

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**REVIEW OF THE REPORT ON AN INQUIRY INTO THE BEST MEANS OF
ASSISTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH NO-ONE TO TURN TO**

At Sydney on Thursday, 20 May 2004

The Committee met at 10 a.m.

PRESENT

Ms B. Perry (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods
The Hon. M. Pavey
The Hon. K. Griffin
The Hon. S. Hale

Legislative Assembly

Ms L. Burney
Mr S. Cansdell
Ms V. Judge

GILLIAN ELIZABETH CALVERT, Commissioner, New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, Level 2, 407 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Ms Calvert, do you wish to make an opening address?

Ms CALVERT: I would, Madam Chair, if I could. I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Committee and to make some introductory comments about our first Inquiry, why it was important and what we have learned from it. As you know, an inquiry into the best means of assisting children and young people with no-one to turn to was announced by the then Minister for Community Services in her second-reading speech on the Commission's legislation. When I was appointed as Commissioner, I had the interesting task of undertaking a major inquiry with a broad brief, at the same time as establishing an organisation from the ground up and setting up the working with children check. However, when I look back at the benefits of the inquiry, I am very glad that we did it and that it happened so early in the Commission's life.

In May 2000, I established the terms of reference for the inquiry. However, almost as soon as I started talking with children about the issues, what they told me about their lives did not resonate enough with the terms of reference that I had set. In particular, they showed me that the focus of the inquiry should not be restricted to children who are already vulnerable or to services for them. Kids—including very vulnerable kids—suggested that I look at how to support children, young people, their families and their communities so that kids did not become vulnerable; a very strong “prevention is better than cure” message from the children and young people of New South Wales. My job as Commissioner is to listen to children and young people and promote their views, so I changed the direction of the inquiry to look at ways to prevent children from becoming vulnerable, to help kids to have an adult to turn to when they need one and to re-orient my thinking in terms of wellbeing rather than vulnerability.

Having changed direction, I found that kids of all ages, from all parts of the state and from all backgrounds, consistently gave me the same message, which became in fact the key message of the report. Kids understand the world and their place in it through their relationships with others. They learn, grow and, when necessary, seek help from people they have relationships with. When times get tough or they are dealing with unfamiliar matters, they seek help from adults they know and trust. In fact, the absence of a strong sustaining relationship seems to be the key determinant of kids' vulnerability. Of greatest importance to children and young people is their relationships with their parents and their brothers and sisters, and their schools or child care centres. If they cannot get help through these avenues, they will go to other adults they know: their best friend's mum, a netball coach, a scoutmaster.

The best way we can prevent kids from becoming vulnerable, and help them if they do, is to focus on strengthening these relationships, giving adults the necessary

resources and skills to maintain those relationships, and making it easier for kids to get help from formal services when they need to. Our emphasis then needs to be on the kids and supporting them to make and maintain positive relationships with adults which they will do through their day-to-day lives, if those adults are willing and able to form relationships. As I said, they form those relationships at home, at child care centres, at school and in their own community. The role of government should be to support these institutions and settings so that the adults are able to form strong positive relationships with kids.

In framing the report's recommendations, I decided to make a couple of dozen recommendations as an invitation to agencies to change. I thought of the recommendations as examples, strategies agencies could consider that would head in the direction of responding to the messages of the report. The important thing, from my point of view, was that agencies heard and reflected on the key messages and then started to think about how they could change their practice to respond to the message. I certainly did not want an organisation simply to look at the summary of the report, identify which recommendations were relevant to them and then react to those recommendations in isolation from the broader messages and context that that broader message provided. If an agency, as the expert in its field, decided that it could support kids' relationships in some other way other than the suggestion I had made in a recommendation, then I hoped that is what they would do. Having said that, it is still quite pleasing to see that there has been some progress on 23 of the 30 recommendations. As part of our Strategic Plan for 2004-07, we are developing a process for systematically assessing the impact of our recommendations.

In promoting the report, we are focused on explaining and helping people understand the messages. We have presented the report's key findings and messages to forums, conferences and meetings, including professional associations, Student Representative Councils, peak organisations and the Regional Communities Consultative Council. The presentations have had a ripple effect within agencies. For example, after we spoke to the Child Protection Senior Officers Group about the inquiry messages, the Health Department representative on that group asked us to speak to her statewide meeting of Health's Physical Abuse and Neglect Co-ordinators. Then the Co-ordinator from Coffs Harbour asked us to speak to the Conference for all Community Health Workers on the North Coast.

The presentations were very much two-way events and participants were encouraged to provide feedback and comments in relation to the findings of the report. Some of them were workshops to help people devise strategies for their own organisations. We also had articles published in 19 journals and we had a series of articles in *Girlfriend* magazine over four months. I am unable to recall anyone who has disagreed with the report's message or the overall direction proposed.

The language used to talk about children and young people and their families has, I think, discernibly started to change, and with it people's thinking and their practice will follow. I do not claim that one report could result in all the changes we would hope could arise from the report's message. The cultural and professional changes implied by the report can only be achieved over time, but even at this stage I

feel optimistic because the response from so many agencies has been positive, and the messages have certainly been heard in many important quarters.

The inquiry had many benefits for the Commission in addition to the report and its messages. It has given us, early in the life of the Commission, a framework or a way of understanding the lives of children and young people, and a way of thinking about and relating to kids that helps shape and direct much of our work, like the wellbeing measures we have included in Kids' Stats. It has helped us establish and maintain networks with all sorts of government and non-government organisations, schools and professions, which we continue to use and build on for collaborative work. It has allowed us to try techniques for engaging children and young people from pre-school to late adolescence, from which we have learned and used to inform our most recent participation work, including TAKING PARTicipation seriously.

It was very good relationship building for us, because it demonstrated that we were serious about being child-centred. Finally, the inquiry was useful for modelling behaviour that other organisations might imitate. We showed that it is possible to consult kids, even very young kids, respectfully and effectively about complex issues, to hear their voices, to reflect and promote their views to our whole community and for their voices to have an impact on society. I would be happy to answer any questions.

CHAIR: I thank you for that very detailed opening statement. I will lead off with a couple of questions, and then we might go around the table, if that is all right with you, Ms Calvert.

Ms CALVERT: Certainly, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Can I just ask the first question, please. Were there any practical issues arising from the exercise of the Commission's inquiry powers on this occasion—for example, the resourcing staffing implications logistics of the consultation process—in your view?

Ms CALVERT: The inquiry was one of the Commission's first big projects. We did learn a lot. I guess the two areas that we particularly learned about was we explored ways of engaging children and young people, and we also developed new relationships that are very positive for us still. I might just talk a little bit about both of those. In relation to engaging children and young people, the quality of the consultations that we undertake depends on really sound planning and good relationships. We needed to develop methods that would enable us to meet the needs of different groups equally well. We had to develop methods for consulting with kids, for consulting with parents and consulting with workers.

The methods that we trialed for the inquiry, we have used in our subsequent consultations. If we look at the consultation paper, we had to respect the differences in age and circumstances and reading abilities of the people who might be interested in this topic. We ended up producing two papers: a long paper for adults, and those who wanted to do a lot of reading; and a short paper for kids and those who did not want to do a lot of reading. Interestingly, the short paper was the more popular of the

papers. We continue to use this principle. For example, we finally produced a copy of the report for kids, and we also produced a copy of the report for adults. That was one of the practical things we learnt and that we have continued to implement.

In relation to our face-to-face consultations, we tailored the consultations for the age and circumstances of the participants. We had to meet at times that were appropriate for the participants and that depended on who the participants were. For example, with kids we learnt one of the best ways to consult with kids was through schools, because they were in one place, and they were easily accessible. For parents, we learnt that if we met after school finished, we had to arrange child care, so that they were able to participate. We also had to learn kid-friendly processes. We used a lot of face-to-face activities with kids—work sheets, games and interactions—as a way of giving children the opportunity to express their point of view. We also learnt that we had to make it fun and that we had to always have food and drink available when we were consulting with children and young people.

In terms of the back room work, if you like, there were a number of issues. We had to put in place systems to manage quite large amounts of information and to track that information. We also had to develop quite formal project planning programs, so that we could keep track of a project that went for over two years. We also had to look at quite a lot of technological solutions for recording information, so that we could adequately, in a sense, reflect on what people were saying and then use software solutions to analyse that information—such as, NVIVO, which is particular research software. We also learned a lot about ways of engaging or using those relationships that we had developed through engaging a whole lot of people around New South Wales. It was a great opportunity for us to promote the work of the Commission and promote the ideal of the Commission. We have continued to use the relationships that we developed through the inquiry process a lot in our current work.

There were a number of practical issues that we had to face when we started the inquiry, but as I said in my opening speech, it was actually a great opportunity for the Commission at the same time, because it helped us put things in place that we have continued to use, and it did give us a set of relationships and direction.

CHAIR: That is excellent. Does the Commission, Ms Calvert, have a position on its future use of special inquiries based on its experience of conducting the No-one To Turn To inquiry?

Ms CALVERT: The role of special inquiries was described by the Minister in her second-reading speech and I might just read that out, because I do think it is quite a good description. She said:

These are major powers and they should not be triggered lightly or used often, but when they are, no government department or non-government agency will be able to ignore or thwart a Commission working with the imprimatur of the Premier. The Government anticipates that the Commission's reputation and standing will allow it to develop a culture of co-operation around its work and its relationship with other organisations. The Commission should operate on the basis of these corroboration

relationships and should only need to conduct special inquiries on an occasional basis.

We decided not to make this inquiry a special inquiry but to just make it a public inquiry and to rely on the section of our Act, which says that agencies and the Commission should work in co-operation with each other¹. In fact, we did get enormous co-operation from people, and so there was no need for us to invoke the powers of a special inquiry. Interestingly, in talking with children throughout the inquiry period, they told us that they preferred adults to work cooperatively in that they did not like it when adults fight. We have tried to reflect that desire of children in the way we approach our work; which is to work cooperatively. We will reserve the powers of a special inquiry until we find an occasion to use them, as outlined by the Minister in the second-reading speech. It would be when, for example, people withhold information or people refuse to co-operate with us.

CHAIR: Ms Calvert, we did give you some draft questions on notice, as you may recall, and just in light of your answer in relation to question 2, I am not sure that question 3 is very much applicable at this stage, which also relates to the special inquiry which you have not done yet at the Commission. It is probably appropriate that that question is reserved to when you do one, unless you want to say something about that.

Ms CALVERT: What I would say is that we do make it a practice to use kid-friendly procedures and processes and that is probably the basic procedure and process that I would continue to use. Beyond that, we have tried to base this inquiry on processes of natural justice and procedural fairness. When an occasion arises for us to use a special inquiry, we will have a better idea of what the specific area is that we are addressing in that special inquiry and I think we would then develop the procedures and processes to fit with that particular special inquiry. I certainly think we would be looking to other agencies or bodies who conduct special inquiries to give us advice before we went down that path about what they have learned and how to avoid some of the pitfalls that I think probably exist in these sorts of special inquiries.

CHAIR: Similarly for question 4, which was a question on notice given to you—again, it may not seem as relevant in light of the two answers that you have now given—and unless you would like specifically to say something about question 4.

Ms CALVERT: No, only to say that our starting point really is to work co-operatively.

CHAIR: Fair enough.

Ms CALVERT: If we cannot, then we will consider a special inquiry.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: According to the NATSEM Report commissioned by The Smith Family in 2000, which found that one in seven Australian families are living in income poverty—and that is around about 732,000 children—you

¹Section 14 of the Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998.

mentioned in your opening report that you were looking at different methods of engaging with different young people. I am wondering, were the strategies that you used as part of your report to engage children of non-English speaking backgrounds, specifically from Asian background and Polynesian Islander background?

Ms CALVERT: We tried to enter communities through people who are already known in that community. So when we did the inquiry we used our existing contacts to find other contacts, and then we would talk with that person about how best to enter that community, and to help us locate children or young people who were interested in talking with us, or who we were particularly interested in talking with. To some extent we were dependent upon our existing contacts, which is why the inquiry was quite good; because it gave us a whole range of new contacts that we have subsequently relied on and used. We were able to identify people; say, for example in schools, or in some youth groups who worked with kids—a whole range of kids—some of whom were from non-English speaking backgrounds, and they would then join in a consultation with children from a whole range of other groups.

We did not do specific community and linguistically diverse focus groups, or Pacific Island focus groups, but there were certainly children and young people from a range of cultural and linguistically diverse communities who participated in the range of consultations that we did. One of the things that makes our inquiry a bit different to a lot of other inquiries which have looked at similar issues to do with children and young people, is that we focused on seeking children and young people's point of view. I spoke with almost 250 children and young people during the course of the inquiry, and that included children from a range of different settings and circumstances.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: Ms Calvert, you are talking, and it flows on from Virginia's question, about diverse groups. In our area we have I suppose pretty disadvantaged societies—the kids' high truancy which leads to high illiteracy—parents do not give a damn about your books, and what programs you have, how do you approach those people, because they are probably the most needy for any outcomes of this inquiry, and often these inquiries do not get down to the bottom, where it really is necessary?

Ms CALVERT: One example of a group of children who sound similar to the group in your area were kids from a rural area in New South Wales who had been excluded from school and were attending the local PCYC, who in conjunction with the Department of Health had set up a program for them. The kids had come to the PCYC because there was nothing else to do, and the PCYC had been able to form a relationship with the kids, and the kids were then coming to do this special education program. We entered that group through the worker who ran the program, and I spent quite a bit of time with those kids, hearing about the story of their lives, and hearing about some of the struggles that they faced; and hearing about who helped them and what made a difference to them.

We also spoke with a similar group of kids in another part of New South Wales—in rural New South Wales—who were in fact living in very rough circumstances. It was through identifying a worker who had already had a relationship

with those kids that we were able to then go and talk with them. We also spoke with kids in juvenile detention centres—some of whom came from those sorts of backgrounds—and we also spoke with some kids in metropolitan Sydney who were living on the street, but had contact with workers, and we also went and spoke with kids in refuges. We used relationships that those kids already had with workers and then borrowed the relationship from the worker to go and talk with the kids.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: Did you get involved with the kids' parents? You are talking about the parents as being the strong party.

Ms CALVERT: Yes. We did not speak necessarily with the parents of those children, but we did speak with parents who had children in very difficult circumstances. Certainly, again in a country town in New South Wales, I met with a group of parents who had had their children removed from them; parents whose children were in detention centres; parents of children whose children had left them and were living in refuges; and I spent some time talking with them about their experience and how they had ended up in that circumstance, and what might have made a difference to them in not ending up in that circumstance.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: Out of this inquiry you are really hoping to gain the positives, and put them in recommendations for those areas that do not have those PCYCs et cetera?

Ms CALVERT: One of the recommendations, or one of the findings we make, is that kids certainly wanted help before it got really bad; and even the kids who are in terribly dire circumstances wanted this. I remember one of them said to me, "I don't want to talk about it now, because I actually would have preferred it back then, and I don't want any kid ending up where I'm ending up." I got a very strong "prevention is better than cure" message from the kids. The other thing we got from the kids is that they do not tend to go visit a service if they have a problem, like we might. If we have a problem, we might go to a doctor. What they will do is talk to the people around them—their relationships—and then that adult might help them get to the service, or help them get to the doctor—might. That is why we have been promoting the idea that we need to have a lot of what we call soft-entry points for kids; so that we need to have the PCYCs, the youth activities, the entertainment activities that kids go to. There are adults at those activities that they get to know and form relationships with. They will then tell that adult perhaps about something that is going on in their lives, and that adult then is in a position to help them get access to some services or whatever it is they might need to make their life a little bit better.

We have been really pushing the message about soft-access points. Don't think that if you're a health centre sitting in the main street of town that you're going to get kids walking in your front door, because you probably won't.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Just following on from my colleague Mr Cansdell's comments, and the interviews that you had with young people that are in trouble, and then talking to parents where the children have ended up in refuges or in detention centres. From your inquiries and your report, do you think we could be doing better as a community, and how would we do better in terms of developing

relationships between the parents and the children; and how could we better communication before it gets too late, where those services can not only help the children, but bring the children and the families together, because so often we hear in our own communities, think it just breaks down, and the kids go haywire, and it just needs better access and communication at an earlier point?

Ms CALVERT: I would like to start by saying that I think that for most kids in New South Wales, most parents do a good job, and the challenge is to pick up those kids that are not doing so well. The reason I raise that is that that gives us our first difficulty, which is how do we get access to those kids who are not doing well, those parents who are struggling and how do those parents get access to whatever it is they need. The view that we took with this report is that the best way forward is to have a whole range of—in a sense—normal activities in the community that provide opportunities for parents to parent. You might run things through the school, because most kids go to school. You try and get your services reaching out into the community, rather than asking the community to always come in. One of the reasons we did the *Girlfriend* series of articles is because there is very little information directly for children about how to deal with relationships. We thought if we did some articles in a magazine that most young people read, about what to do when you break up with your best friend, what to do when you are fighting with your mum and dad, what to do if your mum and dad separate, then that was giving kids information. I think the same principle applies to adults, that you try and make information available to them in a whole lot of ways.

I think that you certainly need universal services available for everybody, and then you probably need some sort of specialist or targeted services for those who are doing particularly badly.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Just as an example, do you think as a practical measure there would be any benefit in looking at the policies of the Department of Community Services [DOCS] and having some benchmarks, or some guiding principles there that do encourage that communication between parents who may not be doing a good job but may just need a bit of help or guidance?

Ms CALVERT: I suspect the Department of Community Services already do that with the families that they work with. They have a parenting centre, they have a parenting web site that they run. I suspect they would say they are already doing that. I do not think there is one thing that you can do to help parents parent. I actually think it is about a whole service system and that involves relationships between the Commonwealth and the State Government and the Local Government. I think it involves relationships between the government and the non-government agencies. I think it is also not just about service delivery. I think it is also about the way in which we organise our work and the work-family balance and how much time people have. I think it is about access to transport, so that you do not spend all your time running from home to child care to work back to child care back to home. I think it is about the quality of housing you have and the sorts of communities that we build.

I do not think there is any one thing you can do that makes a significant difference. I think it is about how our entire community works and how our society

operates, and the priority we put on children and parenting and the task of parenting our children.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I suppose what I am getting at is the point that until we reach Utopia, when we have transport and perfect houses and perfect communities, so we can get in there at this time, where there our breakdowns happening, whether there are some more specific policy goals that we could aim for?

Ms CALVERT: In addition to what we have already set out in the report?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Yes.

Ms CALVERT: No, I have to say I think my priority would be to identify those parents who currently are not doing well and try and get them the supports and services that they need, because overall I think that New South Wales parents do a reasonably good job. The other thing too is that, if I was to look at your question, which is a slightly different question to the one that I looked at in the report, I would probably come up with a wider range of answers. In a way, the question you are asking was one that we touched on in the report but, if I was to approach just that question, I would do it differently. I would have to talk to the Commonwealth, for example, because they provide a lot of the relationship building services and marriage breakdown services and so on, which we did not do much of in relation to this report, which was focusing on kids who have no-one to turn to.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: How important do you think drop-in centres are to children?

Ms CALVERT: What sort of drop-in centres?

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: I am thinking in terms of centres for after school or children who are homeless. It is an informal arrangement where they can play games, possibly be brought into contact with specialist services or whatever, just somewhere to hang out.

Ms CALVERT: I think they are very important to kids, and I think we are seeing some quite interesting models develop in New South Wales; for example, youth cafes. They are a drop-in centre but they are a bit more than perhaps some of the traditional drop-in centres have been in the past. I think a youth cafe model holds some promise because it enables kids to go to a place, to do some things in their own space and then there are also workers available that can provide services. I know some youth cafes bring in, for example, a GP a couple of nights a week or a lawyer a couple of nights a week or something like that, so the kids then start to use those services. I think certainly for secondary school kids those sorts of models hold great promise, because they do reflect that soft-entry point that I talked about earlier, which then gives you access to more specialist services, if the child needs it.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: Can I put these remarks in the context that I understand that it is the policy of DOCS not to continue to fund youth drop-in centres, and here I am thinking specifically of a case in Maitland and I understand

the centre there is closed. There is a PCYC available, but the children who have used the drop-in centre are reluctant to use the PCYC, because they associate it with the police, and they also believe that they cannot afford—many of them cannot afford to use the services. Do you think that is a reasonable concern on their part, or are the PCYC more open in their approaches than that?

Ms CALVERT: My understanding is it is not a statewide policy of the Department of Community Services to not fund drop-in centres. That may be a specific circumstance that you are talking about in relation to Maitland, and this is no comment on Maitland, but I also know that one of the things that we saw when we were talking with kids is that, again, the quality of the relationship is what is important in the youth centre. If you have staff who struggle to form positive relationships with kids, or kids are struggling to form relationships with other kids in that place, or that cafe or whatever, then it does make it difficult to run a successful service. I am not aware that it is a statewide policy of the Department of Community Services to not fund youth services.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: During your inquiry, did you hear any evidence from education officials or from schools of the lack of ability for the Department of Community Services to follow up on complaints and issues about protecting those who are vulnerable within our community, that they were overstretched and finding it difficult to follow up on cases of concern?

Ms CALVERT: We certainly met with people from schools, both kids and teachers, and school counsellors, and talked a lot about services and what they knew about services. There were some people who raised that as an issue, but it was not something that emerged certainly as a theme in the inquiry. What probably emerged more strongly as a theme in the inquiry is that in fact kids tend not to view services as something that is on their horizon. That was one of the lessons I learnt through the inquiry, that kids in fact turn to their relationships for assistance, they do not turn to services. When I asked kids about services that they knew, there were two that they identified. The first was Kids Help Line, and almost every kid could talk to me about Kids Help Line and recite the phone number and they identified that as the place they would turn to if they were having difficulties and their family were not available. The second thing that surfaced that few of them identified was school counsellors, and they saw school counsellors as places that they might go to get help. That was just the general population of children, so services are not on their horizon.

For those kids who are very engaged in a service, then they will know about the services and they will be able to talk in quite a sophisticated way about the service system, and how the service system operates, but they are a small number of kids when we look at the number of kids in the whole of New South Wales.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: As a generalisation in relation to school counsellors, and I am speaking from personal experience, did you find that school counsellors, or that avenue of support from a school counsellor, was more readily on top of the mind of the students that went to a school with a school counsellor that could actually relate to kids, rather than school counsellors that had found

themselves out of the classroom, and enjoying being out of the classroom, but not necessarily a good school counsellor?

Ms CALVERT: You know, I had one kid say to me, "The school counsellor saved my life."

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I am sure that happened but I think on a lot of other occasions within the school system there are—

Ms CALVERT: Yes.

CHAIR: I think in fairness, Melinda, that is a little bit outside the inquiry

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Unless you particularly want access to the services, and being able to have good access to service I think is, in relation to the report.

Ms CALVERT: Yes, I think school counsellors in fact do—I mean the kids identified that school counsellors were a place to turn— as I said, were a group to turn to.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: But it is interesting that Kids Help Line was higher in mind for most of the children—

Ms CALVERT: When we asked why it was that Kids Help Line was higher in their minds, they talked about, "Because we saw the ads on television", "We saw the ads on our milk cartons and cereal cartons," and it is on their bus pass and things like that. I think kids themselves talk about Kids Help Line. In relation to school counsellors, I do not want to pull them out as a particular thing, although on the other hand kids did identify them as important, as one of the groups that they would turn to. There were some issues around school counsellors—some kids feeling as if school counsellors were not as approachable as they might have been—but often that was because they did not want to be seen walking into the school counsellor's office, as opposed to the quality of the school counsellor, or they could not get access to the school counsellor because there were not enough—the school counsellor did not have enough hours of the day in that school.

When I reflect on what the kids told me, it was those issues that were more relevant for the school counsellors than the quality of school counsellors. Having said that, across the board, what kids talked about with workers and teachers and other adults in their lives, what was critical for them was the quality of that person, and that certainly made a difference; but it was not that the school counsellors were particularly bad or particularly good, or teachers were particularly bad or particularly good. They talked generically about adults in their lives, what makes a good adult, what do they think is an approachable adult versus an unapproachable adult.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What makes a good school counsellor?

Ms CALVERT: What makes a good school counsellor; what makes a good school teacher; what makes a good child care worker; what makes a good coach; what makes a good next-door neighbour. In relation to school counsellors, as I said, I think it was more to do with, "I don't want to be seen going into the school counsellor's office," issues of privacy. I have to say also those issues of privacy also existed for health centres, particularly in country towns—"I don't want to go to the health centre because my best friend's mum is the receptionist."

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: Kids Help Line is just a phone call, isn't it?

Ms CALVERT: Yes, and email.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: That's why they like it; it is anonymous.

Ms CALVERT: That's right. It is anonymous, and it is email as well, and it has better hours, and you don't have to make an appointment so you can just ring when you need to and you get a response.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: And no-one knows about it.

Ms CALVERT: And no-one knows about it, so all those things. But certainly the issue of confidentiality, and then not being able to get access to them because there were not enough of them, were raised about school counsellors. We in fact made a recommendation that the ratio of school counsellors to children should be adjusted.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Just a quick question. During this process, did you examine the model provided by the Point Zero program, which is a mobile news service?

Ms CALVERT: No, we did not examine that model in particular. We did go and look at a range of interesting ways that services were being provided across the whole of New South Wales.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: That is a very interesting program. It was originally developed in the Eastern Suburbs but it is now out in the Strathfield area, and I think they are looking at providing one up in the Port Macquarie area, where they have a mobile van which is staffed by professional and volunteers. They go out to where the young people are hanging out—in a very non-threatening environment—and they actually provide lots of information about services; and they offer tea, coffee, hot chocolates, donuts or whatever. I think the concept originally came from America, but it is a very successful program, and it is a very good way of engaging in partnership your local service organisations, from your Lions Club as to your local government in the area, for sponsoring the van—providing some of the funding—and the volunteers go and visit all the local high schools and find out, particularly at busy—say like at Strathfield station for example, we have thousands of school children converging—I think it would be something for you, perhaps as a suggestion, just one model. I am sure there are many others, but I think it is a very good way of actually accessing a broad range of young people.

Ms CALVERT: We certainly looked at services that did outreach type work, and they tended to fit their style of outreach to the local circumstances. For example, metropolitan Sydney, where there are a lot of kids on the streets and living rough on the streets, that requires a different model than say having a van. What the metropolitan Sydney service tended to do was try and be around the streets late in the night and then go up and introduce themselves to kids and find out where the kids were hanging out and just go and be where the kids were and so on. Then there was a different model of outreach in the country, in a country town for example, which was a lot about word of mouth, and then just tracking that word of mouth through. I think that we looked at different ways outreach was being done, going to where the kids are, and I think that is what you are talking about, and it is one that fits with your Strathfield local area.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: We just trialed it, and it seemed to work quite well. The other thing with that, we found that if it was in the same spot at the same time young people got to know it was there, and it is not uncool to go there. You can also involve ECLO² with your local police for your non-English speaking background and your other community groups, and they can access it. It is just rather that some of the young people said to me that going to drop-in things, it is not really that trendy any more because they want to have access—like Internet cafes have actually become the drop-in centres, and it is interesting what you were saying about them picking up the phone, because it is a new generation and that is all part of how they communicate.

Ms CALVERT: And you do need to chase kids because they change. What is cool changes, so you have got to then take your service to wherever cool is.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I am not sure—I apologise, I have just been out of the room—but could I ask, in relation to the questions that you were given, perhaps the first one about consultation, and the issues of the types of consultation that you undertook in this particular report, but also the outcome from those consultations of what you would look at in future, or any issues that may change how you would—some of those consultations.

Ms CALVERT: What we did with the inquiry we have continued to use in our subsequent work with children and young people and it has been successful. What it has probably done is reinforce the importance of things like going in through a relationship that the child already has, making the consultation fun and interactive and in a time and space that is relevant for them, respecting the different age groups of the children and young people that you are talking with or spending time with. What it has done is it gave us a base, and I think our subsequent work with kids has reinforced that base, and reinforced the learning that we got from the inquiry consultations.

I think areas for development are how to do consultations with under five-year-olds, like with smaller kids—how do you seek their views. I think you can seek their views, and we are trialing ways of doing that, but I think it is an area of development,

² New South Wales Police Ethnic Community Liaison Officer.

and I think there are probably some communities that we have better access to than others. For example, while we include indigenous children in all our consultations, I think again that probably is an area of development—that is, in reaching out into the indigenous communities.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: That was probably my next question, about how you see the process with indigenous communities, and also perhaps some of the issues that might pick up previous questions in relation to, say, older communities, with some of those other NESB communities that might be difficult, to really have all the information you need at the moment.

Ms CALVERT: I guess the sorts of things that our previous consultations would suggest we should do and that we are trialing, is that we first of all have to have someone who can help us enter that community, that we are not able to just walk into a community. We need to identify someone who is already in that community and then ask them to open the door for us and to introduce us, and in a sense to vouch for us, if you like, and to help us build relationships with the kids so that they will in fact then talk with us and be interested in us. That is certainly one thing that we would do. We would use our existing contacts—we would use our contacts with indigenous communities to do that. When we are wanting to work with indigenous kids, we will use our relationships to try and engage those kids.

The other sorts of things that we can look at, and that we are thinking about, is using younger people to do some of the work. We have trainees and we have ex-Young People's Reference Group members that we will use as a way of reaching out to other kids. In a sense they act on our behalf and they have at times better credibility than, say, older people might have in getting kids to talk. We would then—if we were, say, for example, wanting to talk within the indigenous community, we would use the indigenous ex-Young People Reference Group members to perhaps go and do some work for us. We might go along with them or we might not, depending on the nature of the consultation. Using someone from that community, in terms of age and cultural background, is the other way that I think we can appropriately reach back out into communities.

I have just done some quite interesting work with young refugees, and that has been using the existing Migrant Resource Centres who have some relationships. We have gone with them into those communities, and we are now beginning to form our own relationships with those kids. But you will hear me say frequently that it really only works if you have got the relationship. The first question you have to ask is, "How do I form the relationship?" Then I think you do get access to kids and you can consult with kids.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: My question really goes to the recommendations and particularly the questions that you have on notice in relation to outcomes and evaluation. It strikes me that what is really required, in terms of the full implementation of this report, is some very good relationships and co-operative relationships between the Federal and the State Governments, and also, I suspect, as least cherry picking as possible from both those instrumentalities, in terms of getting some decent outcomes from the inquiry. Thirdly, that governments do not put their

eggs in one basket, like children—what is it? Families First. If there is going to be any real implementation and change for young people in these situations, having the Ten Most Vulnerable Children's Project—whatever it was called—is not going to make much of an impact. In essence, the first is how is the relationship going between the State and the Commonwealth? Secondly, has there been much cherry picking? Thirdly, are we putting our eggs in not enough baskets?

Ms CALVERT: I can only really talk about my relationship between the State and the Commonwealth, and I have established relationships at the Federal level, primarily through the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Shadow Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. I briefed both of them about this inquiry and met with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and discussed the inquiry.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Who is—

Ms CALVERT: Larry Anthony—and spoke with him about the inquiry. I maintain regular contact with both the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Shadow Minister on issues of concern. I think I have a good relationship with the Federal or with the Commonwealth, and similarly with the State Government as well. I know that in relation to the recent announcement by the Commonwealth Government, regarding the stronger communities' money, that the New South Wales division of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Communities is trying to work with the relevant state officials around where those services are located, so that we do get some coherence, if you like, in where the investment occurs.

In terms of the cherry picking, I do not know that there is a lot of cherry picking going on. For me, the emphasis should be on trying to get some coherence in the planning: planning between agencies at a state level and planning between agencies at a Commonwealth level, but as you say, also the planning between the State and the Commonwealth Government. I know that that is being set up. What was the third thing?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Are we putting our eggs in not enough baskets, or are our eggs all in one basket, or two?

Ms CALVERT: In terms of addressing the needs of this particular—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

Ms CALVERT: I think the priority on Families First is the right priority, because of what we know about the critical importance of the early years and the impact that that carries through and also because that is now a statewide process. I think there is an argument that there needs to be a similar statewide process in relation to eight to 18-year-olds or 8 to 17-year-olds, and I know that that has begun with the Better Futures strategy. That is now being piloted I think, in four areas, using some of the lessons that have been learned from Families First and applying those lessons to that eight to 17-year age group. If that could then be rolled out across New South Wales, I think we could say that we do have the planning systems and monitoring systems in place to really identify and respond to children aged nought to

17. In fact, we would probably be the only state in Australia who had that, but I think that is dependent on Better Futures being rolled out to the other areas of New South Wales.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Can I ask a second question, Madam Chair?

CHAIR: Yes, go ahead.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: With the recent—I think it was the Vinson Report on disadvantage—I understand that there are some views that there may be some flaws in the methodology. I think though that it is a really instructive report to governments in relation to the frightening prospect of poverty becoming so entrenched in certain areas. We know where those areas are now, even though there is some question about whether or not they have been identified in the best way possible. I guess I am just asking or suggesting—and a response from you would be great—is whether or not that sort of understanding that we get from the Vinson Report is instructive to the implementation of this inquiry, but more generally the work of the Commission.

Ms CALVERT: Yes, to both. It is helpful for the implementation of this inquiry, and it is certainly helpful for the work of the Commission, because it does focus on the conditions under which a lot of children are living and where that is.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Where they are.

Ms CALVERT: That then enables us to advocate more strongly for regionally based planning I think it is only through regionally based planning that you can get the agencies to work together, to bring their money to the table and to decide how they are going respond to those areas of high need in their region.

CHAIR: I would like to ask another couple of questions. I am actually very interested in the consultation process and there is a part in the report that actually notes—and it is on page 15 of the report - it notes the difficulties experienced by parents in relation to the public hearing process which led to the use of focus groups, which you have talked about, and states that there is a need to be more proactive in seeking out the experiences and views of fathers in the inquiry process. Has the Commission, Ms Calvert, developed any strategies to enable the views of fathers to be better accessed where relevant in future inquiries that you may undertake?

Ms CALVERT: Because we have not yet conducted any other inquiries, we have not developed how we might approach fathers. But based on the learnings generally around the consultation that we have had so far, I think what we would probably do is, first of all, go and look at some of the literature that exists around fathers and see what had been evaluated—so are there services that have tried to increase the involvement of fathers and the participation of fathers? If so, was it successful and what did they do? That would then give us some ways of thinking about how we might approach an inquiry. I think the other thing that I would do is try and identify some agencies that already work well with fathers, such as the Newcastle Family Action Centre, and go and talk with them to see what they have done, and

what their learning has been about how to approach fathers, and then think about how I could implement that or put that to some use in an inquiry.

What this inquiry did was highlight for me that we need to be very specific about trying to reach out to fathers. That is the learning that I got from this inquiry. In a future inquiry I would then more specifically look at what is it that we need to do to try and get fathers to participate and engage.

CHAIR: You also talked about the relationships that you formed with different agencies that you are now continuing to use et cetera. Obviously they will be very useful in future inquiries or projects. I was just wondering how you might use those in future projects.

Ms CALVERT: How we are using those.

CHAIR: Or how you are using them, exactly. Elaborate on what you have earlier said, basically.

Ms CALVERT: They use us as a resource and for information and skill development. They invite us to speak at functions and ask us to take up issues. They are useful in that they now come to us, rather than us always having to go to them, which makes our work a lot easier and means we are much more informed about current issues. We also use them for information as well and we will use them to partner on particular projects. For example, through the inquiry we were able to strengthen our relationship with the Catholic school system and so now, if we are doing consultations, we have quite streamlined processes for getting access to kids in the Catholic school system. We also worked with Kids Help Line in the inquiry, where they conducted some research for us. We have subsequently done further work with Kids Help Line which has been very useful as well.

We have done some joint projects, for example, we worked with the Inspire Foundation on the Alcohol Summit and the Young People and Alcohol Forum. We worked with the Ted Noffs Foundation on a check list for participation and assessing your agency's readiness to have kids participate in the decision-making processes. I think it has already borne fruit and we are already using the other agencies and they are using us quite extensively in the work and that really is as a result of the inquiry.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: In your report, you said that young children with poor quality of child care, or with multiple-care arrangements, are at risk of developing poor relationships. Just with that whole work-and-family dilemma—and later in the report you also talk about the conflict between private and government-operated child care centres—it is a difficult issue, and I just wonder, in terms of putting at rest the minds of working parents who actually use child care centres that may be privately operated, and very successfully and very well run, how many or what percentage of child care centres are putting children at risk and where they are and what we can do about it?

Ms CALVERT: I think most parents should be reassured that the child care that they are being provided with is probably good enough, and there would only be a

small number of child care centres where you would be very concerned about the quality of the care. New South Wales has a regulatory system and an inspectorate system that enables those matters to be investigated and taken before a tribunal and have the licence revoked. Having said that though, I think a country that is as wealthy as Australia and has the opportunities that Australia has can afford to invest in its child care services, particularly given the importance of the early years and the sort of consequences of poor early years experiences or less than optimal early years experiences.

We would say, as I have said a number of times, that quality is made up of a number of things: the qualification of the people who are working there, the group sizes, the ratios between staff and children, the physical environment and so on. The way in which we set the ground rules for that is through our regulatory system and, at the Commonwealth level, through funding levels and through the accreditation and licensing process. As I said, when we look at it internationally, New South Wales is doing reasonably well with the quality of its child care. However, when you look at what is possible, then I think there are things that we can do better.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: If I can just follow-up on that point by asking the question in relation to the early childhood policy of this Government. It is stated in the report that New South Wales has the lowest amount of funding going to the preschool sector in Australia, and in the report it says that we hope that funding will be addressed by the Early Childhood Policy, which aims to give priority to those groups who have previously had difficulty accessing child care services. It is a major issue in regional areas in particular, where it is not affordable to operate a privately run long-day-care centre, that child care is available through preschools and these preschools are having a lot of difficulties surviving. Are there any thoughts that you have on that and how we are going with the early childhood policy and better revenue going to the preschool sector in New South Wales and not having children leave the state preschool system to go into long-day care.

Ms CALVERT: I think there is a prior question for me, which is what is in the best interests of the child. I think that what the research is showing us is that the important investment years are in fact nought to four, and that that is where we have to provide support to parents and the care environment for children. Certainly preschool is an important year and does provide a lot of benefits for kids in their transition to school.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It would be three to five.

Ms CALVERT: Three to five, yes. I guess I do not want to pull out preschools as only part of the discussion. For me the question is about the child care service system as a whole, because a lot of the long-day-care programs now offer services that are indistinguishable to preschools, and preschools often look like long-day-care centres in a lot of ways. I think, from my point of view, what I did was to look at child care as a system, rather than the little bits of it, and I think there are, as I said, some issues facing that child care system. One is quality and how do we improve quality; the other is affordability; and the other is access. I think those three things are tied up with each other, and they are made more complex by the fact that we have whole

lots of different types of child care, and there are different responsibilities between the State and the Commonwealth Government that then get in the way as well.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: Could I just add to that that I think that preschools are very important for rural areas, because many rural areas do not have day care centres. The preschool is all they have, and it is not affordable for a lot of communities. In fact, there is one, for example, at Tabulam. Some of the kids there—some of the Aboriginal kids from the mission—are dropped there, and they take them for no fee, just so the kids know they are going to have a lunch, and they have somewhere safe for the day. It is important that they need some support from the Government to keep those centres.

Ms CALVERT: I think what you are describing is the impact of the private market on child care that—previously, the base for child care was in fact government funding, and direct government funding, to agencies. That changed, and it became part of the free market, if you like. The free market will not go to where there is no profit, and so it does not go to the rural areas. That is, I think, one of, if you like, the undesirable consequences of handing over our child care services to the private sector and the free market. The free market is not interested in equity, as we know; they are not interested in equity and access. That is not their priority, and you do need some sort of government intervention in order to get—

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: And those community preschools do that.

Ms CALVERT: Yes. Whether preschools are the best place to put that government intervention is another question. But I think what you are saying is that relying just on the private sector to provide child care services is not going to work, because they cannot deal with issues of access and equity, and you do need government intervention. That goes to the way in which we fund our child care services.

CHAIR: I would just remind you that we have another witness here today, Dr Lyndsay Connors. We are looking to wind up by 1.00.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: The report suggests that philosophies of mutual obligation impact particularly heavily upon young children, and I think it singles out children, say in the range of 15, falling between the crack. Would you like to expand upon that a bit more, and also any suggestions you may have for countering those adverse impacts.

Ms CALVERT: We make the recommendation in the report that the Commonwealth Government should look at implementing the report of a review into some of the breaches around that mutual obligation³. We were not alone in making that call, and I think as a consequence there has been some movement on the part of the Commonwealth Government about the way in which it responds to those breaches, and enforces the mutual obligation. I think it was placing already

³ Making it Work: the Report on the Independent Review of Breaches and Penalties in the Social Security System, Dennis Pearce, Julian Disney and Heather Ridout, Sydney 2002.

vulnerable children in more vulnerable positions and it was not making sense. The whole purpose of mutual obligation or providing support is to try and get the kids back into the labour market, and to give them some capacity to stand on their own two feet, if you like. But the effect of the Commonwealth Government's actions was to make them more vulnerable, and make it even less likely that they would come back into the labour market, and to have any sort of capacity to operate in that labour market. I am very pleased to see that there has been some movement in relation to the way in which those obligations are being enforced, and then the imposition of breaches. I think they are positive moves.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: The point about children who are younger, say between the, what, the 12-15 age group—

Ms CALVERT: They would not be captured by that particular mutual obligation policy.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: But you do talk about those falling between the gaps, between State and Commonwealth legislation.

Ms CALVERT: If they are under 16, or 15 years and under, then they are a state responsibility, because they are by law required to be at school. What we did find was that some kids who were being suspended were not being managed while they were on long suspension, and so were becoming even further disengaged from the very thing that might have had some capacity to re-engage them, and to reconnect with them. We did make some recommendations regarding more active management of young people, say 12 to 15 years, who were subject to long suspensions, so that we did not lose them, and that the process of suspension did not drive them further away from the school, because we think the school is the key engagement for kids. We did make recommendations regarding that.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: I was just going to ask you, a large number of Commonwealth and state bodies would be affected by your recommendations, and we have had a bit of discussion about the issue of trying to get the balance between work and family and child care. The Hon. Melinda Pavey made some interesting comments about the child care issue, but I was looking at the issue of zero to two, because it is widely reported in the media about the lack of affordable places for that critical period to support families, and to give them that choice. I am wondering, are you going to make recommendations to the Commonwealth to increase the Child Benefit Support Scheme, to facilitate the private sector and the community based sector in providing more places, because the zero-to-two age group is more costly in terms of supporting that child in that centre, and I am looking at that issue of profit and so forth. How are you going to tackle that one?

Ms CALVERT: What we have done is, in the meantime, release a report in conjunction with the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People, called "A Head Start for Australia: an early-years framework". That sets out a framework for Australia to look at how we best support the early years of a child's life. That does look at the question of child care, more specifically in relation to the child care benefit. I have recently written to both the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs,

and the Shadow Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, saying that I believe the child care benefits for the under-twos should be at a higher rate than the child care benefits for three to fives, because of the increased need for support, and therefore the increased cost of caring for nought to two-year-olds.

CHAIR: I was just wondering, Ms Calvert, if you have got—we may not get to all the questions on notice and I was just wondering whether you are going to table the answers that we do not.

Ms CALVERT: I am happy to.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Ms Calvert, I would just like to ask a couple of questions about some of the recommendations. The first one is basically in relation to younger children, recommendations 1, 2 and 6. How well do the current Family First strategies accord with the report's recommendations in relation to those younger children?

Ms CALVERT: Certainly in relation to recommendations 1 and 2, Families First accords quite strongly with those recommendations. Progress towards both of them has been quite heartening. Families First is now rolled out to all areas of New South Wales, and the Minister for Community Services has established an Expert Advisory Group, which I now chair. The Minister has asked this group to review the Families First policy, so that it is kept current and up to date. The Department of Community Services Enhancement Funding is now being rolled out, and that addresses the Families First field of activity number 3. I am quite heartened that we have had some moneys specifically, if you like, directed to that area of activity. In relation to recommendation 2, the Aboriginal Child and Family Policy that I talked about earlier—sorry, the Aboriginal Child and Youth Policy—is using the regional inter-agency planning process that Families First developed. I am quite pleased to see that has been expanded into that area.

In relation to recommendation 6, which is around child care funding and industrial awards, and the redistribution of child care, that is addressed not through Families First, but through things like the Industrial Relations Commission and Office of Child Care primarily, rather than through the Families First strategy. But certainly for recommendations 1 and 2, the Families First strategy does accord quite strongly with those recommendations.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Can I also ask about recommendation 30 which relates to NSW Police. Has the Commission provided any advice on assistance to the NSW Police to promote training that organisation on issues affecting children, basically because of the wording in that recommendation 30?

Ms CALVERT: We have advised NSW Police on these issues. Both NSW Police and the Commission are members of the Child Protection Training Providers Forum, and this is a cross-agency group which was established at the Commission's initiative to try and develop some collaboration around training initiatives in respect of child protection. We both sit on that committee, and so that has been an opportunity for us to discuss issues around children and young people. The Commission also sits on the

Police Child Protection and Sex Crimes Squad Advisory Council, which the police set up to give them advice on those areas. The issue of training has come up a number of times in that Advisory Council, so we have been able to provide advice. In relation to effective models of policing for children and young people, no, we have not been invited to provide advice or assistance by NSW Police on that particular issue.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I think you said in your opening remarks, and I am sorry if I did not hear this properly, when you spoke about the recommendations in the report, about how many have been taken up.

Ms CALVERT: We went through and looked at the recommendations—the 30 recommendations—and there has been action taken on 23 of those 30. They may not be fully implemented, or they may not be implemented precisely how we want it, but there is action. There has been some form of action taken on 23 of those 30 recommendations.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: On the other seven recommendations, where there has not been any action, are there any of those seven recommendations that you would particularly see as a priority to have some work done?

Ms CALVERT: I will be in a better position to answer that in a while. One of the things that we have done is now bring on board a senior evaluation officer at the Commission. As part of our 2005-07 Strategic Plan we are going to be looking at how we can systematically assess the impact or the take-up of the recommendations. As we do that, I will be in a position to say which of the ones have priority. It may be the one where there has been some action, has not had enough action, and that is more of a priority than one where there has been no action. I want to look at it after we have had a more systematic assessment of the recommendations' impacts.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Did the Commission for Children and Young People calculate the funds and resources that would be needed to implement the recommendations contained in the report?

Ms CALVERT: No, we did not.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Why not?

Ms CALVERT: We are not in a position to conduct that sort of cost calculation. We are not privy to the sort of budgets and financial arrangements that agencies have in place, so we would not have the information on which to base the costs. The other thing is that I do not know that it is our job to spend our resources on doing costing work. I think it is actually the agencies' job to cost if they decide to implement the recommendations.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Just in relation to the comments in the report about the weakening of family and community relationships due to family dislocation and the pressure of work, with 21 per cent of Australian children living in sole parent families. It is particularly relevant to Stephen Cansdell and my region, the North Coast: people moved to the beach because it was cheaper, but it is not so much

cheaper now. Did you during the report engage any of the wonderful community groups that exist within our communities—such as CWA, Quota, Inner Will, Zonta, who do a lot of magnificent community work—that are actually seeking ways and means to building a better community?

Ms CALVERT: As I said, the focus of our inquiry was on talking with children and young people, so we spent most of our time and resources trying to talk with them. We did have some time with community groups and with professionals.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Could you name those community groups?

Ms CALVERT: I think they are listed in the report, although I do not know necessarily what their affiliations are, but I would have been very surprised if we did not have people who were members of CWA and Zonta and so on. I am aware that there is quite a lot of activity around community building, and one of the reasons why we recommend regional inter-agency planning is because I think that is the level at which those groups and their efforts can be most successfully engaged. I do not think that planning that is done at the centre necessarily can shape things as well as a group that is regionally based. The regional level have better contacts with the local community, and they have a sense of who can do what, and what is needed. I am quite sure I spoke to members of the CWA, but they did not identify themselves as such.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Maybe that is something to take on board for the next inquiry, to actually engage those women as part of those groups as representatives, because it is a feeling that I am getting from those groups travelling around that they feel dislocated from the process of helping their own communities.

Ms CALVERT: Yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For example, I was in Port Macquarie at the weekend, and the Zonta group there—no, sorry, the Quota Club there used to help the Taree Women's Refuge.

Ms CALVERT: Yes, actually I am aware of that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: But they have sort of been separated from that now, and they feel that they contributed and they would still like to contribute. I just put that on the record.

Mr STEPHEN CANSDELL: In Appendix 6 of the Commission's report, it refers to previous relevant inquiries. It says here:

Taken together, the reports made hundreds of recommendations to improve the welfare and wellbeing of some of our most vulnerable groups of children and young people. Whilst some recommendations have been acted upon, many have been responded to in a piecemeal way. The social and political concerns that triggered them have rarely been translated into major changes in policy or service delivery.

Do you believe this inquiry is going to be any different to this report?

Ms CALVERT: I hope it is going to be different and I think there are some signs that it is a little bit different. I think the fact that we focused on children and young people, and putting their voices forward, has given it a freshness that a lot of the other reports did not have. It has given it an authenticity perhaps that some of the other reports may not have had. I also think that our approach to focusing on the messages of the inquiry, rather than the recommendations, has also paid off. It might be worthwhile talking about why we have decided to do that. We think that people who provide services are better placed than we are to decide what change needs to occur in response to our message, so to take up the previous member's comments, we might make recommendations about community building, but it may well be that the CWA has a much better way of doing it: they can take the spirit of what we are intending and shape it in a way that fits their community much more effectively than we could through our recommendation.

I also think that agencies need to embrace the fundamental change, rather than just implement some recommendations, and so again that is why we decided to focus on messages rather than recommendations. Also, messages do not date as quickly as recommendations. Some of the recommendations we make are almost out of date by the time that the report gets published, whereas the message remains the same. Messages can be applied to a range of situations where the recommendations are quite singular and inflexible. I can talk about the importance of listening to kids and the importance of relationships to kids and that can then be applied to a whole range of different settings, but if I made a recommendation about relationships, it would be quite singular and inflexible and would not be as useful, to those who were involved or who were interested in what the report had to say.

I think that approach is one of the things that is going to make a difference, and has made a difference to the way in which the report has been received. I think that we are already seeing the impact of focusing on messages rather than on recommendations, although, as I said, I am happy to see a lot of the recommendations have been acted on. But if we look at, say, the message that relationships are central to kids' lives, then what we have is a pilot of smaller class sizes in early primary school years, in order to allow teachers to develop relationships with kids when they are first starting school. That is a message that we gave that is being changed in a particular way. The out-of-home care standards that the Office of Children's Guardian has released focus on relationships, and I think again, we did not make a recommendation about that, but the message has got through. The PCYCs are reorienting themselves to be much more soft-entry points. We did not make a recommendation about that specifically for PCYCs but they have taken up the message that relationships are central to kids.

If we look at the message that prevention and early intervention are priorities, we did not make a recommendation that there should be a framework developed at the national level, but that is what has happened. We did not make a recommendation that DOCS should get X amount of funding for an early intervention component, but because the message about early intervention and prevention was out there, it was able to be adapted. I think they are some examples of how the report has

in fact been taken up, because of the way in which we have framed it and the way in which we have promoted it. That perhaps has not happened with some of the other reports that we referred to.

CHAIR: It seems to have had a far wider impact than—it is unique in a way, and I am just wondering whether you can see any other ways, in the future possibly—I know that the Commission has produced the *Girlfriend* magazine. I am just wondering whether you could see—I know this is asking you to think on your feet really big time—but whether you could see any other ways that it could be utilised.

Ms CALVERT: The report?

CHAIR: In promotional material. Certainly the key messages are out there in promotional material, aren't they?

Ms CALVERT: I guess what I would say is I think it is used in all the promotional work we do, because it is now so embedded in the Commission, which was one of the great things about doing it so early, even though at the time I thought, "How am I going to do a major inquiry, set up a major employment screening system and establish a relationship with government and the community and why didn't they give me more time?" I am now actually really pleased that we were placed in that situation, because it did provide us with a way of thinking about children and young people and families and communities. It has formed the basis of our work. Really, in everything that we do, you see these messages being enacted. When you ask us what else we can do, I think we are already doing it, because it is in the culture of the organisation and it underpins the work of the Commission.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: This might be outside the ambit of your brief, but how do you think the impact of the casualisation of the workforce has impacted on young people, in terms of the family?

CHAIR: Just before you answer that question, Gillian, it may not be directly relevant to the No-one To Turn To inquiry.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: I am just looking at the stresses this puts on a family, that lack of security. Income has a direct relationship to people living in poverty.

Ms CALVERT: Are you talking about casualisation of adults?

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Yes, adults, as the breadwinners. I know some studies are showing the impact this has, particularly on women, in terms of security, planning for the family and so forth. I don't know, are there studies been done or—

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Or it enables them to be more flexible with the—

Ms CALVERT: Yes, I was going to say earlier—

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: : Conversely, that's right. I am just interested in that issue.

Ms CALVERT: I probably would not say anything—

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: It had a big impact.

Mr CANSDELL: No, we'd love casual work in our area, I think, Virginia; any work.

Ms CALVERT: I will not say a lot, because I think it is a very big topic and could be the subject of an inquiry of its own. What I would say, when I reflect back on this inquiry and what some parents told me, is that the answer would probably depend on the circumstances of the people you were talking to. For some people, where there was a parent who had secure work and it was well paid, casualisation was a positive and it worked well for them. For people who had no employment, then casualisation enabled them to have some contact with the labour market. On the other hand, for people who are in casual employment and want permanent full-time employment, then it would be a negative. I think what I would say in relation to this inquiry and what I heard from what parents told me is that it would depend on the circumstances of those particular parents.

CHAIR: That's without prejudice to any further inquiry. Are there any more questions, because we might want to have a five-minute break or so before we deal with the next witness, Dr Lyndsay Connors. Given that you are going to table your answers formally, I am just wondering are there any burning questions that any members need to ask. Can I say thank you very much. It has been nearly an hour and a half, I think, and that is very demanding on you. I think that we got a lot from this as a Committee and your answer were very fulsome and honest and open. I would like to thank both yourself, your staff and also our Members for the way this hearing was conducted today in relation to your evidence.

Ms CALVERT: I would like to thank you, Madam Chair, and also Members of the Committee because it is a great opportunity for me to reflect on what we have done and to get some fresh thinking again about some of the issues that have been raised by the members in their questioning, so thank you.

(The witness withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

LYNDSAY GENEVIEVE CONNORS, NSW Public Education Council, and member of the Expert Advisory Group to the Commission for Children and Young People, care of Office of the NSW Public Education Council, 35 Bridge Street, Sydney, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: I might start off with a couple of questions, if that is all right. Dr Connors, would you please outline for the Committee your role as a member of the Commission's Expert Advisory Group.

Dr CONNORS: Yes. The members have been individually appointed. In my case, my membership of that group preceded the appointment to the NSW Public Education Council, so I am not representing the Council there. I think all the members appear to have been appointed, as I say, for what they might bring as individuals to the group. Should I say a little bit about the group itself and how it operates?

CHAIR: Yes, please feel free to do so.

Dr CONNORS: It operates in a rather informal, certainly not a highly bureaucratic, manner, as a sounding-board for the Commissioner herself. There is a group of people with expertise in areas relevant to the work of the Commission, and that changes from time to time. There have been a couple of changes. I have been on it since its inception, so it must be around about four years now. The way in which we operate is rather informal. The Commissioner brings issues that she feels she would like to sound out with another group of people. Sometimes the Expert Advisory Group almost acts as a kind of little intelligence network, and some of the issues that have come up through that network have been taken up in turn by the Commissioner. I suppose all that I can bring to your work today would be a kind—it is a kind of insider/onlooker role. Obviously I am not privy to the back room or day-to-day workings of the Commission.

CHAIR: Given that you have said that then, did you provide any advice to the Commission in its inquiry into Children and Young People With No-one To Turn To and the subsequent report and, if so, what was the nature of that advice? Perhaps if you could be a bit more specific.

Dr CONNORS: My recall is that the major contact between the Commissioner and the group—our Expert Advisory Committee—was in the sounding-board role, so that we were informed of the progress. We meet four times a year roughly, and we were informed of the progress of the report and were able to comment on it, I am acting from personal recall here. I do not remember any highly contentious issues or that the group had difficulties with the way the inquiry was proceeding and as the report developed. I do remember in particular there were some members of the Committee that in their own personal role as experts were able to, I suppose, sensitise the Commission. I do recall some discussion about the special needs of young people with disabilities, for instance, but it was a fairly general discussion and progress reporting, as I recall.

CHAIR: As you said, it is really an intelligence network, so to speak.

Dr CONNORS: Yes.

CHAIR: And probably helped define the shape in an informal way.

Dr CONNORS: That is true. That is absolutely right.

CHAIR: The Commission's report, Dr Connors, on the inquiry Into Children and Young People With No-one To Turn To, as you know, makes a number of

recommendations concerning education and schools, and particularly to help support vulnerable children and young people and to better provide for their educational needs. Do you have any comments that you wish to make today on the recommendations or the approach taken in the report to those particular issues, if you think that is appropriate?

Dr CONNORS: If I could make a general comment—and I am speaking as a member of the Expert Advisory Committee—I think sometimes one could almost underestimate the value of the Commission's work, because often I have found the Commission manages to express what are quite complex issues and ideas in response to quite complex problems in what looks like a fairly simple way. I mean, when you pick up the little report that I think the Commissioner herself referred to—it looks sort of simple. But looking on, I thought that the report you are speaking of exemplified what I have really valued and admired about the work of the Commission; that it looks in a holistic way at the situation. I could imagine some groups, given the task of inquiring into vulnerable children, go around in a way looking almost to identify in an unequivocal way, who are these children—almost to count them—and go down the path—and I have seen this happen—where you spend ages on definitional issues.

We know there are some children that in a way are almost totally vulnerable, but I think the more complex view that the report took and that the Commission takes generally is we do not actually know all the children who are vulnerable some of the time. I very much admired that balance between—as I did hear the Commissioner outline today, the need to have a generally supportive approach with opportunities for all young people, at any time in their life when they may be vulnerable, to find help; and then the special targeted services for children who are very clearly vulnerable and in specific ways. I suppose then if you went further, you need highly specialist services for some children. I feel this inquiry exemplified the work of the Commission in that way; a rather subtle and complex approach, but often expressed in a way that might lead you to think it was quite simple.

On your question, looking on as a person with an interest in the public education system and in schooling generally, I was very pleased to see, because it fits with my experience, the tremendous importance of schools and the community and families in all. They are the primary group. I am now speaking personally. I hesitate to speak on behalf of the Public Education Council, but certainly in our deliberations we have recognised that, as much as you want funds to go into schools, some issues are best dealt with out in the community or in the family. I think that balance has been captured; that in a way what we are trying to get is children and young people to be able to come to school, able to engage with what the school offers.

There has to be some outreach both ways, but in a way you have to build up the family and the community to get that side of the engagement: that the child comes along in a reasonable state to learn, and then the school has to do its work and they have to interact. The Commission has—I think—built synergies, in a way, among the agencies. Certainly that is my view and I think this report demonstrates that. The specific recommendations about schools, many of them were kind of in the ether. They have been partly addressed—you could go through, I suppose, and write a

report, "There have been some additional counsellors given that I am aware of, there has been the reduction in class sizes in the early years." You would not want to say this inquiry report was the only one that ever said those things should happen, but it gelled very well and added to the momentum for that change.

CHAIR: No, very good. Are there any other questions, given the very narrow focus with which you are here giving evidence today, that someone may wish to ask?

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I would just be interested to know perhaps a little bit more about when the discussions took place about children with disabilities, what sort of issues came up in relation to that?

Dr CONNORS: Perhaps I should have looked back more specifically through the minutes before I came. I do not think I can add a lot. The discussion that I recall was of a fairly general kind, to say do not overlook the specific issues of children who are vulnerable and who have disabilities, and of course, they are not—you can be vulnerable anyway and have a disability, and you can have a disability and not be vulnerable. But it was more in the way of advice to the Commissioner, and sometimes what happens is that the member who has that expertise, the Commissioner will say, "We will meet and talk." We do not always talk it right through at the meeting, so more may have happened than I am aware of. I am sorry not to be able to give—

CHAIR: No, that is all right, thank you.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Dr Connors, in relation to the point that you have made about the capacity of the Commission to reflect what is an incredibly complex set of problems in a way that is digestible, and more importantly, be able to be implemented, would you say that the methodology that has been used by the Commission has actually led to that kind of really applicable report, if that is a fair question, because—

CHAIR: Do you feel that is within your capacity?

Dr CONNORS: I am happy to give a personal answer out of my experience.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: And I think we should take it as that.

CHAIR: Yes.

Dr CONNORS: As a member of the Expert Advisory Committee, I was impressed with the process. Tapping into children is not a simple job. It can be done in a way that is exploitative, it can be done in a way that is tokenistic, it can be co-opting. I watched on with some admiration, and I think learnt a lot, about how that seemed to be happening—I did not actually attend any of the meetings, but from the report it seemed to be done in a very appropriate and professional way.

I think the framing of recommendations was well done, in that the basic message was there. I did hear the Commissioner this morning, and judgment has to be made about whether you are going to, in your recommendations, really lay down a

principle, and she almost said the recommendations were like an illustrative way in which you could go about it; but the Commission would not be averse to, say, an agency like the Department of Education saying, "We have heard your message, but we think there is a better way to do it." I think that is sensible. If you go in for the highly mandatory-type of recommendation, you can, if you are not carefully, evoke a quite ritualistic response, where people keep sending you pro formas with bits ticked off, but the consciousness of the agency has not changed all that much. I would not be personally recommending any different approach. I think it is a quite good balance, and a quite mindful balance that they have struck.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Not necessarily for a response, but it just strikes me—and particularly from myself coming from, as you know Dr Connors, 25 years in education and therefore children—it just seems to me that it is a really refreshing way to get the message of a complex issue back out to the people that participated in it. That has been really good to see that one of the big efforts of the Commission has been to actually report back to those people that participated in the exercise.

Dr CONNORS: Yes, I would agree with that. As a member, of course, you have an ear to the ground, and I suppose the most numbers of comments that came back spontaneously, through conversation with people who would not have known I had any connection with the Commission, were around the Alcohol Summit. I think it must have been eight or nine people, that spontaneously happened to say in the course of my other business what a remarkable contribution young people made, and I think similarly here, the Commission has picked up on the views of young people. You know, that view about intervention being sensitive and protective of their privacy, and not a stigmatising labelling, that has all come through very strongly, and I think we should all listen to that.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Just on the point that I think my colleague Ms Burney made, and picking up on your point, Doctor, was that I know when I looked at the report, I thought these recommendations are very general, they are non-prescriptive. I thought where are the things that you can actually go out and do, but I think the point is well made, that it should be a more generalised—sort of a rationale, an ideology of how you should go about interacting and getting these results, and I found that that was helpful as well.

Dr CONNORS: Yes, I would agree with that. I have found in my own work, chairing the Public Education Council, which is much newer, there is something about the Children's Commission. It is something of a kind of conscience and a challenge to do the job better with young people, but I have found it is also a support. Sometimes I have thought, you know, the Commissioner for Children will be looking at this, and then you think, "I am not sure how to do this. I will ring them." I have found that they, in that way, they are quite interesting. They kind of set a bit of a challenge for other agencies, but they are also quite helpful in helping to meet it.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Because at the end of the day, these are incredibly complex issues that you are dealing with, and they have not got the resources to be able to practically not only identify all of them, but to actually put in solutions. If you have a generalised way of going about the work that you are doing, then those

tentacles can spread out into the other areas, I think more effectively. You can extrapolate these principles practically to most areas where there are problems, because they are like general truths, in a way, that are commas.

Dr CONNORS: Reminders and truths. The Commissioner attended a forum that my Council ran and I noticed she, in her professional capacity, was able to—she kind of knitted up varying views. It was particularly around what you might call the readiness of young people for schools and the readiness of schools for young people when they are starting. The Commission has clearly got this capacity to kind of marshal, in a way, the views that are out there, and put them in a positive and constructive way that others can go ahead with. I think it is quite an effective organisation.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Recommendation 3 of the report, that being: "A cross-sectoral framework to build strong parenting for eight to 17-year-olds should be developed by the New South Wales Government," it is one of those things that is very important. But I am having trouble in my own mind identifying ideas or policies that could action that. Would you be able to—it was a part of attachment 1 in our folder.

Dr CONNORS: Yes, I have the recommendation in front of me, yes.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I was just going to seek, from your vast and wide experience, whether you could help in writing us some ideas, as a Children/Persons Committee, to give us some ideas on that issue that we may be able to action.

Dr CONNORS: If I did answer it, it would be a personal view and I would tend to say we have the makings of that framework in New South Wales. I think that approach of Families First—and this is my personal view, which may not be totally informed—we have that inter-agency approach being exhibited in a number of ways. We have Families First, we have Better Futures, we have some of the national work—I think it is called Stronger Families—working in New South Wales. I am of the view myself that I would interpret "framework" as it is written there, with a small "f", not a capital "F" and not attempt to draw up some utopian blueprint for families, but rather do what we are doing, build up almost a mosaic of policies that support parents. I am not saying we invest enough and I am not saying we have it perfect, but I think we are on the right track from my point of view. If you asked me to advise on that, I would say leave it a small "f", even perhaps cross-sectoral frameworks.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: From your experience within the public education system and just on this issue of child care, are we seeing a difference in children going to school that have had the benefit of child care or that interaction, compared to, say, those that have stayed at home? Is there anything that we should be aware of as a Committee in terms of the differences in outcomes for young children going off to school?

CHAIR: Just before you answer that, it is not directly about the report, with the greatest of respect, Melinda, but if you want to make a personal comment, that is a matter for you.

Dr CONNORS: Let me say, I am not able to speak. I do not hold that information. If the Department of Education has such information, I do not hold it. I am aware that there appear to be positive indications from the preschools for Aboriginal students, that they appear to have a positive effect, but I really should be careful I do not go beyond my expertise. It is a very complex area. How do you get control groups and that sort of thing? You are often not comparing like with like. I think I perhaps would not be helpful.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I just picked up on it from your comment about, is school ready for some young children and are some young children ready for school. Because some young children are ready for school where others are not and I just wonder whether that issue of some sort of child care prior to going to school may actually be enhancing their ability.

Dr CONNORS: The latest thinking—and I am now speaking personally from other experience and looking at research—I think that the latest opinion is against forming an idea that there is some check list that one can run over a child and say it is now ready for school. There is not. It is far better to say most children are going to start school in our society around a certain age and, whatever stage they are at, we have to be ready for them. On the other hand, we can support families and communities so that children have a sense of general wellbeing and confidence. Certainly my thinking, and I think the thinking of the sort of leaders in that area in New South Wales and universities and in the bureaucracy, would be a flexible approach to children and to avoid the tendencies we can see in some other countries, where parents are either holding children back till they are older, thinking they will, if you like to put it crudely, beat the younger children when they go into the same class—there is no evidence of that producing excellent results, but the circumstances of children vary so much, as you would know. A child at home, in a privileged home with the care of a highly educated parent, cannot really be compared with a deprived child in a child care centre and so forth.

CHAIR: Are there any other questions? No? Dr Connors, can we thank you very much for your attendance. I found, no doubt as the Committee did, your answers very informative and very well thought out. Thank you for attending today and again thank you to the Committee for their support in this hearing.

(The witness withdrew)