is no sign of improvement. Given that the act is meant to deliver services in the Mount Isa

best interests of the child and the outcome should be in the best interests of the child, what should happen then? What is in the child's best interests if, even after close to two years, their parents are still struggling and maybe it is not considered that is the optimal outcome? What do you think should happen to the child?

Ms Fogarty: I think the carer and the parent need to build a closer relationship. I myself was a foster carer. I had an eight-year-old. There are three sisters. Mum did not know what happened, what was going on. They always will fret. I had to stop the eight-year-old from wetting bed and stuff, because she did not know why she was taken away. All of a sudden they swept in. She had been failing at school and all that. The older siblings were actually picking on her. I sat the kids down and I said, 'Listen here, you are all kids and your sister is not accountable for something that her dad has done or another adult. You are siblings and you need to sort this out.'

It is about getting them to have that connection with the mum still. They told me that I could only ring up at certain times. I said, 'You're telling me to tell that child to switch off as a human being'. I said, 'I can't do that when she's feeling sad or lonely or upset and she wants to talk to mum because she's missing mum'. She could be thinking about a special time; I don't know. If she's feeling that, I'll say, 'Here's the phone, ring up, Bub'. She stopped peeing the bed. As a foster carer, I monitor and guide mum. I will say, 'This is what you need to do. You need to do this, this, this and this.' Mum still has a close relationship with those kids. Mum actually rings me up and calls me the second mum. I help mum in her parenting weaknesses, because I know that the kids will always look to her. That took a lot of one on one and telling mum things like, 'You have to do your food shopping. You can't just do this. Make sure the food is taken care of. Make sure they have beds. Make sure they are going to school.' It is about supporting her and for the kids to know that that support is there constantly. I think they should be integrating them and twining them together, instead of separating them.

CHAIR: Would it be fair to say that maybe the concern with the permanent orders is because of that loss of connection?

Ms Fogarty: Yes. They will have a connection always through kinship. If the kids are happy with the carer, they can entwine that child, who can then see that they can have more than one mum or more than one dad. In Aboriginal culture, my aunty is my mum. You have mum 1, mum 2, mum 3. That is the kinship system with the Aboriginal culture. It is about seeing them all get on. The kids probably played on it a bit, but if mum or dad did not give them what they wanted then they would go to mum 2. That is just a kid learning through the emotional instability that they are feeling.

CHAIR: The small conversational time that we have had—and I need to share the time with my colleagues—really assists me to understand the bill from the point of self-determination, which is a significant element of this bill, for Indigenous and islander communities. It is about empowering through the five key principles, including participation and connection. Those issues are really important. The model that we often consider if the home life is not in the best interests of the child is that you want to find a permanent arrangement. I appreciate what you are saying that maybe they cannot live with their mum and dad, but they can still live in close connection because there are other relatives or kinship arrangements that can work together. You were talking about significantly supporting the mum in that situation and guiding her. Is that the role of a foster carer, to be a support worker for the parent while taking care of the child? It is not the traditional role of a foster carer, but maybe in a kinship-type arrangement it is.

Ms Fogarty: Yes, in the kinship way it is.

Ms Ah Wing: I think that family arrangement and kinship care needs to be explained more clearly to some of our parents, because that is where some of the questions with some of the affected families arise, such as should we do a family arrangement; are we able to do a family arrangement; what is kinship care? How do we explain to them that there is a difference? We have to explain the kind of relationship they can have with their child who is being placed in care, how much quality time they can have with that child while they are building their support network to build their strength back up as a carer.

CHAIR: Who is responsible for having that discussion, do you think? Is it the department?

Ms Ah Wing: I find it very hard to go into Child Safety meetings and be the advocate for families. A lot of jargon is being spoken. I am breaking down the jargon for that family member who needs to understand what Child Safety is trying to put across the table. There is too much jargon. You have to break it down. Simple words can mean a lot and can hit the mother or the father who is struggling to keep their children. We have brought children back out of long-term care into families and we are still working with their families. There are service providers in communities that are still

working very hard for those children to be kept within that family. A mother may have given away the right to her children a long time ago when they were babies, she signed them away, but we are trying to do a reunification to bring those families back together, so that those children do know who their families are. We are not breaking that family link.

CHAIR: I have a million more questions, but I will allow the member for Thuringowa time to ask some questions.

Mr HARPER: Thank you all for being here. The role that you play in this space is vital. From listening, I am glad we are here. I am glad that the committee has travelled to hear from you. The cultural connection within the bill is explained. There is no doubt the importance of that connecting with families. We have heard from other submitters this morning about kinship in terms of long-term guardianship. You made a point about taking people out of long-term care and reconnecting with their families. What is the success rate? For how long has the group been established? I want to get an idea of how many people you are looking after in the Mount Isa community.

Ms Fogarty: A few. A lot of the kids we work with, even when I was in youth justice, are Child Safety children. It does not matter how bad the mum and dad are or what was going on, the kid would always go back for that connection to their parents. They would self-place, so they would go through that. When I was foster caring, those three children went through 20 different homes in six months. I said to Child Safety, 'You're doing more damage. Those kids are actually coming to me and saying they are regressing. They're ringing you up and letting you know anything.'

Mr HARPER: Having that permanency is really important?

Ms Fogarty: Yes.

Mr HARPER: I am so glad you bring that foster care experience to the table. I have family who are in foster care, albeit in another state, with five kids. I know the importance of having stability and certainty for those kids and giving them a loving environment and, at some stage, reconnecting when the families are ready. There is so much work to do with the families.

Ms Ah Wing: Last week I met a young girl who is 24 years old and has been in foster care all her life. She grew up in Brisbane and only knew Brisbane city. She came here. She has linked up with her older sisters. They knew about the younger siblings, but they did not know about the older ones. They only just met last week. She asked a question: 'Why didn't Child Safety let us know that we had these older siblings? Why didn't we know about this family that we had? Why was everything a secret?' In 2017, why is everything a secret still? It is not their doing that they ended up in care. It did not come from them. She is 24 years old and she is just meeting her older siblings, who are in their 40s. Those older siblings have spent all their lives out here, but she and her other siblings were brought up in Brisbane. I know we live in the same state, but through all these policies and procedures we are still separating our families. Some people grow up thinking that they have no family, but they have a big family.

Mr HARPER: Part of the bill identifies that we need to provide care up to 25, so we do not just cut them off at 18.

Ms Ah Wing: She told me, 'As soon as I hit 18, Child Safety did not give two hoots about me'.

Mr HARPER: It is an important aspect of the bill that we actually provide support.

Ms Ah Wing: That came from a young girl's mouth last week. I have just met her, because she came to Mount Isa to find her family. She is 24 now.

Mr HARPER: It is an important point to make. The aim of the bill is to give care until 25 years.

MS Ah Wing: She asked for her file when she left Child Safety and she was told no.

Mr HARPER: The bill also talks about information sharing, which is absolutely vital, so that people have a connection back to their families. I was going to ask about your success rate with families.

Ms Fogarty: We have had a few.

Ms Ah Wing: We are up and down. There are some good scenarios.

Mr HARPER: It is a really complex and challenging area.

Ms Ah Wing: We can support them for so long and then they can slip back and we have to start from scratch again and be that support team that the community people are reaching out for. We are trying to fill some small gap as a part of helping and working with the other service providers in the Mount Isa community.

Mr HARPER: That is to be commended. Prior to the election in 2015, I spent 25 years in the ambulance service in Townsville. Working with different agencies, you come across all sorts of things. This has opened my eyes to the different areas of complexity within Child Safety, youth justice and domestic violence. There is so much work going on. I commend you all for the work that you are doing. One of the worrying signs of the 2013 *Taking responsibility* report is that we had 9,000 Queensland children in Child Safety. We need to make sure that we get it right. We need to fix the framework in the legislation correctly. It has to be tangible and we have to make sure that it connects with the workers on the ground. We are here to get that ground-up approach. We are looking after over 1,000 kids in North Queensland, from Townsville out to Mount Isa. It is a huge complex challenging area. Thank you very much. I will save any other questions for later and pass on to other members.

Mr CRAMP: I would like to take a comparative view. This morning we have heard from another representative group and got some excellent information out of that. I will repeat some of the questions. I want to hear your viewpoint, because obviously you are very much at the coalface working with Indigenous families. Something that was brought up and something that the bill pays a lot of attention to is listening to the voices of the children, hearing their opinions and understanding them. If they are competent, regardless of their age, and we feel that we can get some value out of their input, then we want that. Does your group practice that? When you are speaking in situations where family issues are at stake, do you take into account the views of the kids? How does it work in the communities at the present?

Mr Cummings: Basically, you have to ask them their point of view. You just ask them why they are doing things. You get a general feeling about why they do not want to be home or whatever it is. Some of them might say, 'Home is worse than walking around the streets'; that type of thing. You have to ask them those questions and listen to them and get their point of view. That is the only way you can help them.

Mr CRAMP: Can that play into working with the family as a whole to make home life a whole lot better?

Mr Cummins: Yes, that discussion is had. If a child brings up something, that is what you have to do.

Mr CRAMP: I know that that may seem like an obvious question, but this committee is learning from people like you who deal with this every day. It is fine for us to sit here and read submissions and write legislation, but we have to hear from people about how the system is working. This legislation will go a long way to valuing a child's input. If there is an importance on the child's input, how will that affect relationships in the family unit? If the legislation says, 'We really value what that child has to say about their home life and who looks after them,' especially if it is a split family, or grandma or a grandfather is looking after them, or a second mum, or a third mum, how is that going to work in some of the communities, especially the remote communities?

Ms Fogarty: I think the kids will speak their mind. I am a foster carer of three children. If they feel that their voice is going to get them taken away, they are not going to say anything. If you say to them, 'We are not going to take you; we are going to work with you to help mum, or dad with Centacare,' they will then open up, knowing that there is not a threat of them being taken away from their parents, or that home.

Mr CRAMP: It is very much about trust.

Ms Fogarty: Yes, it is about trust. If there are issues with mum or dad, they tell us everything. They will speak their mind in front of mum or dad, or in front of us. You do not know the background of mum. For how many generations has mum suffered or fallen through that cycle of domestic violence? How do you know their history? I tell the kids, 'You need to find out.' I say to the parents, 'You need to talk to the children about your life and what happened. They are trying to work it out. You are not saying anything.' I think that is opening the door.

I call it the missing generation gap, because they are not talking to each other. You have the younger generation. I am pretty open with my kids. I tell them everything, whether it is good or bad. A lot of things were swept under the carpet. It is breaking that cycle where the kids are not feeling like they cannot gauge their parents, or the parents cannot tell them, 'I stuffed up.' We have had Child Safety and the parents were taken off them. That is one of the biggest issues. They have gone back to their parents. Then the kids are playing out on the streets. They are wild with mum or dad because, 'What? Didn't you want us?' We say to them, 'Speak your mind so mum or dad can listen.' We have become mediators, or counsellors for these families. We are getting them to talk to each other about issues that they have not spoken about. Since we have done that, we have a couple of families where the kids and the parents have become close.

Mr CRAMP: That is a good outcome.

Ms Ah Wing: Especially in our youth justice area. We go to the courts. Tuesdays is community and Wednesdays is Child Safety. We show our faces up there. We see if any young person does not have any support. We are there for them. If they have an adult with them, we try to make sure that the adult is supported to make sure that they are supporting the young person in court.

We also support the recommendations from the courts for their reporting. We have just started with community hours with our young people. I think we go beyond what is expected of us, but I think that is where we are making some good outcomes with a lot of our families. We are just building that trust and rapport first and sometimes that takes time.

Mr CRAMP: Sondra, you made a very interesting comment. You feel like you are stepping out further than what is required of you as part of your responsibility. One of the parts of this bill allows for the chief executive to pass on their role and responsibility to groups such as yours as authorised entities. As some submissions put it, it is not a box-ticking exercise anymore where you play a part; you are the authorised entity. You have the powers of the chief executive to not only oversee it but also take a lead role in making sure that families come together and that children are looked after, especially in Indigenous communities. When you step into that serious role, do you feel that you have responsibility, or do you feel as though you are authorised to have that responsibility?

Ms Fogarty: It is not authorised, but we have explained to our funding bodies that we cannot just work with a child and then put them back into the same situation. We have to mend the whole family for the wellbeing of that child. We ask mum, 'Have you sorted out what is going on here?' They may get wild at first, but then they will come back and say, 'Yes, I know what you mean.' Then you go back and revisit.

Mr CRAMP: Do you think that having authority and responsibility in the legislation will give you more confidence?

Ms Fogarty: I think that would build up the confidence with the families. One of their biggest fears is domestic violence. We know that the families will not go to those entities, because of the fear of their child being taken off them. They sit there and do not say anything.

Mr CRAMP: That is a very interesting viewpoint. In domestic violence situations, which, as we know, is rife across all communities in this country, unfortunately, you are saying that it may provide an advantage to groups like yours for them to have the confidence and trust that you are in control of the situation and that they might get some positives out of it and open up communication a bit more?

Ms Fogarty: Open up communication a bit more.

Ms Ah Wing: That is what happens when we are networking with other service providers for that one client when we do home visits. We have been asked by a couple of service providers in Mount Isa to give them a couple of tips. How do we do our engagements. We are just fortunate, being the people we are, to have special skills. Together, we make a great team. We can go out there and try to meet some of the welfare and wellbeing needs of these clients to create greater outcomes that they may never have had success with—'It failed before. Let's have another go through working with other people or services.' We can only do what we can do and we are trying to do it to the best of our ability. We have some really good engagements with our families. Families are trusting of us to help the situation. We have been fortunate that we have had some better outcomes than lesser outcomes.

Mr Cummins: I have found that not only the youth but also their families will open up to you if you give them the opportunity to show them respect and listen to them. It might not be the first or second time, but around about the third or fourth time they feel more relaxed and they are willing to discuss things. You have to have that consistency, too. You are seeing a different place every second week. They have to rebuild that trust all over again. Even with that communication, I have seen some people talk to them. You have to talk on their level. Some people talk to them as if they are a university student. It just goes straight over their head. They do not understand. You have to break it down.

Mr CRAMP: I think your groups are the most well placed to do that. You are the type of people who can relate to them. I think it takes years of practice for you guys.

Ms Ah Wing: If you cannot go out there and go to a family, do not be in an engagement position. Nothing is going to happen. You are not going to get any outcomes. You have to be able to build up that rapport with a family and be able to have that family give you back something. They have to give us something that we can work with. When you are sitting around with a young person and the family and then all of this truth comes out, then you start working with that truth.

Mr CRAMP: Thank you.

Mr McARDLE: Thank you for coming in today. I appreciate your words of wisdom with regard to Mount Isa and the surrounding area. The permanent care order has been raised now on many occasions. The child protection peak used the phrase, 'presents harrowing echoes of the Stolen Generations.' They are their words, not mine. That is a very strong, emotive statement to make. You do not agree with that? I am not trying to trick you.

Ms Ah Wing: I just lost my stolen generation mother in July.

Mr McARDLE: My sincere condolences.

Ms Ah Wing: We put her story together. She told her story. It was very sad—a frightened little girl being taken away. We are still trying to link back to family. Even though the government tried to break all of these links, somehow, some way, we are slowly building the chain back. We are putting back the links. We do not want that to happen again. We do not want another stolen generation.

Mr McARDLE: That is my point. They are not my words; they are the words of the child protection peak. They do not like the primary permanent care order. The words that they used implies that it could lead to a second stolen generation. I apologise for bringing up those very sensitive matters, but it is something that has to be explored by the committee. I got the sense, Sharn, that you do not share that perspective. Is there something that you are concerned about that would link into that historically?

Ms Fogarty: No. Some families themselves will admit in the kinship group, 'I can't handle them. Can you take them?' It has been for generations that they have left the kid with nanna, but that connection is there. Mum can come and go whenever, because they know where that child is. With the stolen generation, they took them and put them in institutions. It is a different scenario.

Mr McARDLE: That is absolutely right. The legislation also uses the term 'self-determination' as being part of the process to protect and provide for the best for the child or children, as the case may be. Does self-determination to you mean that a child is better with the kinship group as opposed to a court making a definitive order on a permanent basis about whom a child should live with? Is it up to the group to decide that? Is that self-determination from your perspective?

Ms Fogarty: Yes, self-determination. The child themselves will say that they want to be with grandma. That is across-the-board with anyone. It is not just Aboriginal—

Mr McARDLE: Exactly.

Ms Fogarty: They will pick out of their family who is their favourite uncle, who is their favourite auntie, who is their favourite cousin. If their home life is better over there, they are going to go to that, because that is where they feel safe. It is not just the kinship; it is the wellbeing, because we are all human. It is where the emotions do not change. If they feel safe there, that is where they are going to stay.

Mr McARDLE: You feel that self-determination as a term gives a greater say to the Indigenous population of this nation and the child to say where the child should reside as opposed to leaving it up to a court to make that determination? I am just trying to clarify that.

Mr Cummins: I would agree with that.

Mr McARDLE: You made a very interesting point, Sharn. At the very start of your submission you said that you need to monitor the response. One of the concerns that I have is that we have very remote Indigenous communities right across Queensland generally, but certainly in Far North Queensland. There are small populations with large gaps between them. You cannot simply have a mother or a father leave a community as you could in Brisbane because there is nowhere to go. How do you monitor the outcome of these types of orders? I would like to understand.

Ms Fogarty: When I was at Youth Justice and I had to work with kids, I would ask the child who is the person they talk to the most, who is their favourite. I would ask, 'Who do you talk to?' They would say, 'Nana. When I go through anything I don't go to dad or mum. I don't tell them anything because they go off their head, so I will go to nana,' or 'I will go to Uncle Charlie.' I would zone in—this is how I did it at Youth Justice—to the one that they had the special connection with and I would get his approval or her approval when they would not do their orders.

Mr McARDLE: There is an innate sense within the child as to who to go to for safety.

Ms Fogarty: For safety, yes. Then I would build on that. Because the child would not want to disappoint that person, I would then say, 'If you don't follow this order, do you want me to let Uncle Charlie know that you are not following the order?' They would say, 'No, no. I'm doing it now.'

Mr McARDLE: Gary, you raised the issue of re-engaging in school. That is right. You are the third person here today who has made the comment about truancy being a major problem in Mount Isa. There are statistics available for Aurukun, Coen, Doomadgee, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge through the FRC. What they are showing me is that school attendance notices—when a child does not attend school in that area—keep going up as the years go by: in 2013-14, 1,900; in 2014-15, 2,400; in 2015-16, 2,500. That is just in those communities.

Education we know, Gary, is the pinnacle. It is the pivot point for everybody in our society. We can have all the court orders we want, whether you live here or in Mount Isa, but if you are not going to school they are not worth the paper they are written on. That is why I am looking at the issue of how do we make this monitoring so successful because, if these kids are not getting an education, I am sorry it does not matter what we do in George Street—it does not make a blind bit of difference. Are we are looking at the rear end—we are being reactive and not proactive? I see those figures as very concerning. I think you would confirm that education is the pivotal issue to deal with.

Mr Cummins: That is right. We need education. Everyone knows that. We need to look at the beginning and be proactive straight up. It needs to start from birth. Before you were talking about long-term care, if they are in long-term care and it is working, why change? I, too, do not want to get into a situation of the stolen generation again, but communication and record keeping nowadays are a lot better than what they were. You could keep that child in contact with their families. If you take them out of long-term care and put them back into that family environment, you get that eagle effect. That is what you do not want. They go straight back into the same old groove. That is what we were talking about before. What we are doing now is not working. As I said, long-term care, if it is working, why change?

Mr McARDLE: What do you mean by 'long-term care'?

Mr Cummins: You were talking about that before.

Mr McARDLE: Are you talking about permanent care orders?

Ms Fogarty: Yes, permanent care orders.

Mr Cummins: Permanent care, yes. You have to let them know where they come from. You have to let them know their grassroots and who their family are. We need them to do that. As I said, even the different entities need to work a bit better on communication with the families. A lot of families do not know what is happening.

Mr McARDLE: A permanent care order is made by the court but only the director of litigation can make an application to vary an order and only in very limited circumstances. That means a parent—and I use the word 'parent' in the wide sense that it is used in your community—or a child has no right to make an application to the court themselves. For example, if circumstances change and the child believes that they should now go back to their parents, they cannot go directly to a court and seek a review of a permanent care order; nor can a parent go to the court and seek a review of a permanent care order. The only person who can is the director of litigation and only in very specific circumstances tied into the foster carer. Do you have an opinion on whether a child or a parent in those circumstances should have a right to seek a review of an order down the track of their own volition?

Mr Cummins: I think that goes without saying.

Ms Fogarty: Yes. I think if they feel they are ready.

Mr Cummins: People do change.

Ms Fogarty: People do change if you give them a chance.

Mr Cummins: People turn corners.

Ms Fogarty: That is part of their self-identity, their connection.

Mr McARDLE: That is it, isn't it, being part of a kinship group? Kinship is being who you are and being with who you are.

Ms Fogarty: Yes. We have kinship groups but you have ancestry.com. Every nationality looks for their kinship group. You just do it in a different way. You all look for self-identity, your genealogy, your bloodline, your family ties—whether it be an Irish connection or an English connection or a Scottish connection.

Mr McARDLE: Thank you very much kindly. Thank you for your time.

Mr HARPER: New Zealand.

Ms Fogarty: Yes, New Zealand.

Mr HARPER: Someone has to fly the Kiwi flag!

CHAIR: I have two quick supplementary questions because our time with you is so valuable. Firstly, are people willing to enter into kinship arrangements or do you struggle to find people in community who will do that?

Ms Fogarty: I think if you have kinship arrangements outside the community—we are working on something now with Kalkadoon because of the dynamics of the different families and communities we deal with. We have some Doomadgee here. Some in the community do not drink. I have a cousin who has never touched a drink in his life and his wife. Because of the dynamics of the family, they are too close. They have been foster carers but then there is family feuding and fighting. If they take the child to other family members outside the community, the community can then take the parents and say, 'Let's go fishing. Let's go and sit down,' and help them through the healing process and say, 'What you are doing is affecting the child.' You have that child in a kinship arrangement where you can take the parents and say, 'Look, you are scaring them, so we're taking them back this way.' When the parents can actually see the process and how their behaviour is affecting their child, it hits harder.

CHAIR: Are people willing to do it, though?

Ms Ah Wing: I would like to answer that one. I was working for RAATSICC a few years back now. That is what we were doing. We did not want that child to be removed from the community, so we would go and look for an appropriate, responsible carer. Maybe they were already caring for 10 kids, but we would see if they wanted another one or we would find someone else who was still connected to that family to take that child out of those circumstances, put them somewhere positive and then we could start working on the parents so that one day that child can go back into the home. We did look for responsible, appropriate adults in the community. If it was not meant to be then we had to place them in Mount Isa.

Ms Fogarty: There is family in Mount Isa.

Ms Ah Wing: We did find them. We were fortunate enough that we were able to find those responsible, appropriate carers in the community where we did not have to take that child out of that community.

Mr Cummins: I think in the majority of cases kinship care is already taking place. That is what is happening here and at Doomadgee and on Mornington—wherever. Uncle and aunties or grandma are looking after kids.

Ms Ah Wing: That is why we can be proud that the family unit can still be strong whatever that family consists of. That family unit can still be strong with mum, dad, aunty, uncle and all the siblings.

CHAIR: That is a strong message that is coming across. That would be a problem if you wanted them to stay in community and people were not putting their hands up, but you are saying there are people.

Ms Ah Wing: That is right. You might have to look outside that family but still look in that community so that we are not bringing them to Mount Isa like what happened years ago. We are still doing it. There are still children coming in from those areas and coming into homes and, if they are Indigenous, they are losing their identity because they are going into non-Indigenous homes. These are the things that we have to think about. What is the loss? If they are an Indigenous child, how much do they lose when they go into non-Indigenous families? How much do they lose? Is it weighed up at the end when they turn 18 or 16 or whatever?

CHAIR: I have one more supplementary question and I think the member for Gaven has a clarification. As I said, we could keep you here all afternoon.

Ms Ah Wing: We could talk all afternoon. We are just getting warmed up now.

CHAIR: We love it. I would love some context from you. The bill inserts additional principles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children—which I know would be very supported by you—around connection and participation and having a say, the community choosing. The wording in one of the elements in clause 7 is that 'the principle ... that a child and the child's parents and family members have a right to participate, and be enabled to participate, in an administrative or judicial process for making a significant decision about the child'. A question I have always had is that, if a decision were being made about either of my boys, I have to be honest and say that I would want my husband and me to make that decision in isolation. They have grandparents, but my way of thinking is that we would make that decision. Is it clearly understood in a community who those significant others would be who should have a say?

Ms Ah Wing: I think so, around the circumstances of why that child has been removed in the first place.

CHAIR: Could there be tension because someone might say, 'I want to have a say too,' and the parents might say, 'Well I actually don't think you should have a legitimate say.' How does that work in practice?

Ms Fogarty: We were told that a kid can pick a character. With our families, if the kid wants to go with an uncle—they will choose themselves. You might say, 'I want you to go with my family,' but they might choose your husband's family. It is because they want to go. To me a child will let you know who the person is that they feel safest with, besides you.

CHAIR: In a judicial process, you think the child should be the one to say, 'This person is significant to me. It might be because they own the corner shop and I visit them every day and they know me and they talk to me.' So the child should be the person who says who are significant others?

Ms Fogarty: You would be able to pick it if your child felt uneasy with a certain relative. Does that make sense?

CHAIR: It does make sense.

Mr CRAMP: This question is open to all of you. The member for Caloundra, Mr McArdle, was talking before about long-term care orders. This bill proposes to put in what is called a permanent care order. I just want to clarify something with you. I spoke this morning to the peak body, the previous submitters. The current system allows for long-term guardianship, which is what currently happens, where they are placed with a family member or kin. Should the child or the parents seek to vary that, they do currently have the right to seek variance to that arrangement through the courts, to the best of my knowledge. The new system—the permanent care order—will take that right away. I asked this same question of the group this morning: does the current system work? You like the fact that there is a longer term perspective for the children. They can stay with whoever they want, but should they choose to change that they can go and live with aunty or then go back to mum and dad—obviously with groups like yours and the courts checking that that is all above board and proper. Just so you know, the current bill proposes to remove that right under a permanent care order and only the director of litigation will have that right.

Mr Cummins: I think they should still have that opportunity.

Ms Ah Wing: Is there going to be—

Mr CRAMP: This is what I want to clarify. Do not be alarmed. This is why we have come here. It is not gospel yet. This is the very reason we come to these areas because we like to hear from people like yourselves. Please correct me if I am wrong, but are you saying that the current system works where you do have some permanency but you have the ability as a child or a parent or kin to make variance to whatever the arrangements are. Is that right? You are happy with the current system where the family and the kin do get input?

Ms Fogarty: Yes, because the family themselves are the ones who see the changes or the effect on that child. Someone else making a decision above that—

Mr CRAMP: Someone in the kin under a permanent care order would be able to make application to the Director of Litigation, but if the office chose not to pursue that you would have no right. Do you think that is appropriate? That is where the comments were coming from.

Ms Fogarty: I think it is wrong.

Ms Ah Wing: If this is going to come into play, will any agreement be put into place in regards to the connection? Is support going to be there for the parent who has the child taken away? Will there be some kind of reconnection? We are going back to the stolen generations.

Mr McARDLE: Please, do not take this as being a severing of relationships. That is not the case.

Ms Ah Wing: We need to work on this together. We need to work hand in hand on this.

Mr McARDLE: There will still be that obligation to ensure parents have contact and work together under the permanent care order. There will be no stolen generation.

Mr CRAMP: No, nothing like that.

Mr McARDLE: I want to make that very clear.

Ms Ah Wing: We need to close all of that gap.

Mr CRAMP: It is just a particular way to vary it.

Ms Ah Wing: We still have these big gaps in regards to our children being placed into care. How do we close those gaps? We have to close them somehow.

Mr McARDLE: The permanent care order would never stop that contact from taking place, as I understand it. It will simply mean that the permanent care order—

Ms Ah Wing: I am sorry for voicing my opinions.

Mr CRAMP: No, that is great. This is exactly what we want.

Mr McARDLE: You need to tell us what is what. It will simply allow a parent or child, down the track, of their own right to seek to vary the order. The current arrangement will also stay in place. Permanent care orders are on top of what we have.

Ms Ah Wing: I do agree that if that child is not getting cared for or looked after, that child needs to be removed out of that terrible situation. We have to protect our children.

Mr CRAMP: Absolutely.

CHAIR: To add to the deputy chair's very good clarification, the legislation actually requires that should a permanent care order be the chosen option, and long-term guardianship is another option, the court has to be satisfied of connection and participation. In fact, there is a special limb just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, which I think is very important.

Ms Ah Wing: Because we have to keep that connection.

Mr CRAMP: Absolutely.

Mr McARDLE: I make the point that the department will not be making determinations themselves. It will be after a full and extensive hearing of all of the evidence by an independent body to come to a conclusion. It is not a matter of simply snaffling everything. It is the issue of the right to seek a review down the track, which is an inherent right that exists in most jurisdictions in this nation. That was the critical point.

Mr CRAMP: I apologise if my question caused alarm. My understanding is that you would like the current system where you have the long-term guardianship orders and then the PCOs are another level on top, but the one thing that we are missing is the right of the parents and the child to make a variance without the Director of Litigation coming in. I have enough to go on from that. The groups we have spoken to today seem to say that the current system could vary, but probably not to where a permanent care order is. Under the current system, kin and parents and children still have a say.

Ms Ah Wing: As I said, families are getting confused with family arrangements and kinship arrangements.

Mr CRAMP: That is a valid point.

CHAIR: Sharn, Sondra, Gary and Marshall—we went lightly on you, Marshall, but we will come back when you have been here for longer than three weeks—thank you very much for your input. You can see that we all appreciated it.

MOSS, Mr Matthew, Senior Worker and Cofacilitator, Men's Program, Respondent Court Worker, North Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Resource Centre

CHAIR: Matthew, thank you for coming and sharing your expertise with us. Would you like to make some opening comments about what you do and your knowledge of the bill in this particular area? Then we will open for questions.

Mr Moss: I am the senior worker at the domestic violence service. I have been working there for the past seven or seven and a half years as cofacilitator of the men's program. We help men work on their issues around domestic violence and how they can change. I am also the respondent court worker, so I see the men at court, I talk to them about the court process, explain to them what the issues are, whether they are in breach and how they can change their behaviour by coming into a program and learning a bit more, and the effects of their behaviour on their children. I have also been a foster-carer for 20-odd years, so I have a bit of experience there.

CHAIR: Matthew, do you know much about the bill? Have you read it?

Mr Moss: I read it last week when I was invited here. I am not 100 per cent clear on it, but I have had a bit of a read through it.

CHAIR: Are there any particular comments that you want to make in regard to things that you thought were very good or areas of concern generally?

Mr Moss: The main concern that I have is the language used. Most of us, being educated, have an understanding of the language and how it works. However, for the clients that Child Safety are working with or people coming in to care, you really need to break down what it means. For example, does permanency of care mean you follow through on everything or is it permanent care? Language can be disconcerting sometimes. It can also be misconstrued. If people think that they have lost their child, what is the point in working with the department to try to get the child back or doing things that they think will support them?

Also, the length of time that the child is gone can be a little disconcerting for some parents. When I was fostering, there were a lot of issues around kids who were not from here being placed here and then getting visitation rights or getting some sort of connection back with the family, which was really difficult for them. I have looked after some non-Indigenous people who had to be brought over from Townsville, because the situation over there was too volatile for them and they could not hang around or whatever. They brought them all the way over here, which to me does not make a lot of sense, but that was deemed to be a better idea for them.

Working through the after-care packages and things like that, some of the kids are aware of it and they get it; others do not. A lot of kinship carers are not supported to the point that foster carers are. They do not get enough finances. They are not paid the same. There is not as much support for training. Maybe it is considered not necessary to give them that information and pass it on or maybe it is just not considered necessary because it is kinship carer rather than a foster carer; I do not know. There does not seem to be consistency.

When is an appropriate time for being out of care? Is it when they are considered to be an adult? Legally, when is that? Is that 17, 18, 25? What is the definition and where does that fit? With self-determination, whose definition do they go by? As you were saying earlier with the panel, if you are taking away their right to alter or change their care, where is the self-determination in that? They cannot come to you and ask for it to be relooked at or changed or anything else. As you said, only the litigation director can do that. Where is the self-determination for the family or the child?

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Matthew. I invite the member for Thuringowa to ask questions, and then we will continue down the panel.

Mr HARPER: Thank you, Matthew, for coming in today and sharing that with us. You have spent 7½ years—

Mr Moss: In the DV service, yes.

Mr HARPER: How many people would you look after in that men's group who, you believe, might have a child in the child safety area?

Mr Moss: I would say 75 per cent. A lot of them come through and they have children. Some of them are currently going through Child Safety. Some of them have previously and things like that. It just depends on the circumstance, yes.

Mr HARPER: As I said earlier, it is a really challenging and complex area to get that cultural connection back to the family. I think the bill seeks to do that. The context of the bill is different according to how people read it. You raised that issue. What does 'self-determination' really mean, or permanency care? Are there any other aspects of the bill that in your mind we need to turn our attention to?

Mr Moss: As I say, I have only just looked at it in the last week. I have not gone into it in depth. The important thing is, as I said, the after care. I notice that it says that that can be from 15 onwards. If you are taking a child into care until they are an adult, where does that finish? As I say, is it 17, 18, or 25 that they are considered a youth?

Mr HARPER: It used to be 18, but the intent of the bill is to go to 25. A lot of feedback that we get from people who are transitioning out of foster care, or transitioning out of Child Safety, is that we need to give them more support as they enter into their young adult lives and move on. Thank you for that. You are not the first one who asked to simplify the language in the bill to make it easier to read. I take that as a comment. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr Moss: No worries.

Mr CRAMP: Thank you, Mr Moss, for coming in. It is very much appreciated. You mentioned looking after children in care, especially as they get older and transition out of care from 15 or 18 right up until they are 25, which this bill proposes. You are the men's coordinator for domestic and family violence. I experienced domestic violence as a child. I was very fortunate to get out of that and not repeat it. If children are left to their own devices, there is a concern among some groups that they repeat the actions of their father. Is that something that you have seen? Without going into any detail, I am more interested to know if you think that programs running for young men up until they are 25 might get them out of that pattern. I wondered if that is the case.

Mr Moss: Definitely. From I have seen over the years, domestic violence is a learned behaviour. They grow up in it. They see it all the time. It is considered normalised. It is the default that they fall back to. If they do not have good coping skills, if they do not have good negotiation skills, if this is what they have learned, their default when they get angry, upset, or just stressed to the point that they do not know what to do with themselves anymore is they tend to lash out. By giving them these other tools, by giving them these skills, they are able to make better choices where they can prevent or stop their domestic violence. If children are given those skills and grow up outside of that, they can learn that there are different ways.

Mr CRAMP: From hearing you speak, it seems to me that groups like yours may be well placed to play a pivotal role in assisting young men from an educational point of view—or are you just there after the issue occurs? Do you run proactive prevention programs already? Is that something that you can see happening if this legislation is enacted?

Mr Moss: It is something that we could do. We do not do it at the moment. We are more reactive. Unfortunately, with funding constraints and everything else, it is more or less as it is happening. They go to court, they go to Child Safety, and then they are sent to us as the preferred provider in town. We are the only one doing men's behavioural change. We get the men here. We go through the program with them.

Unfortunately, with Mount Isa being transient, a lot of people will do the program and then they will leave. There is no follow-up. There are no supports for them. For those who stay in town, we can give them those extra supports or, after the program, get them to continue and see us one on one and do a bit more work with them and work through how they can fit with the family and get other services to support that.

Mr CRAMP: The reason I asked that question is that, as the deputy chair touched on earlier, it is fine for us to put these words in place but without that action at the coalface, they are just words. My point was to see that practicality coming out of this legislation. Thank you very much.

Mr McARDLE: Mr Moss, thank you for being here this afternoon and for being patient.

Mr Moss: No worries.

Mr McARDLE: I am interested in what you do as a court worker. What does that entail?

Mr Moss: When men are going to court for a domestic violence application for the first mention—

Mr McARDLE: As a respondent to the application?

Mr Moss: Yes. My job is to meet them at court, have a talk to them about the court process if they do not understand what it is, let them know what their options are when they go into court and see if they are interested in doing a program with us. It is called an invention order.

If they are interested, we make an appointment with them. If they are not and they want legal advice, we try to line them up with a duty lawyer, who is present at the time, or explain what the process will be in court. When they come out of court, we try to find out what happened with them. I do not go into court with the respondents, but we have somebody working for us who goes into court with the aggrieved. As she comes out she usually lets me know if the order was made or not, in which case I will ask the respondent if they are interested in me explaining what happened. Even without being in court, if they have the order, then I can explain to them, 'This is for five years. This is what it means,' what conditions did they get and explain to them a little bit what that means—that no contact means exactly that: no contact. It does not mean that, if she rings, it is okay.

If they come over and do the men's program with us, then they have already had that contact with me. It is a little bit easier when they come over and visit the service that they have seen me. We can sit down and talk. We start to talk about their behaviour, what they have done and what they understand is domestic violence. That is my role.

Mr McARDLE: You would be involved very early in the court process in advising these men and offering help and assistance. How many men would have on your books at any point in time?

Mr Moss: It varies. I deal roughly with, say, 90 a month.

Mr McARDLE: They are not new clients a month?

Mr Moss: No. As I say, it varies. Sometimes with people coming through the court, it is only once while they are at court. They are not interested in anything else. That could be anywhere between five and 20 a month. We do not get a lot of respondents at court, which is an issue, but we would like to work with the police if we can and get a few more. I am not sure if you know the circuit for Mount Isa. We get a lot of out-of-community courts for domestic violence, because when a domestic violence application is made it has to hit court within five days, otherwise it gets thrown out. The outlying communities all get sent through—

Mr McARDLE: Sorry, could you say that again? If they are not dealt with within five days, it is thrown out?

Mr Moss: Yes. Once an application is made, it has five days to be heard in court, otherwise they cannot process it.

Mr McARDLE: That is a domestic violence application?

Mr Moss: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: Can I just clarify that for me, if you do not mind, just out of curiosity? Which courts do that in this jurisdiction?

Mr Moss: All of them.

Mr McARDLE: If it is not dealt with in five days, the court throws it out?

Mr Moss: Yes, because it cannot be processed. That is in the legislation, as far as I understand it. That is what I was told. What happens in the outlying communities, because it is on a court circuit and sometimes they do not get around for a couple of weeks, they send everything to Mount Isa. We hear from Doomadgee, Mornington Island and everything else. It is heard in Mount Isa within that five-day period and then they can make a temporary order until he goes around on circuit.

Mr McARDLE: The bulk of your clients would be Mount Isa based?

Mr Moss: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: You offer the help and assistance that you can, if they seek it, and, if at all possible, you try to get them into other streams of help and assistance—alcohol, drugs, housing, health and those sorts of issues as well?

Mr Moss: Yes, that is correct.

Mr McARDLE: Is your scope to try to get, not a reconciliation, but an understanding by the male as to what they have done and how they can help themselves to reconnect—not partner again—with their children, or their life?

Mr Moss: Yes. Our whole focus is the safety of women and children within that, but it is all about men taking responsibility for what they have done, their behaviour, their choices and how they can change.

Mr McARDLE: We have heard evidence here today that domestic violence is a major issue right across Far North Queensland and, indeed, right across the state. The men who come through Mount Isa are based here get that help. What happens in places like Aurukun, Coen, Doomadgee and the like? Is this sort of service available to people in those regions?

Mr Moss: Save the Children have just got funding to do programs within the gulf.

Mr McARDLE: For domestic violence matters or in regard to children?

Mr Moss: No, in domestic violence that men have perpetrated—change programs. Previously, there has not been anything other than if they came into town, or we could go out and give a service presentation and that sort of thing, but no actual program within the community.

Mr McARDLE: Do you know where they are funded to go into? If you do not know, that is fine.

Mr Moss: Yes, they are supposed to be doing Doomadgee, Burketown and Mornington Island, as far as I know, with a men's behaviour change program—this is Save the Children. As well, there may be scope for other stuff, but they are funded for those areas.

Mr McARDLE: Is it a trial project at the moment, or fully funded for three or four years?

Mr Moss: It is fully funded for five years, but they have only just got the funding. They are working on getting staff, getting everything organised and getting a program that they can take up there.

Mr McARDLE: You have heard me ask other people who have been in your spot about the issue of monitoring. That is a real concern to me. I live in Caloundra. People have access to wonderful facilities right across the south-east corner. You do not have that here in many ways. What facilities would you need to have in place here in addition to what you have to see if these orders are functioning? The figures that we are seeing indicate real concerns with truancy from school. Also, domestic violence orders are going up every day of the week. What would you like to see if these orders are effective?

Mr Moss: The child safety order or a domestic violence order?

Mr McARDLE: Yes, child safety.

Mr Moss: If the child protection orders go through, there needs to be a bit more support for the families. It is no good just taking the child out and putting them somewhere if there are no supports there. If they are doing it at home—truancy and everything else—they are going to do the same thing wherever you send them. I know that, when I was fostering, kids would come to me and they are not interested in school. There is so much drama going on for them at home. Now, they have just been ripped out and they have done whatever and they are in the legal system themselves. Having been removed from home without having some sort of transition there, or support for them, they just get dumped into a new family.

Mr McARDLE: You also made the comment about the language in the bill. You need to be a High Court judge to read some of this language to understand it. For example, on page 34 it says—

Subsection (5B) applies if the litigation director or the child applies to—

(a) vary or revoke a long-term guardianship order for the child.

...

Section 59(1) (a) and (e), (6) (a), (7) and (8) does not apply to the application.

That sort of language to an ordinary person is almost indecipherable. My concern is that when departments or governments or whatever colour go out for consultation, they do this. That is wonderful for George Street, or if you are on the Supreme Court bench, or if you are a barrister, or if you are a member of parliament. My concern is that people do not understand the true implications of what has been told to them. I have heard that today. Those who were here before you clearly did not have a full understanding of what the bill implied. That worries me, because if you do not understand the terms of the bill, how then do you give proper feedback of how it impacts on you? Would you comment on that?

Mr Moss: I think it is really important that the language does try to simplify it, because the people who are going to take it out onto the coalface and work with the clients need to be really sure of what they are doing. As you say, the language needs to be clarified. If you are going to work with a client, they need to know the simplest way that they can do what they are doing. I know when we deal with a lot of men going through the program, they are not educated to equal standards as some other people who might be in group. Instead of breaking it off and saying, 'You guys have to do this and this', we try to bring the language down so that everybody there gets the same feed. It does not matter how much their education is improved or missing, everybody is getting the same information.

Mr McARDLE: At a level they understand.

Mr Moss: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: Of the 90 men per month that you see and assist, how many are Indigenous?

Mr Moss: I would say 98 per cent. Not a lot of non-Indigenous come through, which is unfortunate. I know there are a lot out there, but they are not coming through. They will come in for a one-off session and then say, 'No, I don't need this'. If probation and parole send them down they will attend, but then they find other reasons not to be there. It is all sorts of stuff.

Mr McARDLE: Does that figure escalate? Does it get bigger as the weeks or months go by?

Mr Moss: It is fairly steady. There are times such as rodeo time when we have a big increase in town, and Christmas time, school holidays and peak times when it fluctuates. However, across-the-board most of it is fairly steady.

Mr McARDLE: For the 98 per cent who are Indigenous, is alcohol an issue?

Mr Moss: Alcohol is an issue and drugs are an issue, unfortunately.

Mr McARDLE: What sort of drugs are we talking about?

Mr Moss: Ice is a big one at the moment in town. I would say probably 55 to 60 per cent of clients say that they have been using it during an episode of domestic violence, so there has been quite a bit. There can be a whole lot of other reasons, as well. It could be jealousy, which they throw up all the time and say, 'I did all this because I was jealous'. The classic is that they cannot remember why or what happened. There is no having to take responsibility for that if they can pass it off on something else or forget it.

Mr McARDLE: I want to talk about rehabilitation to reform the family unit, as least in the sense of the child having contact with mum and dad. If you are using ice, I would have thought that would be a very difficult exercise. Alcohol is bad enough. I am not an expert on ice, but from what I have heard it is much more difficult to be weaned off ice, because of the damaging impact it has directly on the body.

Mr Moss: That is my understanding, as well. We do not focus on the drugs or the alcohol. Our focus is on domestic violence, but we give them support to attend ATODS or something else if they need it.

Mr McARDLE: What services are here? Besides the lady waving frantically behind you, who do you refer a domestic violence perpetrator to? I want to get an idea of that. Part of the process of maintaining contact is getting the help that is needed to the relevant people, whether it is directly to mum and dad, as I understand them to be, or the kinship group. In Mount Isa, what is available for those men and women to seek help from?

Mr Moss: We have ATODS programs. We have the recovery centre. We have Ngukutha family centre, which works with NWQICSS, North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services. They work together to help the family reunify if possible or to support the family going through struggles and things like that. It is education, mums and bubs clubs and that sort of thing. There is ourselves for domestic and family violence. We have Save the Children, which is doing FaCC, Family and Child Connect, and FISS, Family Intensive Support Service. They have to be referred through Child Safety, is my understanding. From that you also have headspace and SOLAS for young people with mental health issues, although I think they have had a name change to selectability. We also have the community mental health section, as well.

Mr McARDLE: At the hospital?

Mr Moss: Yes. There are some services that they can get support from. We have the Murri men's court and the Murri women's court, as well as the supports through the Murri men's and women's groups. There are those things to assist people through the court process and afterwards into other programs.

Mr McARDLE: Outside of Save the Children, which of those organisations, or akin to them, exist outside of the Mount Isa region and extend into the remote Indigenous communities?

Mr Moss: Centacare would and ATODS would. I think that is about it. I am not really sure.

Mr McARDLE: We will ask the department. They can fill us in on that. Mr Moss, thank you very much. It is much appreciated.

CHAIR: Mr Moss, thank you so much for your input. It has been really interesting to listen to your responses to my colleagues. When you work with gentlemen in intensive programs that they are very willing to participate in and there is behaviour change, what is your relationship then with the Department of Child Safety? Of course, they should be aware of that improvement in behaviour and hopefully reunification is possible. Can you tell us how that works?

Mr Moss: At the present time, if we get a referral we make arrangements with the clients and upon completion we are required to give a report back to Child Safety. We let them know the basics: yes, they have participated; yes, they have made an effort and changed. It is not necessarily about anything that they have disclosed, unless there is significant self-harm or harm to others. Aside from that, everything in their past we leave alone. We do not put that in the report. We talk about triggers that they think might be an issue in the future or things like that, so that their Child Safety case worker is aware of them. In a perfect world, there would be a lot more interaction between ourselves and the Child Safety case worker, but that does not always happen. They are stretched and it is a big area that they cover. Sometimes we get a referral with very little follow through afterwards. Aside from that, if they are Indigenous, Brother Marty and Cliffy from the Murri Men's Group do that follow up and support. They also do a presentencing report for the court, which Child Safety can have access to through the court.

CHAIR: How long is the course?

Mr Moss: Our course for the intensive behaviour change program is eight weeks and 16 sessions. We do twice a day on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 to 12, so it is two hours a day over 16 sessions for eight weeks. For fathers, it is more general information so it is only four sessions. Once again, it is two days a week for two hours. They get eight hours for that. Our ideal is to use the fathers program as an introduction to the other one, because a lot of the men have never had standardised schooling or have had to sit down regularly or things like that. We break them into it with the fathers program, get them used to attending and what the program is like and then lead in to the other one if we can. Hopefully, that way they have done three months with the programs.

CHAIR: Given you said about 98 per cent of the men going through your program are Indigenous, are the trainers or cofacilitators Indigenous? How do you build in cultural sensitivity?

Mr Moss: Ideally we would have one but, unfortunately, we do not have one in the service at the moment. The woman who cofacilitates with me has an Indigenous partner and she is recognised and accepted in the community. They seem to accept that alright. Over the seven and a half years that I have been doing the programs, there has never been an issue with me. It is not an Indigenous-specific program and it does not have an Indigenous component to it; it is more about domestic violence and everything else. With all the men coming through over the seven and a half years, we have a 48.9 per cent completion rate. I cannot say that is an improvement or a stoppage. I do not know if you are aware, but one-third of people going through programs will make lasting changes, one-third will make no change and one-third will make some change but not lasting.

CHAIR: Where does the content of the program for the fathers come from?

Mr Moss: Both of our programs are based on the American Duluth model around the power and control wheel. The fathers program is just general information around how domestic violence hurts children and things that it can do from that.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Moss, for your time. Thank you for assisting the committee. We appreciate it.

BROOKS, Mr Phillip, Regional Director, Child Family and Community Services, Mount Isa and Gulf Child Safety Centre, Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.

CHAIR: Phillip, thank you for joining us. Are you based in Mount Isa?

Mr Brooks: No, I am based in Townsville.

CHAIR: Could you give us an overview about the area that the centre covers and then we will open for questions.

Mr Brooks: The North Queensland region covers from Townsville to Mackay, Bowen and the Whitsundays and out to Mount Isa and up to the gulf. The North Queensland region is the first region inside the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services to transition and fully transition Disability Services. As a result, the Community Services arm or remit, otherwise known as our procurement and contract part, has come over to this position. It is the only position in the state that currently exists like that until, of course, the full transition occurs.

CHAIR: What does that mean, practically?

Mr Brooks: In real terms, I have Child Safety and the funding arm of the department responsibilities. In other areas, it is split up between two regional directors.

CHAIR: Thank you for your patience. I know you have been sitting here throughout the day, listening to the evidence. We appreciate that you were happy to be moved to the end of the day, so thank you.

Mr Brooks: That is fine.

Mr CRAMP: Mr Brooks, I will start the ball rolling on this. I am interested to hear from the department about the region. It is a big area. How many staff and officers do you have across the region? Do you have an office in Mount Isa?

Mr Brooks: That is right.

Mr CRAMP: How many staff would you have here?

Mr Brooks: Roughly between 43 and 45. That is Child Safety staff, but we also have procurement and contract management staff.

Mr CRAMP: Is that an average sized office for your model?

Mr Brooks: Yes, it is the same sized office as we have across our five locations.

Mr CRAMP: You mentioned a funding arm. You have both the funding arm of child services—

Mr Brooks: Of all Department of Communities and Child Safety minus Disability Services, now it has transitioned.

Mr CRAMP: How does that work in practical terms? You have a program. You decide which programs you are going to fund. Can you explain that? Can you break that down a bit more?

Mr Brooks: Sure. Our job is to actually procure and commission services and then contract manage them, but the policy arm, the platform, still comes from George Street.

Mr CRAMP: I heard from the previous submission—it sounded great actually—that there are all of these groups working together. It seemed integrated. Was that an autonomous scenario that these groups started working together, as we have seen happen right throughout the state from time to time? Is this something that your department put together? If you did put it together, that is great. Is it something you encourage and you put funding into some of these groups? How does that work with the private groups and other resourced groups?

Mr Brooks: Are you talking about integration of services?

Mr CRAMP: Yes. We have the North Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Resource Service. Mr Moss put forward a number of groups. There is the Mount Isa Recovery Services Centre here as well. Are they funded in any part by the government or are they just working together autonomously off their own bat?

Mr Brooks: I could not name services other than what we fund. I would suggest that they are funded by the Queensland government.

Mr CRAMP: That was not to put you on the spot, I assure you. I was wondering how your department integrated with those services more so.

Mr Brooks: Definitely. The reality is that we have something called care teams. I am sure there is going to be a question very shortly around how we ensure the safety of young people, children and families, especially in remote locations. One of the things that we work towards is having care families and care teams around a young person. That could be inclusive of non-government organisations.

Mr CRAMP: With regard to the Indigenous population and the communities out here, are there specialist teams within your department, looking at Mount Isa or across the five offices, as you said, or are your staff trained to work across-the-board with children and families regardless of heritage or culture?

Mr Brooks: It is the latter. Cultural competence comes within an actual employee. We do not want to set up a program or a stream to do that for us. We make sure that we recruit people who do have those capabilities and skills. Luckily, recently I was able to appoint a manager here locally, who is now permanent in the child safety office, who is a local Aboriginal woman.

Mr CRAMP: With regard to the bill, specifically I am very interested in the fact that we are looking past the 18-year-old cut-off mark where we say, 'There you go. You are out on your own.' Do you see your department, especially in regional and remote areas, playing a significant role in that? Have you been given any information to say that you will be a part of that planning? We have heard from previous submitters today and they want to see a positive interaction right through, not just for those who go off the rails or a child who maybe needs some help. They want to see it in all circumstances. Has your department been given any instruction or has there been any correspondence of any kind to say that you will play a part in this proposed new legislation if it comes to fruition or is it too early?

Mr Brooks: It is too early to say. When it comes to the detailed parts of the bill—I know the committee is seeing Megan Giles later in the week in Brisbane on the 21st—that hearing would probably relate to that. In relation to young people, I am always supportive if we can get better outcomes for children, families and young people—of course we would play a role in that.

Mr McARDLE: I am not going to touch the bill because I think the questions in relation to the contents of the bill should go to Megan Giles. That is not your role, I suspect. I do want to talk about a care family. What is a care family and how wide can that go by way of membership?

Mr Brooks: Care teams and families came out of the family-led decision-making and our collaborative family decision-making. It goes to the core of supporting young people, children and families to make decisions over their own families. What they are able to do is invite people who are significant in either (1) support or (2) families—it could be cultural support or cultural advice for the family or it could go as far as physical support, not so much financial. It could be aunts or uncles. It could be the local counsellor, as in the domestic and family violence counsellor. It could be someone from the local council. It could be someone from the education department.

Mr McARDLE: It could be you.

Mr Brooks: It could well be.

Mr McARDLE: We have had orders being made under the current act now for many years—care and protection orders, long-term orders and the like. Have they resulted over that time line in a decrease in the number of applications to a court for such orders or are we seeing increasing numbers of orders being sought outside of what you would say would be normal growth based on population and the like?

Mr Brooks: To answer that question wholesomely, I would like to take that on notice.

Mr McARDLE: Absolutely. The reason I pose that question is this: your region covers some of the remote areas I have spoken of in the past—Coen, Doomadgee et cetera. The FRC reports are brought down every 12 months. One of the measures that the current regime encompasses that concerns me is the school attendance notices for those regions, and I read those into the record: in 2013-14, 1,900; in 2014-15, 2,400; in 2015-16, 2,500—that is, children who may come to school and then disappear during the day or not come at all, let alone the non-registration of students. My question is this: if the current regime is still producing that escalation in school attendance notices, how is this new regime going to be more effective on the ground?

Mr Brooks: That is a great question. The answer lies in that legislation or law is not always the answer. What I mean by that is that it comes down to relationships. It is about how we work with children and families, how we know our communities, how we know the support systems inside an educational institution—it may be a teacher; it may be someone helping with truancy or otherwise—understanding the importance of education and whether families find that important and getting that information across. I do not think any piece of legislation will provide those sorts of relationships.

Mr McARDLE: I take your point. What you are saying is that on the ground is where the rubber meets the road. What is needed now on the ground? Governments have been very keen to assist in this sort of area for many years. You have been involved now for a number of years with the department and have every involvement in this region. What additional services are going to be needed to make a difference?

Mr Brooks: I do not think it is financial.

Mr McARDLE: No. I did not say that.

Mr Brooks: At the moment we fund quite a significant amount of dollars in relation to support for families. Ultimately, it comes back to having that understanding, and the Our Way strategy that we have recently released is actually going towards that. That is notifying and understanding that parents are the first teachers and that parents are the first protectors, going back to the core to understand what family communities and kin can do to support and make sure that educational outcomes, along with juvenile justice outcomes, are actually improved.

Mr McARDLE: I am very cautious not to delve into the policy issue, which is Megan Giles's bailiwick. I am going to insist on this question again. You really have not answered my question. We have had this ongoing scenario for a long time. We are now moving to a new order. In terms of retaining what we have and the new permanent care order, what do we need to do on the ground? What do we need to put in place on the ground in these communities to make it happen? Are we simply going to be using the same resources we have now—well-intended, great people who are well trained and have a heart of gold but not getting the outcomes that we need?

Mr Brooks: Hearing the question again, I think that would be better directed to Megan Giles. I could not give you that answer.

Mr McARDLE: My colleague the member for Gaven asked questions in relation to notification to you of what this means for your department. Are you in a position to indicate what additional staffing you may need to put in place with this bill? I imagine that the government would act on the basis that this bill is going to pass. You have to plan for it. What additional staff would you need?

Mr Brooks: Again, I could not answer that question. It is better directed to Megan. What I can say is that it was recently announced that there is \$200 million in resources coming over the next two years to assist with front-line child safety.

Mr McARDLE: That is statewide though, isn't it?

Mr Brooks: That is correct, but it will see a natural increase in FTEs in all of my child safety service centres in the North Queensland region.

Mr McARDLE: Are you able to indicate to the committee what you would say would be the required number of FTEs to make service more likely to achieve a positive outcome?

Mr Brooks: No. I am not in that position. I am not across the specific details of the bill.

Mr McARDLE: Would it be you who will be asked to provide that detail?

Mr Brooks: I am sure I would be part of the consultation.

Mr McARDLE: That has not started yet I take it?

Mr Brooks: There has been consultation around this bill but not to that detail.

Mr McARDLE: That is fine. I have asked everybody who has come before us how we will monitor this. You have indicated that it is quite difficult, and Megan Giles may have the answer to part of that question. How do you monitor it now? How do you monitor a care and control order or an out-of-home care situation?

Mr Brooks: I am assuming you are talking about those remote communities—Doomadgee, Normanton.

Mr McARDLE: Even in Mount Isa or Townsville.

Mr Brooks: Mount Isa and Townsville are a bit different because we have the physical ability to go into homes on any given day, along with further support such as intensive family support, Family and Child Connect—those sorts of areas. In remote locations, it is about understanding and having great relationships with the care team. Again, I go back to the care team that we talk about—the aunties, the uncles, the next-door neighbours, whoever is important in the life of the child. They help create the family plan or the safety plan. They assist with that. Of course, we have our government agencies that we have there who have good relationships again with Education, Health and police.

Mr McARDLE: How many staff are employed, or directly engaged in the department, in this district to deal with the monitoring by the department?

Mr Brooks: We have different arms of the department. The actual child safety service centre encompasses our front-line staff such as child safety officers and child safety support officers. We have senior team leaders, senior pracs and a manager. They collate to over 40 positions that we alluded to earlier. We also have positions that are outside the remit of the actual service centre but still within child protection. They are our placement services unit staff.

Mr McARDLE: How many of those?

Mr Brooks: There are two of those who assist with foster care applications and any support they may need. They work with our non-government organisations who look after the foster care associations. Then we have our family group meeting convenors.

Mr McARDLE: How many of those?

Mr Brooks: We have two of those—one is Indigenous—in this location, again, to help that collaborative family decision-making occurring.

Mr McARDLE: As I understand it, you have 44 staff to deal with the monitoring—

Mr Brooks: Approximately.

Mr McARDLE: Yes, approximately—directly involved with the department. How often do they go into remote areas and physically talk to the care team as opposed to making contact by telephone or whatever the case may be?

Mr Brooks: Depending on where they are on the child protection, out-of-home care or ongoing intervention continuum, it could be weekly—it could be even more than that—via the phone. Physically, we go into Doomadgee and Mornington Island on a fortnightly basis. We also have a community support officer that sits inside of Normanton.

Mr McARDLE: How many families do you have contact with on that basis throughout your district?

Mr Brooks: Again, I would like to that on notice to make sure we give you the correct numbers.

Mr McARDLE: Are you able to indicate in your answer to that question where they are located—Mount Isa, Townsville, Doomadgee, Aurukun and the like—or not?

Mr Brooks: As in the majority?

Mr McARDLE: No, just individually in the areas. Can you give me a demographic as to where they reside?

Mr Brooks: All locations would probably be the easiest way to say that—that is, Mornington, Normanton, Cloncurry, Doomadgee, Dajarra.

Mr McARDLE: They make telephone contact once every two weeks?

Mr Brooks: They physically visit those remote locations every two weeks. If required, we will make phone contact in between.

Mr McARDLE: Before you go, is contact made with the family to notify them that you are coming through?

Mr Brooks: Yes.

Mr McARDLE: What contact do you have with Education Queensland in relation to not attending school?

Mr Brooks: We have quite a bit at a strategy level. The regional director for education sits in Townsville, as was alluded to earlier. Both of us sit in Townsville. There has been a recent announcement that they are looking at using engagement officers. We also have officers who are co-assisted between our department and Education—the name escapes me, I apologise. Ultimately, they are there and they are employed on the inside of Education to ensure and work towards better outcomes for young people in care. That is ultimately finishing grade 12.

Mr McARDLE: Again, looking at a permanent care order, what is the strategy of the department to tackle the issue of school attendances?

Mr Brooks: I probably could not say in terms of a permanent care order.

Mr McARDLE: Generally speaking—it is the same either way. It does not matter.

Mr Brooks: Right now, our service centre manager has great relationships with their principals here in Mount Isa. Over in Townsville, at a strategy level, it is understanding where the blockages are. Some of the things that we know is that, ensuring young people finish school, is getting them engaged earlier at school and making sure that they stay connected with a school. Multiple movements inside of schools has resulted, according to the numbers, in the decline of attendance. So that stability—

Mr McARDLE: A decline in attendance?

Mr Brooks: Yes. That stability, that stable lifespan—not just when we talked about placements before, but educational institutions—is really important.

Mr McARDLE: Do you expect that the permanent care order would arrest that decline?

Mr Brooks: I think so.

Mr McARDLE: If you say yes, why?

Mr Brooks: I probably would not go as far as that, again, because Megan would be better to answer that, but I think that any movement towards stability for a young person where they can form an attachment is a good thing.

Mr HARPER: Mr Brooks, it is good to see you again. I had you in my electorate office not that long ago dealing with another matter in relation to child safety. For the purpose of better informing the committee, how big is your region? What are the boundaries?

Mr Brooks: All the way from Sarina up to Ingham, west to Camooweal, including Mount Isa, and up to Mornington Island.

Mr HARPER: How many children under child safety orders would you currently have?

Mr Brooks: For the purpose of being correct, I would like to take that one on notice and get back to the committee.

Mr HARPER: That is fine. This might go some way to answering the comment made by the member for Caloundra about staff increases. The *Townsville Bulletin* that Saturday prior to our meeting in my office advertised for 30-odd staff, if I am correct. How is that recruitment going?

Mr Brooks: Yes, the first lot are here in October. We have already finished and commenced those and we have notified the successful people. They are going very well.

Mr HARPER: Excellent. The intent of this bill is to better support families with re-engagement and giving that permanency of care, particularly around the cultural side of things. How are you currently sharing information? I know that you play a role with the Townsville stronger communities group. The intent of this bill is to strengthen the sharing of information. That can only be a good thing. I do not know if you want to add any commentary to that statement.

Mr Brooks: No, other than, again, if it moves towards having better outcomes for children and families and, through the information-sharing provisions, there is less likelihood of young people and families falling through the gaps, it is a good thing.

Mr HARPER: The tyranny of distance over that vast region that you have is challenging for any government agency, I would imagine. We have heard some criticism today of the turnover of staff in Child Safety. How do you give incentives to people to work in these north-west remote areas?

Mr Brooks: That is a great question. It was raised earlier and I heard that comment. The recruitment of anybody in the north-west is not limited to Child Safety. It is a problem that all non-government organisations, local councils, federal government and state government agencies have. Some of the things that our department implements—and it is one of the few departments that implements it—is rural and remote incentives. We have a range of packages available to people who are just newly out of university or people who are very experienced. We have the full realm. That includes accommodation assistance. It also includes a bonus. That happens on a yearly basis, although it is paid six monthly. They are the sorts of things that we try to do to give incentives to people to come to Mount Isa. That period goes for five years and it can be reviewed by the delegate at the end of the five years to see if it could be extended.

Mr HARPER: I have said it to you personally. I commend everybody who is involved in child safety and trying to work with families. This bill, should it pass, seeks to strengthen those ties in the community. Thank you very much for your time here today.

CHAIR: Thank you. Phillip, I have some operational questions. The information provided by the department talks about a notification that is received, or gives rise to you becoming involved. An investigation occurs and if it is determined that there is a risk to the child, there is a case plan. Can you tell me what that requires? If you make a decision that you need a case plan, who do you involve? Who is privy to it? Who has a voice?

Mr Brooks: That is a great question. If at any time we come to what we call an ongoing intervention, we have already had conversations in the intake part and we also have conversations in our investigation assessment part—when we physically knock on doors and sight the child for the first time because we believe that they are either at risk, or have been harmed. Once it is decided to have an ongoing intervention in the family, we need a tertiary response. We start talking, again using that collaborative family decision-making model, and form what we would call a care team around the family and make sure that they be present at the case planning.

The case planning includes a whole range of things. It is, obviously, what are the worries up-front? What is working well? You talked before about asking a young person. Some of the questions we ask a young person is, 'If it is working well, what does that look like?' Why is that important no matter the age of the child? I have found on occasions, and history has shown me, that sometimes the parents are not aware of some of their actions and how it affects the young people or the children and what they see. Without going into specifics, one is just a young person acknowledging the parent giving them a kiss goodnight and saying they are proud of them. That is a very simple thing. If that was working well for them, that is what they have asked for.

CHAIR: Are children routinely asked about how they are feeling and what outcome they want, whether they are Gillick competent or not?

Mr Brooks: Yes.

CHAIR: Even a five-year-old would be asked—separate to the parents perhaps being in the room—these sorts of questions appropriate for their maturity?

Mr Brooks: Yes. Some of the ways that we do that is we use the three houses. It is just a tool that we use on a piece of paper to show, 'What are you worried about?' They may be pictures. 'What is working well?' Ultimately, 'What is the goal? If it was working well, what would that look like?'

CHAIR: I know it is not fair to ask you to speak on behalf of the whole child safety system across Queensland, but a couple of stakeholders have mentioned that the children want their voices to be heard and that they do not feel heard. Where could the system be falling down? If they are a part of that conversation in the very beginning, why is it that they do not feel heard? Is it late in the process? What feedback do you get in regard to that?

Mr Brooks: I do not know if I can answer because, to be honest, I am not understanding it, because part of our practice framework is specifically understanding and hearing the child. I think the reality is, though, that we can always work towards having an improved system. We never rest on our laurels and think that there are no areas in which to improve. Obviously, that is one place.

CHAIR: How great a change will the self-determination components of the bill be to your practice?

Mr Brooks: I am probably not across the details. That is probably better off provided by Megan Giles, that one.

CHAIR: Fair enough. You are not on the ground doing case plans, but previously you were the regional director?

Mr Brooks: Yes, I was the manager at Mount Isa here.

CHAIR: If you had an Indigenous family involved, how far would you routinely go outside of the nuclear family of mum, dad and child for the case plan? I think, culturally, their idea of family can be different from, say, mine. I would not necessarily think that you would ask the grandparents interstate. How much would you involve them now? What is practice?

Mr Brooks: We would want to ask the children, young people and families who is their support system and who is critical inside their family, or community, who can assist them moving forward with practical supports. Outside of that, we have the recognised entity, who we involve in all family decision-making and any significant decisions around the child.

CHAIR: That leads me to my next question. How closely do you work with the recognised entity? How well do you feel they know and advocate? There has been some commentary that, currently, they are not viewed as an advocate but as an independent entity under the act. They would be seen more as an advocate for the family rather than the department's resource. How does that relationship between the department and the recognised entity work?

Mr Brooks: Currently, in my region, which I can only talk to, we have great relationships. I have met personally with the recognised entity and I meet with them quite regularly. The reality around the recognised entity as it stands is that the recognised entity has given me feedback that they would like a more meaningful role. By that they mean that they would like a more meaningful role to work with families.

The hard part that they have expressed currently is that their time is caught up in the intake part of our department. We have numerous numbers of intakes. The intakes happen over the phone. Because of the provisions of the Privacy Act, we cannot go broader. We utilise the recognised entity. On occasions—and, again, this is the recognised entity advising me—they do not know the family. They are providing cultural advice on a family whom they have never met.

CHAIR: That goes back to my questioning of QATSICPP this morning. If they are an advocate for the family, or the community, they should know the community. If I were a parent in that community I would want to know that they knew me and my family and they would strongly advocate. It seems to me from the feedback that you have just given me, and also from QATSICPP, that the bill gives effect to many of these things. There has been obviously feedback on the ground that has come from groups like QATSICPP, and I am sure from the department as well, how important that is.

I am really interested in short-term orders and the concerns that were raised in the Carmody review. This morning, the witnesses from Injilinj mentioned 20 placements. It is the balance between the permanent care order—and that is one of many options—that provides permanency, and permanency is so important, and not wanting a child removed when you could keep working intensively with the parents. That is always the option and they should maintain their rights. How do you balance all of these tensions and issues to ultimately achieve the best interests of the child?

Mr Brooks: I think that is a great question. The reality is that there is no perfect picture, but the attempts to provide more tools for Child Safety officers and the organisation is a road to a better world and better outcome for young people and families. I have heard the term permanency care order, which is to be on top of and part of a larger suite of tools. I think that is a good thing. Should it be the only one? No, but I think the increased number of tools for young people, families and children at their disposal to make decisions for their lives is a good thing. In terms of stability for a child and multiple placements, young people have advised us that they find multiple placements themselves traumatic. Any stability, or any process that works towards stability for a young person, children and families is a good thing.

CHAIR: I have heard that feedback, too. When you hear that a child might have gone through 20 placements, for someone like me who has never worked in Child Safety, how does that happen? How does something like that happen? How does that situation arise? Obviously, it is highly complex, but how does that happen?

Mr Brooks: We wish it would not be the first answer to that. We have a child protection system and we are trying to match the young person as best we can. Unfortunately, we do not always get that right from the start. Ultimately, the placement breaks down for a range of reasons. To go back to your point, we would like to have a young person to be as stable as possible.

CHAIR: That could be either the child or the carer has indicated that it is just not a fit?

Mr Brooks: Correct.

CHAIR: I have a final question. You might say that it is a question for Megan. If I were a foster carer and I was having a child placed with me, what information do I get provided about the child who is coming to stay with me?

Mr Brooks: It is called a CIF—a child information form. All the information about the young person's strengths, areas of improvement due to history, education, what their aspirations are—a whole range of things—are inside that form.

CHAIR: Am I privy to enough history to understand, if there is trauma, what that trauma was so that I can best care for that child or, if I have other children in my care and there has been maybe aggression previously, are there triggers? What information is there in that regard?

Mr Brooks: The answer is yes to that question. We also undertake a placement matching. A non-government organisation and also our placement services unit undergo a placement matching process so that we understand the other young people who may be in care or just their own children who may be there as well. We understand who else is in the household. We do a range of things that look at that matching process before a young person is approved to go in there.

CHAIR: That is to ensure the safety of the vulnerable child, the safety of the children already in the home and also to try to make the match better so that there are fewer placements?

Mr Brooks: That is right.

Mr CRAMP: The chair was speaking about recognised entities. We had Injilinjji and Peak speak today. Are they two of the groups who you consider are recognised entities who would come in and assist? Can you extrapolate that for me? Which groups are you talking about as recognised entities?

Mr Brooks: Currently, the department funds specific organisations for the recognised entities. It is a program inside the department. That agency here is called Nawamba. I apologise, and I am happy to take on notice, if you would like me to expand that acronym.

Mr CRAMP: If you could get some information around that, that would be great. I ask because today we heard a lot about building trust. The groups that we heard from today sound like they are at the forefront of building trust with community groups. This bill goes a long way to ensuring that, from my understanding, the government will work with the groups at the coalface who are really doing the hard yards with families to build trust. However, today I have not heard anything to convince me that the department is working with those groups. Can you clarify that? Am I wrong? How often do you work with those groups to ensure that the best outcome is happening for the children? From the sounds of it, if you do not have that trust, especially in Indigenous communities, they will not speak to you. Those are the exact words from a previous witness from the Injilinjji.

Mr Brooks: That is a great question. I think Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations are very important. As part of the policy platform, recently the department announced \$150 million for family wellbeing services that are to be located across the state. As a result of that, Mount Isa has received a family wellbeing service, which is a community controlled organisation. Part of the specific recognised entity is actually a tertiary service. That enables us to information share inside the provisions currently as they stand.

Mr CRAMP: You are sharing with those groups; is that right?

Mr Brooks: The recognised entity groups. There is a separation between the recognised entity as a program, as it stands. Some of the other groups were talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations. You can be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisation and have the RE funding program as part of your remit or you may not.

Mr CRAMP: My concern is not so much about funding. I am happy to make this comment; you do not have to provide an answer. Today I have heard some really impressive submissions from those controlled programs. However they get their funding, they are private groups that have started up because of necessity. They are doing a great job. It concerns me that we are not utilising those services more, but are just expanding the department. Even from what you said then, without putting words in your mouth, you are going to expand this department, but I have not heard you say that you are going to engage those groups more and work proactively with them. It concerns me that we would not utilise what I consider to be specialists in their community.

Mr Brooks: That is not the case, so I am glad to be able to clarify that for you. So that you know, Injilinjji is one of the agencies that we fund. The program that was here today is one of the agencies that we fund. We are very connected. This is probably because of my articulation back to yourself. The crossover is when it comes to privacy or identifying a young person in care. That is where we would not share that information, but we would with the recognised entity. When it comes to getting better outcomes for children and families, we would absolutely engage those agencies.

In relation to the use of QATSICPP, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak, in my former role I was the executive director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and actually led, as the SES on behalf of the government, the Our Way strategy. Part of that Our Way strategy moving forward was utilising in co-design the Queensland Family Matters program. Family Matters was led by QATSICPP. That was actually a co-designed program as we moved forward.

Mr CRAMP: So it was done on a consultative basis?

Mr Brooks: No, it was co-designed. They were actually part of everything, including the write-ups. We took them behind what other people may term the closed curtain. We went beyond that. They actually saw the details and helped write the detail.

Mr CRAMP: I do not want to push the point, but for clarification: in regards to individual situations where we are building trust with families, currently we are not engaging with those groups to any great degree even though they have people on the ground and have that trust; we are rebuilding it when it is already there. Is that right?

Mr Brooks: No, absolutely not. We would engage those agencies.

Mr CRAMP: That was my concern.

Mr Brooks: Again, it must be part of my articulation. We would engage those. Especially if they are part of the family's network and support, as I spoke about before, the care teams, they would be brought in.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. The time allocated for this public hearing has expired. A number of matters were taken on notice and the secretariat will be in contact with you to confirm those questions and when the response is due. I thank you very much for coming in and speaking to us. I certainly found it really helpful to understand what happens on the ground. I was very grateful to every witness who came here today. We very much appreciate it. I declare the hearing closed.

Committee adjourned at 4.04 pm