

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

FOLLOW UP OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL'S PERFORMANCE
AUDITS APRIL 2012-AUGUST 2012

At Sydney on Thursday 13 February 2014

The Committee met at 12.00 noon

PRESENT

Mr J. R. O'Dea (Chair)

Mr B. E. Bassett
Mr M. J. Daley
Dr G. Lee
Mr G. M. Piper

CHAIR: I have already opened the Committee meeting but I welcome all witnesses who appear before the Public Accounts Committee today to give evidence. I firstly confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and the information about standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses. Does anyone who needs to have that information not have it? I will take that as an indication that everyone is happy. As part of the formalities I will ask each of you to take an oath or make an affirmation. I welcome the Auditor-General and his staff. Most of you are well acquainted with this process. Mr Hehir, do you want some greater guidance on what we do at this stage?

Mr HEHIR: I will be right, I think.

GRANT HEHIR, Auditor-General, Audit Office of NSW,

ROBERT MATHIE, Head, Performance Audit, Audit Office of NSW, and

BRIAN SMYTH-KING, Executive Director, Learning and Engagement, Department of Education and Communities, affirmed and examined, and

SEAN CRUMLIN, Director, Performance Audit, Audit Office of NSW,

JANE SIMMONS, Executive Director, Learning and Leadership, Department of Education and Communities,

DAVID CULLEN, Director, Early Learning and Primary Education, Department of Education and Communities, and

CINDY BERWICK, President, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., sworn and examined:

CHAIR: We have received submissions from various parties in relation to the hearing today. I take it that those submissions will form part of your formal evidence today. I also want to indicate that the Committee has passed a resolution to allow media coverage of this hearing. There may or may not be members of the media in the gallery but it is an open public hearing. I ask everyone to make sure that their mobile phones are switched off as the Hansard recording in particular depends on a lack of electronic interference. Before we proceed does anyone have any questions concerning the procedural information sent to you in relation to witnesses and the hearing process? No? Then I will invite the Auditor-General or his representative as nominated to make an opening statement before commencement of questions. I will also invite the other witnesses to make an opening statement, should they wish.

Mr HEHIR: I will hand over to Sean Crumlin, who is one of the audit officers. As this audit report was not done during the period when I was Auditor-General, I think that it might be more appropriate for him to make any comments.

Mr CRUMLIN: I do not propose to make an opening statement, Mr Chair.

CHAIR: Excellent. Does a member from the Department of Education and Communities wish to make an opening statement?

Mr SMYTH-KING: Yes, I would like to make an opening statement on behalf of the Department of Education and Communities. On behalf of the department I thank the Committee for the opportunity for us to come and present evidence today about the way in which Aboriginal students and their literacy improvements are tracking in our public schools in New South Wales. I also wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay respects to Aboriginal elders past and present and also to Aboriginal people here today. In 2003 the New South Wales public school system had over 740,000 students and I think it is important for us to contextualise where our enrolments around Aboriginal students actually sit.

Of the total student population within our schools, 49,000 of them in 2013 identified as Aboriginal-Torres Strait Islander. Since 2009 the number of Aboriginal students enrolled in our schools has grown by 8,500 students. Sixty per cent of all Aboriginal students in 2013 were primary aged—kindergarten to year 6; 40 per cent obviously were secondary aged and just over 76 per cent of our students attended public schools outside the

Sydney metropolitan area. They are really significant issues in terms of the challenges that we have in delivering educational provision to all of our students but particularly Aboriginal students. In 2012 and 2013 approximately 13,000 Aboriginal students sat what is known as NAPLAN, the National Literacy and Numeracy testing scheme. Of these students, 14 per cent performed below the national minimum standard in reading in 2013 compared to 21 per cent in 2012, so we saw a shift from 21 per cent in 2012 to 14 per cent in 2013 who performed below the minimum standards.

Between 2005 and 2013 the numbers of Aboriginal students participating in the HSC doubled; it went from 1.6 per cent of the number of students participating in the HSC to 2.8 per cent—a very significant change indeed. There are many different reasons why a child or a young person does not reach expected standards in literacy or engage in schooling until year 12 or its equivalent. Every day teachers use their professional judgment to determine the best learning experiences for their children. Each child is unique; each school community is different. There is no single solution. One size does not fit all. Aboriginal people in New South Wales really value very highly Western education. It is an essential vehicle for gaining access to the social and economic advantages of mainstream society.

The Aboriginal people of New South Wales assert a need for their children to acquire skills and knowledge and obviously impact on their self-reliant, economic and social outcomes. In the context of all of that New South Wales education is undergoing unprecedented systemic change. We are really focused on lifting the educational attainments of all students through the highest expectations for every student. In doing this we have to partner with people. Change is a long-term process and it is about bringing people along. That is why today in particular one of our enduring partnerships within education has been with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group [AECG] and I am very pleased to have Cindy Berwick here to also provide evidence in terms of Aboriginal people and education.

In 2013 we implemented Local Schools, Local Decisions. It is devolving decision-making to the local level and the community level. It is underpinned by a complete rethink of the public schools education budget and how it is deployed. Each school's budget will be derived in the future progressively from a core budget entitlement and supplemented by equity loadings, targeted support for students, and that will be reflecting school locations and the socioeconomic background of students. These are all issues that were raised in the audit report. Over the next three years schools will be gradually allocated their budgets according to the resource allocation model. What is important about 2014 is that we have allocated \$64.5 million in Aboriginal education equity loadings and targeted support to our schools. This is \$18.5 million in addition to what was allocated in 2013.

This is the first time every school is being resourced for its students' needs in this particular area. It is fair, it is transparent, and it is an approach that is particularly important for Aboriginal students. It is the first time every Aboriginal student, irrespective of the school that they attend in the public sector, draws for their school an Aboriginal equity loading. This means that in 2014, 49,000-plus students are now being resourced. In addition to that we have other programs in terms of target support that are very important for schools. These are central to a much broader range of reforms and changes that are taking place. We have extended new business systems that are being underpinned by changes such as Connected Communities—Every Student, Every School, Great Teaching, Inspired Learning, Early Action for Success, rural and remote education and the blueprint for action. We are more than happy to talk about these as you see fit in the questioning that you may take on afterwards.

We are also embracing—and I think it is really important to make note of this—the New South Wales Government's Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment [OCHRE] strategy. In particular there we are looking at Aboriginal languages and culture—its revitalisation, reclamation and maintenance—and the way in which public schools will be very central in terms of language and culture development in young Aboriginal people and other people. We will empower Aboriginal people and employ them to connect with young people and others and share their histories and culture in a way we have not seen before. We have done a lot in this area in the last number of years but particularly in the last two or three years. However, we still have a lot to do and we look forward to being able to progress the work that we have now got well underway.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Smyth-King. You have touched on a number of areas we will explore in a little more detail during some of the questioning. Indeed, you may wish to refer back to your opening statement in answering some of the questions that might be asked. Some might be of a slightly repetitive nature, but hopefully we will enhance some of the excellent statements you have made already. I invite Ms Berwick to make an opening comment or statement, if she wishes.

Ms BERWICK: I am happy to take questions. The only statement I would make is that we have a good relationship and a trusting relationship with the Department of Education and Communities. It is based on respect and the way we work together is to ensure that the department is responsive to Aboriginal students' needs and Aboriginal people's aspirations.

CHAIR: Thank you. I record that today is National Sorry Day.

Ms BERWICK: It is.

CHAIR: We acknowledge that and, as Mr Smyth-King appropriately did, the Committee acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land as well. Most of the prepared and unscripted questions will be directed to the Department of Education and Communities. I am happy for any of you to answer the questions. There are some questions that relate particularly to the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Connected Communities that we might ask Ms Berwick a little later, but I invite all of you to respond as you think appropriate. In advance of responding, particularly for Hansard's benefit, I ask you to indicate your name if I do not do so.

In the 2008 National Indigenous Reform Agreement, the New South Wales Government agreed to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in a decade. Is the department still on track and confident that that will be achieved by 2018?

Dr CULLEN: At the outset I wish to say that the commitment made to halving the gap in relation to the performance of Aboriginal students in literacy is a complex issue in which there are no simple processes or structures put in place to ensure achieving that. What we are doing, though, is working very hard to support the learning of Aboriginal students, in particular in terms of supporting their literacy outcomes, to achieve that target. There are a few things that have happened in that space in recent years which have dramatically changed the landscape not only in terms of the way in which we teach literacy generally but in terms of how we target other learning of Aboriginal students in particular. I direct you to a couple of initiatives that we have undertaken as a department, but moreover some strategies in which we are involved that are whole-of-government strategies, which I think are getting us on track, and down the track we might be looking at moving close towards that target that was set some years ago.

The audit report mentions the Best Start assessment and the literacy continuums, which are two areas in which we have done much work in recent years to embed practices in classrooms. We are on target with the audit recommendations in relation to extending the Best Start software, which is a tracking tool to monitor very closely the literacy performance of all students and Aboriginal students as they move from kindergarten to year 6. By the end of next year we will have that tracking mechanism completed for year 8, so it crosses over that very important transition period from year 6 to year 7. But the tracking mechanism is only part of the picture. What we have with a literacy continuum is an opportunity for teachers and for students and their parents to engage critically with the eight aspects of literacy that are part of that continuum, which include things like phonics, reading, writing, comprehension and speaking, among other things.

I am quite happy to table the literacy continuum, K-10, for members of the Committee to look at. That tool not only provides a great standpoint for teachers, students and their parents to monitor their kids' performance but the software component also has teaching ideas and parent teaching ideas as you run off the various reports. Reports can be generated for individual students and so on. The data from that software also enables the teacher to monitor individual students' learning. The kids also monitor their own learning. I am quite happy to table another document that shows quite graphically kids plotting their own learning across that continuum, which is a very important part of learning. It can be analysed at school level and at State level if need be. We recognise the difficulty that teachers face in translating statewide targets and big targets like Closing the Gap to classroom practice, but we believe the literacy continuum and the associated software is actually bringing teachers into a very continuous process of monitoring performance, not just for year 3, for year 5, for year 7 and year 9 point-in-time National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] assessments, even though we are starting to see some lifting in those as well.

Let me talk about why we believe that those literacy initiatives are yielding fruit. When we look at the \$261 million Early Action for Success strategy, which is our approach to the Minister's Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan, we are seeing significant evidence. In the 92 schools that have engaged in that program so far, 2,677 are Aboriginal students. Next year we will be doubling the size of that program and it will capture 200

schools so there will be a significant increase in Aboriginal students. Because the use of the literacy continuum is at the centre of that program, our data is already showing us that the percentage of students who were performing at or above expectation at the beginning of 2012 increased by 44 per cent for the Aboriginal students involved in the program across the State. Bear in mind that is across 92 schools at the moment. We have also seen a related decrease in the percentage of kids below expectation of 21 per cent. When we look at the growth of kids from year 1 to year 2, we are seeing through Early Action for Success for Aboriginal students there has been a 19 per cent increase in students at or above expectation and a related decrease in students below expectation of 21 per cent. The use of the literacy continuum in the context of those schools—and bear in mind that we encourage all schools to use the literacy continuum—provides a particular window to see that there have been some stunning improvements in terms of their performance.

The other strategy I might talk about is the \$59 million Federal Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership, which is a critical partnership for us because it is built around using the literacy continuum or its related cousin the numeracy continuum. We have 55,000 students across the State in 402 schools involved in the partnership of whom over 5,000 are Aboriginal. It is a K-8 program: It is capturing schools from kindergarten to year 8. Importantly we have 175 secondary schools that are using the continuum and building whole-school approaches to literacy around that continuum. Bearing in mind that the measurement period was only five months, from May to November, we have seen a 24 per cent increase in Aboriginal students' performance in that partnership at or above expectation and a reduction of 19 per cent of those students below expectation. We are seeing these as really clear windows to see the power of the continuum where schools have whole focus.

To roll that out right across the system, my unit is developing materials this year about using the literacy continuum. We are using the cases from those two very important projects to illustrate it to teachers and to provide further information. But even with the strategies themselves, we have over 16 per cent of the State's Aboriginal students in those two initiatives. I am fairly buoyant that the sort of change in practices and the power of that diagnostics tool of the continuum and the associated software are foregrounding significant opportunity to change the way that we teach literacy, and in particular to target the needs of Aboriginal students.

CHAIR: Dr Cullen, you have provided a lot of useful information, which is great.

Dr CULLEN: Yes.

CHAIR: My question is: Do the department and the Government still stand by the target for 2018? I must point out that despite your encouragingly having pointed to some positive trends, including the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy results over the last year, the reality is that the Audit Office report in 2012 is damning.

Dr CULLEN: Yes.

CHAIR: It said that over the previous decade there had been no substantive improvement and that there was no evidence to support the proposition that the commitment of the previous Government in 2006 to close the gap by 2016 was attainable. I want to hear whether you are confident, based on some of the information that you have but also on a reaffirmation of commitments, that we will halve the gap by 2018. Could you answer that question, please?

Dr CULLEN: I am not going to say that we will halve the gap, but what I am saying—

CHAIR: You are retracting from that target?

Dr CULLEN: No, no. I am not retracting. I am saying that what we are doing is that we are certainly working towards that target and that expectation. The initiatives and the strategies that we have put in place, partly as a consequence of the Audit Office report, are initiatives that we would have been taking in the normal course of events. I am optimistic that we will be working well towards achieving that target.

CHAIR: Does that target stand, or not?

Mr SMYTH-KING: The department is committed to the targets that were set. Unless they are re-evaluated and re-established at some time in the future, we will strive to meet those targets. When you are talking about Closing the Gap, we are also here talking about something else that is really important, which is

about the performance of all students, including Aboriginal students. As you lift the performance of all students, you are also focusing on the gap between Aboriginal students and the increasing performance of other students. We want to increase the performance of all students. We want to close the gap or improve the learning and literacy of Aboriginal students, and we will be striving to do that as we move forward. I cannot give a commitment here that the department will be able to deliver exactly on those targets; they were set at a point in time before.

I think the other important aspect of this is that, prior to 2013 and moving into 2014, we had a very different approach to the way in which we provided additional support and interventions for children who had additional need in our schools—we had a programmatic approach—and I think that the change that we have seen in terms of Local Schools, Local Decisions, the way in which the budget is now being allocated to schools and progressively built upon, and the way in which we are devolving responsibility and local decision-making and flexibility in that to schools will see significant gains being made along the lines that David Cullen has talked about.

CHAIR: The 2008 National Indigenous Reform Agreement committed to halving the gap by 2018. The 2021 State Plan outlines one of the priorities as halving the gap between New South Wales Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in relation to reading and numeracy by 2018. I find it disturbing that the department cannot simply say, "We are committed to achieving that target." Also, why has the word "writing" not been included with numeracy and literacy in those targets? Is that an oversight or was there a conscious decision to exclude writing?

Dr CULLEN: I can answer that. I was not part of the decision-making process, but I can give you an insight. In terms of testing programs, reading is much easier to assess with more reliability, and I think it might be a function that writing is more difficult to assess in large-scale testing programs from a reliability point of view. That is the insight from me.

CHAIR: The Auditor-General recommended that the department needs more realistic targets with which to assess its progress in improving the literacy of Aboriginal students. The department listed implementation, and you have referred to a new school-based assessment and accountability framework as an action to be taken, which is good. You have talked about some of the progress and you might want to talk a little bit more about that. I note a quote from a media release today where Minister Dominello said, quite appropriately:

Quantifying 'the gap' and setting targets is an important part of monitoring progress in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Having an accountability framework which meaningfully assesses the progress is very important. In addition to progress in terms of implementing the accountability framework, I would like to ask you to give a progress update on where we are from 2012 through to the beginning of 2014 in terms of closing that gap.

Ms SIMMONS: I will answer that in a couple of ways. I must admit it is very difficult to hear.

CHAIR: Yes, and I apologise for that. A directive may have gone out earlier to ask the builders to be quiet, and in the break I will take personal initiative to make sure that they stop.

Ms SIMMONS: As I said, I will answer it in a couple of ways in terms of the framework and the ability to track the work that is occurring in schools and the outcomes for students. The department agrees that we need to effectively track the work that occurs in schools and this needs to occur over time—

CHAIR: I am sorry. I would adjourn except that we are under time pressure. I apologise for the noise.

Ms SIMMONS: We now have systems in place where we are tracking student performance, where we are able to set local improvement targets, and they are based on realistic assessment of where students are at in terms of literacy learning. Dr Cullen mentioned earlier the Best Start software. We also have software which is called the Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool, and my colleague Mr Smyth-King is able to talk further about that. We also have another system which is called our Student Administration and Learning Management Solution. That is data that schools are able to utilise to help inform targets. In light of the data that is available to schools and in light of some of the other reorganisation that has occurred in the department in 2013, we are in a place where we are able to triangulate the information that we have that is able to inform us about where we are heading in terms of reducing the gap.

In 2012 the department established the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. That is to oversee processes associated with the efficiency and effectiveness of the department's initiatives. They have developed an evaluation framework in consultation with the New South Wales Government evaluation framework. Sitting alongside that is the accountability framework. So in 2013 we have been working on the development of the framework to support principals in local decision-making, which is a school-based assessment evaluation accountability framework, which is what you were referring to in your question. In 2013 more than 100 government schools have been involved in the testing and planning tools used in the system, the school-based data that I have been referring to and performance measures to map links between student assessment and performance and strategic directions to inform school planning. That also includes monitoring the targets of student performance, particularly Aboriginal student performance.

During 2014, supported by the introduction of systems to track student performance, we will roll out a school-based evaluation and accountability framework with clear expectations and accountabilities that will assist schools to manage their resources in an environment where there is, as referred to earlier, increased local decision-making. The improvement measures and accountability will address the performance of Aboriginal students in the system and at a local school community level. That is on track for completion by December 2014.

CHAIR: There were some targets around December 2013 for the personalised learning and support to be made available. I apologise for the noise; it makes it difficult for us to properly comprehend what you are saying.

Mr GREG PIPER: Even without the noise it is pretty hard, so we need to be able to concentrate.

CHAIR: That is right. I apologise to the witnesses.

Mr GREG PIPER: Ms Berwick, what is your general attitude to the responses we have so far heard in relation to the targets and how things are performing in relation to the changes?

Ms BERWICK: From our point of view, we would suggest Aboriginal disadvantage and gaining access and opportunities in education is difficult. There are lots of factors that influence that access and attainment in education. A lot of it is actually about poverty and the social indicators that we come from. One of the things that we look towards is the relationship that we have with the department and the advocacy role that we play in representing the voice of Aboriginal people and what their needs and aspirations are in achieving what they want to achieve in the world that we live in. From that point of view, we actually advocate very strongly to the department in what they need to do and what they need to include in their policies and practices that will impact on how we take our place in this world. A lot of the things that the department has done are sometimes a direct result of our advocacy, or we have included our views, and generally, or by and large, we do not always agree with everything but we come to a compromise and arrangement where Aboriginal people's interests are allowed to be expressed.

Mr GREG PIPER: You are satisfied with the range of actions taken by the department at this stage and you believe that they are working to implement the agreements that have been undertaken?

Ms BERWICK: To be honest, it is probably a little bit early to tell. Some of the things, as Brian Smyth-King said, are in their infancy stages in terms of the major reforms that are happening and I would say that they are on track. There are some things that we will obviously work towards to see whether they do achieve what they have been set out to achieve, and I guess that is around the accountability about what we in the community see, and then work with the department to try to put it back to where it is. In terms of whether we are satisfied that things will be achieved, as I said, the reforms are quite early, in their infancy, and I guess time will tell.

Mr GREG PIPER: The discussion we are having today is pertinent because national discussion is happening at the moment. They have lined up very nicely. With the intentions spoken of by the Prime Minister in the last week or so, is there anything on the horizon or tangible in those national discussions to advance the delivery of programs to reduce the gap in education standards?

Mr SMYTH-KING: If I can respond to that question, which is a really pertinent one, I outlined at the beginning that this is a space that has a long history and it is also a space that has many variables. There is no

single thing that is going to make a difference. I think we are naïve to think and continue to think that there may well be a solution just around the corner that we can bring along and implement. For every kid, their reasons for going to school and continuing or not continuing can be very different. What is really critical in this space—and it was in the paper today mentioned around Glebe Public School where I think the principal said that it was not rocket science; this is a place kids want to be, they want to come here every day and they want to engage. What we have really got to start focusing on is in addition to the programmatic interventions that have traditionally been there, the particular things that might be done for reading or writing or whatever, making a kid come to school and stay there is not actually going to solve the problem. What we have to do is make kids want to be there. I guess you have to look at the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and the recognition that is given to Aboriginal people and their cultures and histories. I think that is what Cindy Berwick is really talking about, and that has to be as much embraced as anything else in this space because if we are going to make a difference we need to make a difference that that is where Aboriginal kids want to be.

When you look at our retention and school attendance data, we have a much higher level of school attendance in the primary years than we do in the secondary years. That is a real issue. We have an initiative that has been put in place around rural and remote education. We know that that is a significant issue for us, that kids who are going to schools in rural and remote New South Wales do not fare as well in terms of their education experience. Seventy-eight per cent of Aboriginal kids go to schools in rural New South Wales. What we have to do is look at the way in which each school, and the teachers that teach in them, are skilled and positioned to engage not only in the relationships they have with Aboriginal students and their families but also in terms of the educational journey they take kids through.

Mr GREG PIPER: Speaking specifically about the teachers and engagement with students, I imagine there would be benefits in having a higher ratio of Aboriginal teachers or persons within the system? Can you advise what the percentage of Aboriginal teachers or persons in other roles within the education system might be, and has it increased as part of this awareness?

Mr SMYTH-KING: I will let my colleague Cindy answer the question. I do not have the figures in respect of the number of Aboriginal people that we have. We are happy to take that question on notice.

Ms BERWICK: It is one of the things that we have advocated for, role models and the value that Aboriginal people contribute when they are employed in classrooms and front offices. We have been a strong advocate for the programs that the department has taken up. I think we lead the country. There are more than 800 Aboriginal teachers in schools. A number of field staff and Aboriginal education officers exist in schools. We have advocated for Aboriginal people to become teachers so the department has increased their teacher scholarship program from 25 years ago up to 80 people that they now sponsor. This has been going on for a number of years. Now that there is a critical mass of Aboriginal teachers in schools, the next thing was how to get them in leadership positions and how to take them in leadership positions. In the last couple of years a national leadership program has been put in place to provide those classroom teachers with the skills and equipment that will allow them to be merit selected or be part of the merit selection process to pick up the leadership positions. Over the past couple of years I understand from the meetings I have had with the department that there has been an increase in Aboriginal people in principal positions in schools and taking on the leadership roles. That is an example of the community's value in the advocacy role that the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group plays within the relationship to be able to work with the department to achieve something.

Mr GREG PIPER: Thank you.

CHAIR: At this point I and the Committee acknowledge that there have been a lot of positive initiatives coming out of the Department of Education in recent years, and in the main they have been referred to today. I want to ask in particular about the Student Administration Learning Management [SALM] tool and then we will move to the Connected Communities initiative. I note that the Committee intends to visit two of those Connected Communities at Wilcannia and Menindee on Monday. I hear Wilcannia is more challenging than Menindee. That is good news for Menindee. Perhaps significant progress is yet to occur in Wilcannia. We will also be visiting a school in Broken Hill.

In respect of the Student Administration and Learning Management tool, I understand it was implemented in 229 schools between September and November last year and it is being rolled out to the remaining New South Wales public schools. I am trying to bring the discussion back not so much to the initiatives, because there have been a lot of great initiatives that are continuing, but how we are effectively

tracking and analysing students' performance and needs over time and how we are monitoring it so that we are getting more meaningful feedback and progress reports as we go and we do not end up a decade down the track saying, "It did not work. Why did it not work?" Some of what you have talked about is encouraging in that regard, but what progress can you give us from the rollout of the SALM tool on how things might be progressing?

Ms SIMMONS: I will answer that in a number of ways. The SALM tool is one system that is going to assist us with the tracking and monitoring of Aboriginal student outcomes in our schools. As you have indicated, the SALM system was rolled out between September and November in 2013. It is ongoing work and it is in this context that the department advises the Committee that continuing to roll out solutions in all of our government schools will be done in a time frame that is sustainable for schools. Whilst we have got SALM, we also have the business intelligence tool or platform, which is a platform that will enable us to bring a whole number of different data sources together, which includes information relating to NAPLAN, the information that we have around Best Start, the planned software and some of the information from there. There might be information that comes from the Higher School Certificate, information from SALM, so it will be a platform that will bring all of the information together into one database where we will be able to monitor and track the performance of all students, but particularly we will be able to aggregate the information and make links to all of the different data sources for our Aboriginal students into one database where we will be able to track that system at a school level. That business intelligence platform has been planned for rollout in 2014.

CHAIR: The audit report referred to collecting some of the information at a local level and across the State, but didn't it also say we need to focus on the regional level more?

Ms SIMMONS: In 2013 the department underwent realignment. We have one State one system, so Local Schools, Local Decisions, and as was indicated earlier, we will progressively work towards 70 per cent of the budget being rolled out to schools. Data will be aggregated at a whole-of-system level but we will not be in a position to aggregate data at a regional level because there is no regional structure. Targets will be monitored at school level and at a system level.

CHAIR: That reflects the restructuring of the Education Department, which is consistent, so I understand that. I will direct the next question to Ms Berwick. The department's evaluation of the involvement and support of Aboriginal parents in the Aboriginal community appears to be essentially through the actions of the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. Are there Aboriginal community engagements and involvement activities not captured by the AECG and how do schools report on and share information about such activities? Perhaps that might then be a good lead-in to the Connected Communities issue.

Ms BERWICK: The New South Wales AECG represents a portal to the community. We have 126 local AECGs that operate around the State. Anybody can be a member. We see that we are a facilitator to the rest of the community. We have strong partnerships with the land council and with the area health services. We work in partnership. We are a member of the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations. We represent all of those things. Where schools have the advantage that there is a local AECG, it is their access to the community and not just members of the AECG. It is members of the broader Aboriginal community who are interested in education and training. I know that schools have relationships with their local Aboriginal land councils. Schools have relationships with the Aboriginal medical services and it is a reflection of all of those organisations, wherever they sit in the community, who they have relationships with, but if they do not have that relationship, the local AECG can help facilitate those relationships for new principals and teachers at the school.

Over the past couple of years the department has rolled out a Connecting to Country program, which is professional learning for teachers and principals about how they form relationships. It is an introduction to their local community. The AECG facilitates that program but they involve all of the community. One of the days is about introducing the school and the teachers to the local services, the local providers, the elders in the community. If you go to Wilcannia, a good-news story is that they did their Connecting to Country program with the whole school last week and it was very successful by all accounts. It is led by the local community. All of a sudden the local community become teachers, the school teachers are the students, and it is about building the capacity of those teachers to give them knowledge about our history, which is their history, and how they become responsive to their needs and our aspirations of that. It has been independently evaluated by the department. It is the community that leads it. The department only sends the teachers along. By and large, from all of the evaluations that have been done, it is a hugely successful program that has effected change in the way that teachers practise their craft in classrooms.

CHAIR: Is the Connecting to Country program the same as Connected Communities?

Ms BERWICK: No, it is different.

CHAIR: I was not sure if it was part of it. It has been rolled out in 15 communities, as I understand it, including Wilcannia.

Ms BERWICK: I reckon they stole our name. That is just my view.

CHAIR: Before I ask representatives from the department to give their angle on the same questions, are there other ways that the schools can report on and share information about some of those activities that might involve land councils but that may not involve the department? Does that information flow back so that it is collected?

Ms BERWICK: They have set up reference groups in the connected community schools. The reference groups have a variety of people from the community on it. The only person from the school that is on it is the school principal. It is chaired by the local AECG president. It has a wide range of representatives from the local community on it. The department may need to answer how it does the broader community. Certainly the information we receive is shared with the broader community.

CHAIR: Thank you. I am willing to invite representatives from the department to make any additional comment on that before I pass to Dr Lee. I have been unduly hogging the questions. Does anyone from the department want to add anything to the last series of questions?

Mr SMYTH-KING: I reinforce the comments that Cindy has made in respect of the very critical role that the New South Wales AECG has in connecting Aboriginal people throughout New South Wales with the educational journey. One of the areas that Cindy did not underscore is the critical role that her organisation plays in building the capability of Aboriginal people to have the confidence to engage in education. What we are now seeing is much greater engagement in that, and it was reflected by a group of secondary principals I met with earlier this week when I asked them about the value of personalised learning plans for Aboriginal children. We have been looking very closely at what those measures are and how we move forward in a way that is going to better meet the needs of all kids. About 60 per cent of all Aboriginal kids have a personalised learning plan [PLP]. It initially evolved out of our work with the AECG and the need to enable dialogue between family and Aboriginal kids and their schools about their aspirations, where they were going and what they were doing. That is what a PLP is all about.

When you look across the State, not every school has been able to do that. Where they have, principals resoundingly reported—even this week—that they have been a powerful mechanism to bring Aboriginal people, particularly parents, to the school, to have a structured dialogue around their aspirations for their children and the ways in which they were going to realise those together. That is a powerful thing that we need to continue to build on. As we do, we need to also move—and this comes to much of the stuff that my other colleagues were talking about earlier today—into the space of being able to put in place a process by which those kids who need additional support are actually given the additional support, not in an artefact like a PLP but in the day-to-day work in their school and the practices that they have. That then becomes the ongoing dialogue between the parent, the student and the family.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Dr GEOFF LEE: The establishment of the Centre for Educational Statistics in Evaluation is obviously a good idea to measure the efficacy of the programs that the department delivers and funds. Can someone share some light on the Aboriginal education programs in respect of the relative cost efficiency and effectiveness?

Mr SMYTH-KING: I might ask my colleagues if they wish to make comment on this but, as an initial comment, we have to move away from the notion that we have got a programmatic approach, that there is a particular program for Aboriginal students. What we have to re-emphasise is that the efficacy of our various interventions and the options that teachers use to teach kids are evidence based and cost effective. The Government's delivery of an evaluation framework in August or September 2013 has been a very important initiative for us, because what we have been able to do in the months since then through to January this year is develop our response, the way in which education is now going to start looking at the efficacy of programs and the cost of delivery so that in the new organisational arrangements we have got, the new way of doing business

around devolving decision-making locally, that schools will be able to—with confidence—look at the options they have available, what teachers might be able to do with various kids and the learning needs that they have and be able to draw those into the school through the mechanisms that we are now progressively putting in place. What is important to understand in this particular context is—as I have mentioned earlier—one size does not fit all. You cannot mandate, if you like, from a central point a particular program that is going to work for everybody. Our experience is that a program that works in one school may not work nearly as well in another school for a whole host of reasons. It is about how schools then use what we guide and advise on to best effect at the local level.

Dr GEOFF LEE: Every learner is different, but how do we measure the efficiency of the extra money that we give to support people from low socioeconomic areas such as Aboriginals or people with a disadvantage?

Mr SMYTH-KING: The connection between the moneys that might go out and their line of effect, that is where we were with the programmatic approach. We would roll out a program and then assess what its impact might have been. Invariably, we would have assessed the inputs rather than the outcomes. You have to come back to the sorts of things that were profiled nationally in the last day or so around those indicators of educational outcomes. It is about the way in which kids are retained in school and the attendance levels of schools. There is a whole range of proxy measures that reflect very much the impact that we are having. Inside the space with an individual child who has an additional learning need, where we have invested additional money, we have very much moved forward on personalised learning and support. There are four elements in personalised learning and support that we are very much focusing on schools developing. The first one is around consultation. Did you actually consult and liaise with the student and the parent and those who have knowledge about the child? Have you assessed the child's need and pinpointed it? David has talked about that in respect of the literacy continuum. There is a whole lot of wellbeing and other educational pinpointing that we need to do. Beyond that it is about what teachers then do day in and day out to respond to that child's assessed need and how the system—the school—evaluates that. That is the metric.

What we capture in schools around all of that are the evidences that schools have. New South Wales work in this space, personalised learning and support, is now being adopted nationally through the Commonwealth Government's approach to collecting data on students with additional need as part of a consistent data approach across 24 education jurisdictions. What I am trying to emphasise is that it is about the process in schools that teachers will take to provide for the need of the kid. What we have to have sitting behind that is a robust way of giving teachers guidance and schools guidance and advice on what options they have in respect of the interventions that they might choose—the tools that they might use to move forward the learning of those kids. That is a different space to where we have been previously. What we have previously done is had a programmatic response with a string that might have been tied at a particular point in the organisation through to the school and it would have worked by and large in isolation of other things. We have to try to move away from that.

That is the challenge in the change process that we are currently engaged in. We have phenomenal change happening in our schools. We are changing what teachers teach, we are changing the way we recognise teacher performance, we are changing the accountabilities that schools have, and we are giving them more responsibility. It is bringing those things together effectively for us that is going to answer the sorts of issues that you are raising, rather than looking at a programmatic approach to a particular program and how effective it might be. That is what schools have to choose from.

Dr GEOFF LEE: I agree that personalised learning programs such as giving teachers and principals and schools and the community a whole range of tools and capabilities to choose the best ones that suit their own individual classes and students is the way to do it in respect of individual programming for students and what the learner wants to learn best, but eventually we have to measure it to say what works and what does not work. You have set up a Centre for Educational Statistics in Evaluation. What does it measure? Does it measure the proxy values, that kids turn up to school? At the end of the day we are trying to halve the gap by 2018 and it is a fairly definitive measure. One would suspect that you would have a dashboard to say these are our proxy values that we should hit in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 so we do not reach a point in 2017 and go, "Look at that, we missed." Can you imagine that? So the first time that the problems are identified, we correct it. By simply saying, yes, we have personalised learning, eventually we have to aggregate and be able to measure something. That is what concerns me. I agree with you entirely that every student, every community and every class is different and we need to give teachers the ability and the tools and the capabilities and the time and effort, but how do we know where to put our efforts if we are not measuring these things? Eventually we do a

NAPLAN test and say these kids are above in respect of what they should know in respect of numeracy and literacy or below in respect of numeracy and literacy.

Mr SMYTH-KING: My colleague Jane Simmons made reference to the business intelligence system that we are putting in. That is coming out of that particular area that you have made reference to within the department. What it is doing is drawing together the wide range of data sources that we have within the department to provide what you have described as a dashboard that the system will use. In particular, the dashboard being visible and used by schools in their day-to-day work so that we can then monitor as a system across the organisation the various issues that you are talking about. In fact, I think the question that you have posed is very much tied up in the development of the business intelligence tool and the way in which schools and the system will manage its data, use its data to have evidence-based decision-making as we move forward. Sitting with that will then be the processes we want schools to engage in to identify the kids in those mechanisms that I have just talked about as being vulnerable to continuing in school, achieving success against the New South Wales syllabus. All of this is rooted in the fact that all New South Wales schools are mandatorily implementing the New South Wales syllabus, and that is the measure against which we—

Dr GEOFF LEE: Maybe you cannot answer this, but how long will the dashboard take to develop? Will it be the end of 2014 or beginning of 2014?

Ms SIMMONS: The plan to roll out the business intelligence program is early 2014.

Dr GEOFF LEE: What month? I am not holding you to account. Is it February?

Ms SIMMONS: I am not in a position to give a specific date.

Dr GEOFF LEE: But before halfway through the year, one would expect?

Ms SIMMONS: Yes. We are on track with that.

Dr GEOFF LEE: Will it expect principals and teachers to enter more data or is it simply a bespoke system where it puts it together without having to put more onus on schools and teachers?

Ms SIMMONS: As I mentioned in my response earlier, it is a system or a platform that is able to bring a whole lot of different data sources together, not just student performance. It could bring together information about student attendance and so on, so it enables schools and the system to make links about what is happening at a school level or an individual student level so that we can measure the student outcomes.

Dr GEOFF LEE: How will it meet those needs? Will someone have to re-enter the data? When visiting our schools, teachers and principals are upset that they have to enter information two or three times about the same student. We must collect data, and I am a data person, but you have to face the principals and they say we enter the attendance on one bit and their marks on another bit. I just shake my head and think this is madness in the twenty-first century.

Ms SIMMONS: The business intelligence platform will enable us to utilise data that has already been entered and the Centre for Educational Statistics in Evaluation is the section of the department that looks after all of the data. There are a whole lot of different data sources. The schools will not be entering the data as such. It is a system that is able to bring all different data sources from the department together.

Dr GEOFF LEE: Excellent. Thank you.

CHAIR: I will shortly pass to Mr Bassett. As a question on notice, and we might pick this up later because we have only five minutes left, I am interested in knowing what the business intelligence platform will tell us and in respect of closing the gap on literacy, how that will transparently indicate progress towards the 2018 target. For example, how it will be reported and exactly what will be reported? I am also interested in how that ties in with the new appointment of the Deputy Ombudsman in New South Wales who will be pulling together a lot of data.

Mr BART BASSETT: Having accepted that it is not just about the program but an overall approach, the Teaching English Language Learners program, how does that ensure that Aboriginal students are provided with the additional support they might need for that particular program, which was in the submission?

Dr CULLEN: I will take that question on notice and get back to you with a response.

Mr BART BASSETT: That is fine.

CHAIR: We have a few questions on notice, including the earlier question on Aboriginal teacher numbers and trends. We have some indication in the answer from Ms Berwick, but perhaps in respect of some of those trends on Aboriginal numbers we could have the department figures as well, which you have taken on notice. Are there any comments or observations or questions through the Chair that the Audit Office has in relation to anything that has been said or anything that might have been missed?

Mr CRUMLIN: No, thank you, Mr Chair.

CHAIR: Does any other member of the Committee have any comments or questions before we conclude?

Dr GEOFF LEE: I think it is great that 2012-2013 sounds promising in terms of improvements in literacy. It is a great step forward. My interest in looking at the key performance indicators that you need to set and monitor are simply that you do not want to get to 2017 and find we are not on target and someone walks away saying, "Oh well, we missed that one." We spend a lot of money, effort and dedication on education but if we do not actually measure it and monitor it every six months or whatever the right period is, we will not reach those targets.

CHAIR: I also ask you to take on notice any feedback from the Connected Communities initiative. I am interested in how successful that has been. I know it involves a lot more than what the Department of Education and Communities can directly control. But in relation to that and the other questions we have foreshadowed, the transcript will be available to guide us in getting those questions consolidated in writing. We would then ask you to respond to those questions, from your notes and future correspondence which we will send you confirming those areas of further inquiry. The replies to those questions would also form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to those further questions and any others that we might have?

Mr SMYTH-KING: Yes, we would.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I would like to thank all of you very much for appearing before the Committee today. I know that sometimes questions are not anticipated or easy to answer. We do appreciate the significant efforts that you are making not only in terms of the hearing today but more importantly in improving the situation for all our students, not just Aboriginal students, although we do focus particularly on Aboriginal students in our public hearing today. Again thank you for appearing today.

(Short adjournment)

CHAIR: I welcome representatives of the New South Wales Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Community Relations Commission. We have already indicated to previous witnesses a request to turn off mobile phones and as it is a public hearing the media may be in attendance but they are not at the moment. I understand that the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders relating to the examination of witnesses, including procedural information have been made available to all witnesses. Before we proceed with other matters does anyone have any questions of a procedural nature in relation to any of the information or providing evidence today in the hearing process? All is good. As part of the formalities I ask each of the witnesses to either take an oath or make an affirmation.

CHRIS ECCLES, Director General, Department of Premier and Cabinet,

GEORGINA HARRISON, Acting Deputy Director General, Department of Premier and Cabinet,

HAKAN HARMAN, Chief Executive Officer, Community Relations Commission, and

STEFFANIE VON HELLE, Director, Policy and Community Relations, Community Relations Commission, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: The Committee has received two submissions from your organisations and I note that the submission from the Department of Premier and Cabinet corrected some matters relating to the submission from the Community Relations Commission. I might clarify in a moment how much of the previous submission from the CRC still stands but in terms of a starting position I presume we will treat those submissions as part of your formal evidence. However, I would like to clarify a couple of matters. Are you happy to proceed on that basis?

Mr ECCLES: Thanks, Chair.

CHAIR: The submission from the Department of Premier and Cabinet clarified some earlier statements. In terms of the formal acceptance of the recommendations, I understand that has been retracted or not accepted. How much otherwise of the CRC's submission does or does not stand; I take it that the rest of the response does stand unless it is otherwise indicated now?

Mr HARMAN: If it is okay with the Committee, from my perspective I would be happy to make an introductory statement which may or may not address some of those issues.

CHAIR: I am happy to proceed on that basis. I was going to ask you each to make an opening statement but I just wanted to clarify that because it will influence the nature of the questioning as we go forward.

Mr HARMAN: Sure.

CHAIR: If you want to cover that in your opening statements I am happy to go in any order but I invite both organisations to make an opening statement?

Mr HARMAN: If that is okay I am happy to proceed on that basis. Thank you, Chair. First and foremost, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee this afternoon and again I would just like to point out that it is actually day 14 in the chair as chief executive officer of the commission so I do hope that I can answer some or all of your questions.

Mr GREG PIPER: Happy two-week anniversary.

Mr HARMAN: Thank you very much. My colleague Steffanie von Helle will fill in any gaps in my knowledge of this particular performance audit. On that basis, I have been in the public sector since 2002 and have had the privilege and the opportunity to work with the Audit Office on a number of audits as a chief financial officer, first at the commission and the last three years at the State Library of New South Wales right next-door and the last two weeks back at the commission in the capacity of chief executive officer. They do fantastic work. The performance audits that they undertake play a vital role in the public space and they put forward excellent recommendations so I just want to acknowledge that right up-front.

I have been briefed on this and I have tried to distil and sink into, as much as possible, the particular issue about the Auditor-General's review of settling humanitarian entrants into New South Wales. I am happy to receive feedback from the Committee on the issues that we will consider during the course of today but in terms of a couple of points that I have been briefed on, which we may refer back to, the first is that the CRC and the Department of Premier and Cabinet [DPC] worked together during the performance audit and developed a joint response to the overall direction of the report's recommendations. Looking through that brief the DPC and the CRC have both agreed that the Auditor-General's findings on this issue—it may be a strong word "misrepresent"—took a different view of the role of New South Wales in the settlement of humanitarian entrants within New South Wales.

However, the commission and the DPC did agree to respond to some of the recommendations and we are continuing very closely—I think I have met twice already with officers from the DPC just in those two weeks and we have also agreed to a date for the New South Wales Government Immigration and Settlement Planning Committee. As I understand it, that will be on 3 April. Secondly, I just want to reiterate that in my capacity as the chief executive officer I am responsible to a whole range of masters and one of those is the commission; it is an independent statutory authority and it has, through its legislation, the right to act independently, to undertake reviews and also through applying the principles of multiculturalism. In that frame the overview of the commission, its role and responsibility and how we do our work—I guess having worked there in the capacity of chief operating officer for some years gives me the capacity to talk about this.

The Principles of Multiculturalism Act is the enabling legislation for the CRC and it first and foremost recognises the different linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds of the residents of New South Wales and promotes equal rights and responsibilities for all residents of New South Wales. Our remit is to promote community harmony, community participation and access to services. The Act recognises the State's cultural diversity as a significant social and economic resource and asset. It also points to the fact that multiculturalism is a stated and deliberate policy of the State and that we take steps to ensure a cohesive and harmonious society. One of our main principal deliverables is a harmonious society and we do this through community consultation. The commission maintains a number of ongoing consultative processes, including participation of our commissioners in community networks of activities. We have a broad consultative role and we do this through regional advisory councils—10 of them.

CHAIR: I do not want to be rude but we probably all have a pretty good idea of what the CRC does. Can we focus mainly on your report please?

Mr HARMAN: Sure.

CHAIR: I am conscious that we want to try to finish by two o'clock for a couple of reasons so we have limited time.

Mr HARMAN: That is fine, Chair. I will wrap up there. The most important piece of activity for the commission is the Multicultural Policies and Services Program. That is a standard framework that enables every single agency in the sector, through the responsibility that is allocated to each of the chief executive officers of each agency, to ensure that they take account of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population that they service in providing their services. It is that framework that ensures that all the services provided through the public sector take into account all the different nuances of the minority groups. That is the most important piece of legislation, activity and role of the commission.

CHAIR: Thank you. I now invite Mr Eccles to make an opening statement. Then, unusually, I will ask the Audit Office to respond. In this situation, because there has been a bit of toing and froing, it will be useful to hear their perspective after hearing the opening statements.

Mr ECCLES: My remarks will be very brief, Chair, and go to what you describe as some of the latter part toing and froing, which principally came in the form of the Community Relations Commission submitting a document to which we responded, and then to which they responded. With the benefit of hindsight as between the two agencies, we could perhaps have handled that a bit more diplomatically and perhaps a bit less publicly. I do not think it was necessary that it rolled out in the way that it did. But the important things to note are the relationship, which is now very strong and cooperative—it always has been strong and cooperative—and our joint interest in supporting the effective operation of the Government immigration and settlement committee and enhancing the coordination of service delivery at the State level.

CHAIR: Mr Hehir or your representative, would you like to make a statement or comment?

Mr MATHIE: No.

Mr HEHIR: No, we do not.

CHAIR: We will move on to questions. I will make some observations, having read everything exhaustively a couple of times. My impression is that certainly in the initial response, which was called into question by a subsequent submission from the Community Relations Commission, it appeared that the Government as a whole did not accept the recommendations and the Government has confirmed that situation. My own reading of it is that I understand the explanation for rejecting those recommendations, but I do not necessarily agree that all the logic and reasoning behind rejection of the recommendations as they were presented is fully persuasive or totally based on factual interpretation as I would see it. But I think that is largely academic in the sense that there was foreshadowed action that essentially satisfies the essence of the report and the recommendations. I would now like to focus on testing actions that have been taken, consistent with what was promised in the response would be done. In that sense I will particularly focus on what the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Community Relations Commission will do, as indicated by them in that response, rather than focusing specifically on the nuts and bolts of what might have been disputed between the parties, which might be a distraction.

Mr ECCLES: Thank you, Chair. That is a generous way of approaching it. You are right: There is not much to be gained by going into some of the contested detail. The main initiative has been progress with the revitalisation of the Government immigration and settlement committee. Between the two agencies we have now agreed on new terms of reference. As the chief executive indicated, the first meeting will be on 3 April.

CHAIR: That is the first meeting, is it?

Mr ECCLES: The first meeting of the new committee will be on 3 April. The revitalisation of the terms of reference is accompanied by having a more senior level of representation on the committee. It will be co-chaired by the chief executive and one of my deputies, which reflects the importance we give to the committee. We will also insist on senior representation from agencies. Part of the problem, which I think was identified in the audit report, was that there was variable and not particularly senior buy-in to the committee's work by other agencies. Through the seniority of the chairing arrangement we will ensure that that seniority is replicated by the agencies around the place. That is the first thing.

The second thing that has occurred has been progress in relation to the Commonwealth's approach to settlement planning. One of the keys to the problems faced by the State was the opaque nature of the Commonwealth's decision-making in relation to settlement locations. With the new national settlement framework, which has been announced by the Prime Minister, we will have a senior officers committee of all jurisdictions dedicated to ensuring the sharing of data between the Commonwealth and the States around settlement planning. That implies they will be open to input from the States in coming to a view about settlement planning. Then the State will have the opportunity to get its coordination act together more systematically because we will have had both input into the settlement planning and also advance notice of where the other humanitarian entrants actually will be located. They were the two biggest issues, one of which was drawn to our attention by the Audit Office. I think we have made substantial progress on that front.

CHAIR: I agree that things appear to be heading in the right direction. I would like to test some of that more specifically. I must also say that I am concerned and disturbed that it has taken two full years to get a one and a half page document, which states the terms of reference for a committee. I would like to hear why it has taken two years to simply deliver a terms of reference document. There has been no meeting of the committee, which was meant to occur in December. Until this process of follow-up occurred, it seems as though nothing happened. With respect, it is an easy interpretation to make that the Government rejected the recommendations and was not going to do anything unless we followed this up.

Mr ECCLES: I might defer to others who are closer to the process, Chair, but I take your point that at face value, if there is a one and a half page terms of reference response to a report that is two years old, on any interpretation and whatever rationale that might emerge, that is not acceptable.

Ms von HELLE: I will answer that question, being the only person who has been involved from the inception of the report right through until now. A lot of time was taken in the actual review of the steering

committee. The Community Relations Commission, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and New South Wales Trade and Investment were involved in the review process. That involved testing expectations with all of the committees that the Community Relations Commission participates in or chairs in relation to immigration and settlement issues, of which there are many, and testing with our regional advisory councils.

It is a quite widespread consultation process that we are doing, with a similar thing happening with the Department of Premier and Cabinet and New South Wales Trade and Investment at the time. Some progress was made there. Also I think that changes in staffing, particularly in the Department of Premier and Cabinet and then with the leadership of the Community Relations Commission, had an impact in the later nine months, particularly with our former chair having a protracted leave arrangement. While he was going to leave originally in August, that extended to December and that made it very difficult, given the seniority of the expected chairing of the immigration and settlement planning committee. It was difficult to settle a date on the basis of that.

CHAIR: I am encouraged by Mr Eccles' frank response because that was my conclusion as well. I ask the Community Relations Commission or whoever is responsible to provide evidence, please, of what Ms von Helle has just indicated on that extensive consultation process. Certainly in terms of what was said would occur, there was going to be a review that was to consider development of a process to monitor and respond to humanitarian entrant settlement issues, to seek formal partnerships with the Commonwealth, New South Wales local government organisations and other relevant stakeholders, and to ensure that service provision is coordinated, planned and transparent. I still cannot see any of that in the terms of reference, other than that you have set up a structure that might then further explore those through some sort of review. I would be interested in seeing evidence that those matters actually have been subject to review in the context of forming the terms of reference. I also am interested in what progress has been made on each of those. We will draw down a little bit more specifically, but would you like to respond to that as a general comment or question?

Ms von HELLE: We do work particularly with the New South Wales State manager and another complicating factor is the Federal election and subsequent changes with the immigration and citizenship department, which now has split into functions of immigration and border protection and settlement outcomes. Correspondence with the Commonwealth Government has been difficult as they have been adjusting to new circumstances. Nevertheless, we have maintained operational relationships with senior staff in the Commonwealth Government. Part of the response to the Audit Office report is that we have gained access to govdex, which contains Commonwealth Government statistics about immigration decisions. They are not forecasting where people might be settled, but they are the first point of knowledge once a settlement decision has been made. I am sorry, I think I am going off track there. Would you mind repeating the question?

CHAIR: Could you provide evidence of what you have said in relation to the processes that you have outlined? I would be very interested to see any evidence that that process has actually occurred. I am highly dubious that it has, to be honest. When you get a page and a half document after two years, it does not seem as though a lot has actually occurred. The committee still has not met and it is not intended to meet until 3 April. I will leave that one on notice.

Mr HARMAN: We will take that on notice.

CHAIR: In relation to the third paragraph of not the Audit Office report but your combined response of what you would do, I refer to the Community Relations Commission—and this is going back two years—as the coordinating agency formally requesting the Commonwealth to provide regular data on humanitarian entrants, including statistics about intending humanitarian entrants and information about any planned release of asylum seekers from detention, and the statement that this information will greatly assist New South Wales in planning service provision. We read that a lot of government agencies are having problems because they are not getting that information. What has been done specifically in the last two years on that front?

Ms von HELLE: That is the reference I was making to having access to govdex, which is the Commonwealth's internal database that they share on a confidential basis with select government agencies. That has extended to the Community Relations Commission, the police, education and health. There may be more agencies that have applied through the Commonwealth and been successful. Basically, when those agencies are preparing advice to their Ministers or internally to their directors-general about matters relating to settlement, about topical issues relating to community harmony, et cetera, then they can access the settlement data that is available on govdex. That is used on a regular basis when briefing the Minister in that interim period.

CHAIR: The Community Relations Commission has access to govdex and there is information on that database. It would be useful if you were able to clarify what information is on that database.

Ms von HELLE: Yes.

CHAIR: And also how that information from govdex is being shared and utilised by the various New South Wales government agencies.

Ms von HELLE: Yes. I can answer how it is being shared right now. It is confidential information and it is made available to the subscribing government agencies for the purpose of briefing the Minister, so it is not able to be shared amongst government agencies, but the Commonwealth Government has made invitations to select government agencies, being some of the ones that I mentioned—the key service delivery agencies—to have access to that database.

CHAIR: Is the frustration that was clearly expressed in the Audit Office report from a range of government agencies being addressed now or not?

Ms von HELLE: Access to the data is available. The frustration regarding coordination still is unaddressed. The Immigration Settlement Planning Committee will be the structure that enables that coordination to happen, where the data accessed from all the different government agencies can be reviewed and monitored and discussed collaboratively.

CHAIR: Who is responsible ultimately for collecting all the useful data and measuring outcomes regarding humanitarian entrants at a New South Wales level?

Mr ECCLES: I imagine that the responsibility will reside with the two agencies and that will be driven through the committee, and the two agencies co-chair the committee. If you are looking for a single point of accountability so that you can look at someone and say, "Why have you not delivered?", I think the answer is that you will have to call us both back because the responsibility will reside between the two agencies—our responsibility in driving whole-of-government coordination of service delivery in complex domains and the Community Relations Commission's responsibility specifically for community relations.

CHAIR: Do you know how that compares with approaches in other Australian jurisdictions?

Mr ECCLES: I do not personally.

Ms von HELLE: No. The Community Relations Commission has previously been represented on the Select Council of Immigration and Settlement, which was disbanded in late 2012, which was the multi-jurisdictional forum which previous incarnations of the Immigration Settlement Planning Committee fed into, so that was where we would have inter-jurisdictional discussions about how this data works. The jurisdiction that has the most similarity to New South Wales is Victoria, in terms of size and the way that it is structured. In their equivalent organisation to the commission, they have a dedicated research position that does manage the data and can perform specific statistical functions.

Mr ECCLES: To complete the story about the national arrangement in relation to this, the Premier wrote to the Prime Minister on 27 September 2013 requesting the establishment of a multi-jurisdictional multilateral senior officers group to replace the group which expired, and the Prime Minister then wrote suggesting that it was a matter for Kevin Andrews, who has since convened a senior officers group to consider and finalise what I would call the national settlement framework, so there has been some movement at a multilateral level to enable the comprehensive sharing of information around placements.

Ms von HELLE: Having said that, for a year there was no opportunity for jurisdictions to communicate on a formal level to discuss immigration and settlement issues.

CHAIR: It seems from the report that some other State jurisdictions have been more successful in terms of their collaboration and dialogue with the Commonwealth Government than New South Wales. That is an observation.

Mr ECCLES: Yes.

Dr GEOFF LEE: My question relates to the consultation and collaboration between the Commonwealth and the New South Wales Government. I have every confidence that the Community Relations Commission and any other government department can cope with settlement of humanitarian entrants, but my observation is that the Federal Government seems to put lots of new humanitarian migrants in Western Sydney and State Government agencies are then responsible for their welfare and wellbeing. I think it would be fair to say that most people would be of the view that they dump them in Western Sydney and rely on third-party contractors to settle them, who then direct them to not-for-profit agencies to provide them with the essentials in life—like a bed and a refrigerator—and in fact we are setting them up to fail. How do we ensure that we are properly resourcing our State Government agencies in relation to issues created by the Federal Government?

We are bringing over all of these people, and some of them are being put in my seat of Parramatta—there have been some very famous ones come to Parramatta—but we dump them there and then they are set up to fail. They have nothing to do, many of them cannot work—there are all sorts of issues—and some poor government department like Housing is meant to find them a house and look after them. They speak very little English and there is no prospect of them entering a productive economic cycle and building a life for many years. It is a significant problem in Western Sydney that has been created through the Commonwealth. We have no control as a State.

Mr ECCLES: Without commenting specifically upon the adequacy or otherwise of the Commonwealth's response in the terms you describe, I think there is a recognition by the Commonwealth through the fact of the requirement for a national settlement framework, which is a partnership between the Commonwealth and the States, of the need for there to be better sharing of information to facilitate the better coordination of services by the State. I think the framework itself was set up in recognition of the need for things to be done better. We have set up a committee whose purpose is to ensure our end of the bargain, assuming the Commonwealth delivers its end of the bargain of providing the information in a timely fashion, so that we can deliver our services as effectively as possible.

Dr GEOFF LEE: I think that is a great first step, the sharing of information so we know we are housing one particular group of people, but resourcing is the problem. I feel for government departments. They just do not have enough resources. Many people who have no ability to live productive lives are set up in areas of Western Sydney which become ghettos of crime and antisocial behaviour. Unless we drive that message to the Commonwealth and say, "If you choose to bring in 20,000, 30,000 or 40,000, and you choose for them to be housed in a certain manner, you need to understand the cost"—I am sad to say it is about money. If we had lots of money it would be easy.

Mr ECCLES: And I have no doubt that as part of our engagement with the Commonwealth we will be drawing their attention to the circumstances of the individuals who are located at the Commonwealth's initiative in particular parts of Sydney.

Ms von HELLE: In terms of what New South Wales has been doing in the interim period from the report findings until now, one of the recommendations was about creating a better focus through the Multicultural Policies and Services Program on humanitarian entrants. The Multicultural Policies and Services Program, as described by our chief executive officer, is the way that we engage with New South Wales government agencies and their public accountability for providing equitable services. Through our Multicultural Coordinators Forum, which is where senior practitioners who are responsible for multicultural service delivery get together on a quarterly basis in Sydney and four times a year in the regional areas, we have had specific cross-agency focus and discussion on humanitarian entrants, have been required to report on an annual basis about what they are doing with regard specifically to the cohort that is mentioned in this report, and when we table the report in Parliament in April this year through the Minister for Citizenship and Communities there will be a section on what government agencies have reported to us that they are doing specifically for humanitarian entrants. While the New South Wales Government did not explicitly accept that recommendation when it was released, in the intervening time it has become a priority for business and we have seen the merit in it and taken action at a practical cross-government coordination level.

Dr GEOFF LEE: It is not a criticism of our State Government departments, I am not saying that; it is a criticism of the Commonwealth, and the need to drive home that it is great to report, and we all know the issues—I could tell you the issues right now and we could sit here and discuss those—but it is a case of resourcing, which equals money, and understanding that many humanitarian entrants when they come here have significant problems. If it is not housing, training and education requirements, they may have mental health issues which create further problems in our community. Despite the best efforts of the Community Relations

Commission, and no matter what meetings you have and how many people you talk to and identify, these problems have to be addressed in a realistic, resourced manner so that we do not set up these people to fail when we bring them over and then blame them for everything. It is simple.

CHAIR: Comments made by individual members of the Committee do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of the Committee.

Mr BART BASSETT: Will there be local government representation at the highest level with the new committee that is to be jointly chaired? Will there be a representative in the new body for rural and city-based local government regions, because what Dr Lee has mentioned is absolutely right. It is not just about State Government resource allocation. Local government so often fills the gaps that are left. Local councils take issues forward and in many circumstances we find local government picking up the pieces.

Ms von HELLE: Yes, the invitations will go out from the Department of Premier and Cabinet—they may have gone out; I am not sure. Certainly local government and the Commonwealth Government will be invited to nominate a representative of the same standing as the rest of the composition of the committee.

Mr HARMAN: I can clarify that because I have the list, if you wanted to put it on record.

CHAIR: Of who is on the committee?

Mr HARMAN: Yes.

CHAIR: Could you provide that to the committee?

Mr HARMAN: Yes, absolutely.

CHAIR: If the following questions cannot be answered briefly, I am happy to allow them to be taken on notice. How is the Community Relations Commission improving the public promotion of New South Wales government agencies' responsibility to provide interpreters? What are the existing initiative programs in place and how are these being improved?

Mr HARMAN: I am sorry, could you repeat that question?

CHAIR: It is a question on interpreters, which is I think a matter that was touched on in the report. I suggest that it be taken on notice, unless you particularly want to answer it now.

Mr HARMAN: I am happy to provide an overview of the interpreter services provided through the Community Relations Commission.

CHAIR: Briefly, particularly what improvements have been made and how they are made accessible to humanitarian entrants.

Mr HARMAN: We do not discriminate to our clientele. It is a policy of the State that interpreting services are provided and that the Community Relations Commission for a multicultural New South Wales and its language services arm is the commercial provider of language services of the State of New South Wales. There is another body, the health interpreter services, that has its own internal interpreter services. The Community Relations Commission is the provider of language services in over 100 languages and, as my colleague Steffanie von Helle mentioned, through our extensive reach through regional advisory councils, the multicultural advisory groups and senior coordinator forums, as we find out about emerging languages, we are the only provider that ensures equitable access to interpreting services.

CHAIR: In respect of public promotion of an agency's responsibility to provide interpreters, I suppose that service has been accessed because people know about it. If there are any improvements to that strategy or initiative, it would be useful to receive that.

Ms von HELLE: Might I add one now?

CHAIR: Yes. Sorry, I am trying to rush.

Ms von HELLE: We have improved our relationship with the agencies that have the contracts for settlement services, for example, Settlement Services International and Red Cross. We have begun engaging in their groups and letting them know that their clients can access our interpreters, particularly when they are working through government agencies. So their clients, many of whom are asylum seekers or humanitarian entrants, are eligible to access an interpreting service. That is one area where we have expanded our reach.

CHAIR: I have noted that you will give reference to humanitarian entrants in the report to be tabled in March, which is great. You have specified that for five years from June 2014 key agencies are required to provide a summary of current issues and outcomes for humanitarian entrants in relation to that program and its services. If there is any further information on how that reporting mechanism might assist in delivering services to New South Wales humanitarian entrants, we would be interested in receiving it. Perhaps you might take that on notice. I also ask for your brief comment in respect of where the status of the mooted card for humanitarian entrants is up to. I note there was a card for international students that is particularly referred to in the audit report. Although there is a much smaller number of humanitarian entrants, can you give us an update of an information pack—whether you call it a card or any other initiative—on government services that are available for humanitarian entrants to access?

Ms von HELLE: The information that is relevant to international students is generally applicable to humanitarian entrants. There is not a great distinction in the types of information that both of those groups would need access to. The Z-CARD, as we refer to it, is still available and it is still being requested in fairly large numbers from organisations that we have contact with. Some of them are educational institutions and some of them are other service providers. Given the efficiency dividends that are applied across the sector, that has not been prioritised by the commission to date, given that there is an already alternative source of information that is still available and applicable.

CHAIR: Coming back to the committee, you have indicated that the number and the seniority of its membership have increased. I would be delighted to hear that information in respect of who is on the committee and how it will operate, including how you see its output being transparently communicated to those who will want to see real outputs and outcomes. So in providing that information about the committee, perhaps beef it up a little bit more than just the terms of reference in its purpose and mission and the outcomes that you are targeting through the committee. That might come out of the committee's first meeting on 3 April. It is mid-February now. It would be better if we can get information before 3 April, but in respect of the outcomes of the committee on 3 April, it may well be that our report will not be finalised by that date. It will be useful to see some real progress in respect of that committee, which might make our report a little more favourable. Are there any comments from the Audit Office about anything that has been said or anything that has been missed?

Mr MATHIE: No.

CHAIR: I have flagged a number of areas where we have asked for further responses on notice. I take it that both the Community Relations Commission and the Department of Premier and Cabinet will be happy to answer any additional questions that are provided in writing, and that replies will form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to reply to such questions?

Mr ECCLES: Yes.

Mr HARMAN: Yes.

CHAIR: I thank you very much for attending today's public hearing. It is an important area where the State has real responsibilities, particularly for service delivery. While I understand the comments from the Deputy Chair, echoing what appeared to be Mr Piper's visible response, I would say that the State has real and tangible obligations and responsibilities. Its life might be made more difficult at times by the decisions of the Commonwealth, but that does not take away from those responsibilities. The State has to deliver quality services to all people in New South Wales, including those who come here through humanitarian programs. I appreciate the assistance you have given the Committee and I look forward to receiving the further responses.

(The Committee adjourned at 2.05 p.m.)