

CORRECTED COPY

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 2

Wednesday 16 September 2009

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

COMMUNITY SERVICES

The Committee met at 3.00 p.m.

MEMBERS

The Hon. R. M. Parker (Chair)

The Hon. A. Catanzariti
Mr I. Cohen
The Hon. G. J. Donnelly

The Hon. C. J. S. Lynn
Reverend the Hon. G. K. M. Moyes
The Hon. C. M. Robertson

PRESENT

The Hon. L. J. Burney, *Minister for Community Services*

Department of Human Services
Ms J. Mason, *Director General*

Community Services
Ms A. Gallard, *Acting Chief Executive*
Mr S. Matthews, *Chief Financial Officer*
Ms S. Stewart, *Divisional Director, Communities and Early Years*

New South Wales Office for Children
Ms K. Boland, *Children's Guardian*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I declare the hearing for the inquiry into the 2009-10 budget estimates for the portfolio of Community Services open. I welcome the Minister and accompanying officials. I will make some brief comments about procedural matters. I refer everyone to my earlier statements about the broadcasting of proceedings. I do not propose to go through those lengthy comments; I simply note that they are available by the door.

JENNIFER MASON, Director General, Department of Human Services,

ANNETTE GALLARD, Acting Chief Executive, Community Services, and

STEPHEN MATTHEWS, Chief Financial officer, Community Services, affirmed and examined, and

SONJA STEWART, Divisional Director, Communities and Early Years, Community Services

KERRY BOLAND, Children's Guardian, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I declare the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of Community Services open for examination. There is no provision for an opening statement by the Minister so we will begin with questions.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Is it possible for questions to the Children's Guardian to be asked first, thereby allowing her to take her leave?

CHAIR: That is a little irregular, and it is a difficult request at this time. If we had known in advance we might have been able to do that.

Following the damning internal Department of Community Services [DOCS] review regarding the management by DOCS of the death in 2007 of the child now known as Ebony, what have you done to ensure that caseworkers pursue every child and particularly high-risk children who are known to DOCS to guarantee that they have been sighted by the department?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am pleased that you have asked that question. Everyone feels how awful and moving was the death of the young girl now known as Ebony. Clearly, an enormous amount of work has been undertaken, not just as a result of her death but also as a result of a range of issues around that time, which are no secret. Community Services and the Government are very much on the record about the circumstances and, I think, the justifiable criticism of the role particularly of Community Services and other government agencies around that particular death. Following Ebony's death, the former director general asked the New South Wales Ombudsman to undertake a comprehensive and independent review of the case.

The department is in the process of implementing the Ombudsman's recommendations. As a result, a number of changes have occurred in the region where this case was managed, including improved supervision of staff and employing specialist staff who provide support on complex cases, improved intake and assessment procedures, and improved overall practice and additional training for staff to develop the skills needed for serious neglect cases and hostile clients.

CHAIR: That is just within that particular region. What about across the whole State?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: This case among other things precipitated the inquiry by Justice James Wood. The little girl's death has been the subject of proceedings before the East Maitland Supreme Court and the jury found that the little girl's mother was guilty of murder and her father was guilty of manslaughter. Following this tragedy, as I indicated earlier—I am sure we will talk about it at length throughout these proceedings—the child protection system went through an extensive review.

CHAIR: When did that review commence?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It was completed at the end of November, and the review took place 12 months prior to that. The Government responded with Keep Them Safe, which no doubt we will also explore throughout these proceedings. Of the 111 recommendations made by Justice James Wood, 106 were accepted by the Government. It is fair to say that—this goes to the heart of your question—one change that has already taken place within New South Wales is the changes to legislation, which have gone through both houses of

Parliament, relating to the capacity for government agencies to exchange information when there are concerns about families. Obviously that is done within strict criteria and protocols. In my view, that has been as a result of a number of things but one of those things is the terrible and tragic death of this young girl.

CHAIR: Do you now feel confident that you have the structures in place to review every child, particularly high-risk children known to Department of Community Services, and that you have the appropriate safeguards in place, and that those protocols are completely in line with the recommendations by Justice Wood?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I was about to say that another important change—to answer your question—is the establishment of child wellbeing units in a number of other government agencies, including health, housing, disability services, police, and education, and the role of non-government agencies. Together with the changes to legislation and with sweeping reform, including new thresholds, including the fact that we are in the process of training 200,000 mandatory reporters across the State, it is about sweeping changes to the child protection system. It is about strengthening the child protection system. Once again the important point is that those government agencies all take child protection reports and Community Services take the ones that go above the new threshold, and that will mean that more of the serious, complex cases will be dealt with by Community Services.

CHAIR: Are you confident you have got it under control?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am committed to, and obviously the Parliament, with the support of the legislation, is committed to the most sweeping changes in the past 20 years. The additional \$750 million will greatly strengthen and improve the child protection system in New South Wales.

CHAIR: Have you negotiated with the Minister for Police to ensure police accompany Community Services workers to any homes with people who are potentially violent or obstructionist?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: As I understand it, that is the procedure at the moment. Police are often involved in visits with Community Services workers to homes where it is very difficult situation.

CHAIR: In the 12 months since the publication of the Woods report have you liaised with the Minister for Education and Training to ensure the attendance at school of children known to the Community Services?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. One of the changes under these reforms—I am not quite sure the commentators have picked up on this—is that it is now a reportable matter if a parent wilfully and deliberately keeps their child from school. Obviously the Department of Education and Training has an enormous role in the child protection system, particularly the new system. I am happy to say that the Department of Education and Training has been the first agency to put in place its Child Wellbeing Unit. It is participating in a huge roll-out of the mandatory reporter training. The department is also participating on the senior officers group that is overseeing the implementation of the reforms.

CHAIR: There has been a lot of discussion about the handover of casework files and part of or entire files going missing. What has the Minister done to improve the management of case files?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will ask Ms Gallard to respond to that question.

Ms GALLARD: As a result of the findings of the internal review we have looked at our case practice procedures, and new procedures that are being rolled out to people in the field have been developed and are being consulted upon. Every Community Services centre in the State will receive training on the new requirements.

CHAIR: What is the timeline for that?

Ms GALLARD: I will take that question on notice.

CHAIR: In relation to the Community Services Grants Program [CSGP], other than a consumer price index adjustment, there has not been an increase for 17 years to that funding. In March the Minister reported that the recommendations from a business case developed from the CSGP review in 2008 were the subject of a discussion between Community Services and New South Wales Treasury. What was the outcome of that discussion?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The lead-in to your question is correct. There has not been a substantial increase to the base funding. I think this question was asked last year—I have just had a déjà vu moment. There have been consumer price index increases. From memory the Community Services Grants Program is about \$82 million a year. That funding supports a lot of community groups such as neighbourhood centres across New South Wales. Recently I met with the peak group at its conference where I spoke about the CSGP. In relation to the CSGP the Government is doing a lot of work to look at performance measures and aligning this grant program in the direction it is heading in child protection in New South Wales.

CHAIR: I will interrupt. We will ask questions about how these programs are appraised and about any feedback but my question was specifically about the Minister's negotiations with Treasury, the department that hands out the funding. What have your negotiations revealed? What is the likelihood of improvements to funding?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I was moving towards that. Under Keep Them Safe, \$37 million has been allocated to intervention and community building preventions. Our discussions are around looking at CSGP funded organisations and having discussions with them about their capacity for delivering some of the components of that \$37 million allocation. The Government has a very good relationship with the peak bodies involved in the CSGP. Whilst the budget did not increase funding this year, the way is open for further discussions with the Treasurer in relation to CSGP base funding next year. It is important for the committee to understand that this program is not just sitting around but the Government is actually looking at ways to improve the program and align it better with its priorities. It will work closely with those organisations that are CSGP funded.

CHAIR: Is the Minister confident that there will be an increase in funding next year if there is no increase in funding this year?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The discussions with Treasury have led us to what I have described—

CHAIR: No extra funding—

Ms LINDA BURNEY:—and the capacity for further discussions in the next budget about base funding.

CHAIR: The committee will come back to CSGP next year. Minister, I have more questions on that program. In relation to the Ebony matter, and case-file management, what improvements to the Key Information Directory System [KiDS] have been introduced so that files can be updated and not lost?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It may seem that I am constantly going back to Keep Them Safe but it is understandable as it is the way forward. Keep Them Safe got a substantial allocation around information exchange. Keep Them Safe and the Government's reforms are essentially about the whole system, including information and technology. In fact, the mini-budget granted the department funds to begin work immediately around the information technology system.

Detailed planning for the kids core design update project was completed in 2008-09, as I have just indicated. That project will modernise the Key Information Directory System [KiDS] to suit standardised business practice and improve useability. A business case was prepared and reviewed by the Treasury's Strategic Gateway Team and capital funding of just under \$20 million over two years was included in the 2009-2010 State budget to improve the KiDS. The other important thing to say is that one of the really keen discussions and part of the planning of the Senior Officers Group has been around this absolutely fundamental point of information exchange. That is important, because what is underpinning some of this is what we call cumulative harm. Obviously if police have information on a family it might be one DVD—

CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I would like to finish this point, because you asked me the question.

CHAIR: The questions are about specifics. Most of us have an understanding of how these things unfold.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: All right. I am saying that the improvements are there, the money is there and the work that is fundamental to the rollout of our reforms is being undertaken.

CHAIR: Specifically what will be done to better manage parents who are resistant or obstructive, such as in the case of Ebony?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Could you expand on that?

CHAIR: If parents do not want assistance, if they deliberately try to avoid that support and assistance, what will be done?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: That may sound like a straightforward, simple question, but it requires quite a complex answer. It is around whether the parents you are referring to have children who are in, or are going to enter, the statutory child protection system, or whether they are parents who we feel, or non-government agencies feel, or they themselves feel, that they need to enter something like Brighter Futures which, of course, is a voluntary program. I think you are probably referring to the first set of parents who deliberately obstruct and are difficult with caseworkers. One of the huge aspects of what we are doing now is around special training for our staff. Some of it is specific around this issue, and I ask Annette Gallard to expand on that.

Ms GALLARD: I am sure everyone understands that Ebony's parents were extremely difficult to deal with, quite hostile, and they misled Community Services staff and staff from other agencies on a number of occasions. We are very aware that a number of our staff are young females and that they need special skills in working with hostile parents and in dealing with intimidating situations. As a specific result of that, we have looked at how we can skill-up our caseworkers to deal with situations like that. We have been building that into our training packages for staff.

CHAIR: For clarification about police accompanying the Department of Community Services workers, you said that that was already procedure. If that is already procedure, why did it need to be a recommendation in the Ombudsman's review?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I guess you would need to ask the Ombudsman.

CHAIR: Clearly there is an issue, obviously it is not occurring. Is that the case?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: No, that is not the case. Where it is necessary and warranted, police do attend.

CHAIR: Minister, I return briefly to the Community Services Grants Program. I am sure you are aware that there are issues of lengthy reports being required, sometimes from very small agencies, that take a long time to put together?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: Who reviews those reports that each service compiles? How do the service providers get feedback? Is any of that feedback provided to you from those reports?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Sure, I could not agree with you more. It is something that we are working on with the office that looks after the red tape, the Office of Regulatory Reform. One statement and discussion that I absolutely have had with Brian Smith and others around this issue is that there is an awful burden on small organisations if they have two or three grants, all requiring a different form and different accountabilities. One of the things we are pursuing is taking away that burden and making it one application and one process. It is very much welcomed by the sector, I assure you. I agree that with a \$6,000 grant they should not have to do the same amount of paperwork as for a \$36,000 or \$46,000 grant. That is one thing that we are determined to change.

Mr IAN COHEN: Minister, are there enough registered foster carers in New South Wales to take children into crisis care when emergencies arise?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: No.

Mr IAN COHEN: Would you like to expand on that?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will expand on that. I am glad you have asked that, because this week is National Foster Care Week. This week we have launched a new website to make it easier for people who are interested in foster caring to register and go through the process. We have a major campaign underway to recruit more foster carers and a specific campaign within that to recruit Aboriginal foster carers—and not only to recruit them, but to retain them as well. Last Saturday I went to Olympic Park to the Foster Carers Annual Picnic. I spoke to a lot of foster carers. Some really great feedback was that they feel that some of the work we have been doing over the past 12 months is starting to show. This year we have 518 new carers. Are you asking specifically about respite carers, or broadly?

Mr IAN COHEN: In crisis, in emergency situations.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It applies across the board. A specific campaign to recruit more foster carers is underway. Yesterday in Bega an information session was held on recruiting foster carers. We have in place a new innovative project called Lifestyle Solutions, a new contract to create more emergency beds. You are right, Mr Cohen, if at 2.30 in the morning something dreadful happens in someone's home, children need to be taken out quickly. That is one of the challenges, of course.

Mr IAN COHEN: What happens to a child in an emergency situation when there is no available carer at short notice, as you described? At what rate did that occur in 2008-09?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: In relation to the second part of the question, I defer to Annette Gallard for an answer.

Ms GALLARD: You are right: there are emergency situations when it is very difficult to find a bed for a child at very short notice. We now have systems in place that mean that if a community services centre is having difficulty in finding a bed, that is circulated to the regional office and then it is the job of the regional office to find an emergency placement, either within the region or indeed across regions. In that way we can maximise the emergency placements that are available.

Mr IAN COHEN: Are there circumstances where a child cannot be placed immediately and how often did this happen during 2008-09?

Ms GALLARD: I cannot tell you how often it happened during 2008-09. It does happen from time to time and in those situations we usually put a couple of caseworkers with the child in a motel for the night until we find a placement for the child the next morning.

Mr IAN COHEN: Do you recall how many motel nights have been organised?

Ms GALLARD: We will take it on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: I would just like to know what the situation is. The out-of-home care budget shows that the spend per child with high and complex needs has dropped from \$151,000 in 2006-07 to \$122,000 in 2008-09. Could you explain where those savings have been found?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will ask Jenny to respond to that.

Ms MASON: There has been a process, which I think we discussed last year as well, to try to get better quality contracts and, I suppose, more rational arrangements. The department had a process in the past where we were doing things under various one-off and emergency arrangements. We have tried to get orderly contracts. I think we now have contracts with four separate providers to try to do it in a systematic way. In our view we are providing better quality for those high-needs kids. In fact, our staff member who runs our metropolitan high-needs kids program got a public sector medal this year for the work she does with the kids, which is absolutely fantastic. We will be happy to give you the details of those contracts on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: Do you think that despite the lowering of funding there is a heightening of care?

Ms MASON: I would say that. We still spend probably about one-fifth of the out-of-home-care budget on the 300 or 320 most high-needs kids. It is still a huge part of what we spend the money on.

Mr IAN COHEN: Could you provide information about the progress of setting up the child wellbeing units in Health, Police, Education, Disability Services, Juvenile Justice and Housing?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes I can. The child wellbeing units are obviously part of the reforms and the units that are being established in the agencies that Mr Cohen just referred to are well on the way. The Education Department has its unit in place and one of the really rewarding things about that was there were over 300 applications for those positions. Health will be establishing a number of units across the State. New South Wales Police is also establishing a unit. There is now a Department of Human Services and some discussions are going on about what the structure of the units will be in Housing, Disability Services and Juvenile Justice. Another consideration is how the non-government sector, particularly non-government schools, will do the reporting. I can say they will all be in place by the end of October. The training is being rolled out to the units and they will be staffed by qualified, highly specialised people.

Mr IAN COHEN: All those departments will have these in place by the end of October?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes, but I stress that they are not all exactly the same, depending on the size of the department and the number of reports. The answer to your question is definitely.

Mr IAN COHEN: You might want to take this on notice. What will be the cost of these units?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I do not have that information at hand but I will take it on notice. I can say they are all costed and funded out of the \$750 million that has been made available under Keep Them Safe.

Mr IAN COHEN: Will child care be transferred to the Education super department as announced in the 2009-10 budget?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: No, initially in the first blush of the restructure of the agencies child care was mooted to be transferred completely to Education. After lengthy discussion, including discussions between the Minister for Education, our departments and the Department of Premier and Cabinet, we took the view that at present we would keep child care and preschool early childhood services where they are. I will take a minute to explain that. We are in the process of some really exciting funding rollouts and discussions with the Commonwealth about early childhood education, such as who will be the regulator; the quality childcare framework is being rolled out and an agreement will be signed through the Council of Australian Governments [COAG] process in December on the national strategy quality agenda. New South Wales is obviously a major player in that. Huge increases in funding are also being rolled out, both from the Commonwealth and the State, through the Preschool Investment and Reform Plan [PIRP] and the national quality agenda. Because of the incredible reform and change and the fact we are in the middle of the COAG process we felt it was more sensible to keep early childhood where it is and make sure the reforms and funding are rolled out. Everyone agreed that was a sensible approach.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I was quite appreciative of the increase in the budget for the implementation of the Keep Them Safe action plan. However, looking at the real increase over a period of time it is about 6 per cent in your department. I believe that is a very small increase for a department that has such enormous responsibilities. What is the problem? Why can you not get more money?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am pretty happy to get a \$750 million specific increase for—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Six per cent is not much when you count 2.4 per cent—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am looking at the \$750 million on top of what we get now. In the 2009-10 budget there was actually a 16.3 per cent increase in the overall Community Services budget. I am not sure I agree with your sums but I would never question your capacity for mathematics.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: When I look at all the programs on which that money is spent I see that most of it is being spent on the symptoms of child neglect and abuse rather than on addressing the causes in disadvantage and poverty. It seems to me there is very little for prevention and most of it is being spent on more staff to stick on bigger band-aids.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I respect your view but I have to say—this is no secret—the biggest spend in Community Services is the out-of-home-care budget.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Always has been, Minister.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am not sure of the exact causes but it is not just New South Wales, as you know; it is right across Australia and the Western world. More and more children, for whatever complex reasons, are requiring care. Referring to the specific issues mentioned by the member in his question, between 2006-07 and 2009-10 there has been a 22 per cent increase in the prevention and early intervention budget.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I can understand that. Early intervention became the flavour of the month.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It took a long time for that to happen, but the investment is important if we are to address in the long term the number of children who are going into care. Overall funding for early intervention and prevention is \$114 million. A whole range of things could be fitted into that, such as \$25 million to improve the services provided to Aboriginal children and young people. An amount of \$750 million has been allocated specifically to implement the changes that were recommended and accepted in discussions relating to Keep them Safe. Some families have reached a crisis point and their children could go into the statutory system. That is where we want to make a difference. It is hard to put a spoke in the wheel and to create intergenerational change in order to prevent violence and abuse from one generation to the other. I liken the Government's policy to the Holy Grail: it is trying to change the ever-increasing number of children who are going into care.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Reflecting on your earlier answer that we had no base funding increase for the Community Services Grants Program [CSGP], I note that last year those services turned away a staggering 50.5 per cent more people than they did in the previous 12 months because they did not have the funding. How will you address that problem?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I want everyone to understand that almost all these organisations receive funding from a number of places—some receive Commonwealth Government money and some receive philanthropic money. In some cases, the CSGP forms a substantial part of the budget of some organisations, but in other cases it forms a small part of their budget. These organisations, in particular, neighbourhood centres, do not rely primarily on CSGP funding.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: But many of them do. You said earlier that you were getting on well with the peak bodies. A number of peak bodies would not be agreeing with you on that matter. That would include, for example, the New South Wales Council of Social Service, the Local Community Services Association, New South Wales Family Services, the Youth Action and Policy Association, and the Local Government and Shires Associations. They are not happy with you, Minister.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am not sure about the Local Government and Shires Associations, but all the other bodies have been involved in discussions relating to the way forward for the CSGP. I do not want members to think that this issue is being ignored, as it is one of my biggest priorities and passions. Community Services remains committed to enhancing that program. The \$37 million allocation to Keep them Safe should be aligned with CSGP funded services and with what we want to achieve overall in the child protection arena, including early intervention. Those services will be well placed to access that money and to run early intervention prevention programs.

A week ago I spoke about that issue at length at a conference that was held and those services are excited about the prospect. I acknowledge that they are not happy as there has not been any base funding, and nor am I. However, this issue has not been ignored. We are looking at ways of working with those services to provide access, and to expand and align the services that they provide. For many years I was on the board of a neighbourhood centre called the Settlement, so I understand the role and the importance of those services to the community. I am aware that, importantly, they provide a focus and a hub in the community.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I wish you every success in what you are doing.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Thank you.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: This issue is fundamental. If those services are turning away one out of two people in real need you have to come up with some answers.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. I hope that the points I made earlier go some way towards reassuring the member that we are seeking a way forward. We are working actively on supporting and enhancing the very services to which the member is referring.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I will read and reflect upon your answer.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am happy to have an in-depth discussion with the member at any point.

Mr IAN COHEN: The joint training opportunities for government and non-government organisations is a key recommendation in the Wood report. What proportion of the Keep them Safe budget is allocated to joint training?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I do not have a specific answer relating to joint training. One of the fundamental points that Wood made—and one of the fundamental principles that we have accepted—relates to the greater role of the non-government sector in delivering both early intervention prevention and out-of-home care. In fact, we have already handed over 500 out-of-home care places to the non-government sector. About 42 per cent of the Keep them Safe budget will go to the non-government sector, primarily to deliver out-of-home care. The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies [ACWA] has been contracted to roll out much of the training program. We have met with individual organisations and discussed with them their contracts and their roles. That will not be done willy-nilly and it will not occur in one month; it will occur in an orderly and proper fashion and everyone will be in the same boat.

Mr IAN COHEN: How would you respond to a concern that there is cost shifting in this area?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Could you explain what you mean?

Mr IAN COHEN: There is a movement of money between the organisations and they are not really getting down to the issue of joint training.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will take that question on notice. I am not quite sure to what you are referring.

Mr IAN COHEN: I will send you a more detailed question.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: If the member is referring to the mandatory reporting training that is taking place most people in those non-government organisations fall into the mandatory reporting basket. Over the next few months they will be included in the training program and they will be trained, in particular, on the new mandatory reporting threshold. If that is the issue to which the member is referring they will be included in that training.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I wondered whether the 500 out-of-home care places to which you referred had been passed over.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: They have already been transferred.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: That might be part of the background for the cost shifting.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am not sure whether that is correct but I am happy to look at that issue.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Following Mr Ian Cohen's earlier question, could the Minister elaborate on her answer by telling the Committee how Community Services is improving the assessment and authorisation of foster carers in New South Wales?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will not go over the points that I made earlier relating to the role of foster carers in New South Wales and the respect that we have for them. However, we recognise the need for additional foster carers. Members would appreciate that the foster carer assessment process is thorough and it is conducted in a manner that ensures they are the appropriate people to become foster parents. We have been performing this task well over the past three years. In that time we have authorised 1,018 foster carers in New

South Wales. In addition to foster carers we have a range of other carers, such as kinship carers, who also go through a process, though not exactly the same.

Community Services commissioned a review of the assessment process. Some feedback we received from foster carers was that the process was too lengthy—in some cases way too long. This was at the beginning of my tenure, so we reviewed the assessment process and some significant areas for improvement were identified. In April 2009 a new computerised system was installed to manage the authorisation of foster carer applicants. People now are able to log on and register their interest. The system tracks the progress of applications and instead of the paper-based system requiring people to remember to follow up the process of their application, the computer system trips or highlights when certain steps in the process are due. This minimises delays and relieves staff from administrative tasks to concentrate on casework. The system has proved to be really successful evidenced by the number of people accessing it.

We also have an online information facility about fostering and provide a toll-free inquiry number. People are dedicated to the task of ensuring that system works well. In the first four weeks' operation we received 149 online applications and something like 316 calls. We are pretty happy with that. Continuous improvement of the program is important. We have set up a system of foster carers support networks across New South Wales. They are incredible people. I have met a number of them. We have made sure that foster carers have a forum through which they can tell us where they believe they need more support and information, and what we need to do to address those needs. The assessment and training has improved significantly. A new training program is being developed in consultation with the non-government sector. This results from all the things I have just described. An enormous amount of work and effort is going into recruiting and training and to improve our processes and support for foster carers in New South Wales.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, what progress has been made in improving the processes to identify children at risk and interagency cooperation in the child protection system?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: We probably have canvassed some of the answers in our earlier discussions. I will not repeat them but, basically, they fall into a number of categories. The first involves changes to legislation. As I said earlier, those changes were very much about interagency coordination and information. What I did not mention before and want to highlight is the issue of cumulative harm. We are conscious of that issue, especially with a number of agencies now operating in a reporting capacity. This will help put together the story of a child who may be in a home the subject of a domestic violence callout, who may visit the hospital emergency department, who may not have lunch at school or who may not be getting to medical appointments. This procedure is further enhanced by our fantastic joint work with the Commonwealth as Medicare and Centrelink now provide information to help us put these stories together. It is around changes to the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act.

The Commonwealth also has its assessment framework for child wellbeing. To some people this would not be interesting, but it is important. We are in the process of developing a world first common assessment tool. Someone working in the child wellbeing unit at the Department of Education and Training, in Health, the Community Services Helpline or in one of the new family referral services that are about to be set up will use the same assessment tool to make a decision whether that child is above or below the threshold. People will be trained in how to use that important assessment tool and it will be ready by the time we switch on the new threshold on day one of term one next year. The assessment tool helps in referral to the appropriate service and minimising multiple assessments by different agencies, not duplicating effort, which is really important. I am sure that addresses the questions the Chair began with about the case to which she referred.

There are a number of other points in relation to the mandatory reporting guidance. It is fairly typical but it is an essential part of the jigsaw of making sure that the reforms we are talking about roll out at the appropriate time. Everyone with a role in reporting, assessing or being part of the child protection system is working with tools that have been tested. In fact, the structured decision-making tool model, which is the technical name to what I have been referring, is being developed between us and the Children's Research Center in the United States of America. It is the assessment tool that will help guide us in this decision making. The early results of our field testing are very good.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Minister, could you elaborate on the Brighter Futures evaluation by updating the evaluation of the early intervention program?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. Most people know that the Brighter Futures program is our main intervention and prevention program. It is a key element of what we do about early intervention prevention. Brighter Futures is a program where people can be referred by way of the Helpline, by way of contact with a non-government agency or self-referred. It is voluntary and is about providing support to families so their children do not become part of the statutory system. It is absolutely fundamental to what we do. Significantly, about a quarter of families in the Brighter Futures program are Aboriginal. The vast majority of families have received risk of harm reports in the two years prior to entering the program. To quickly answer your question specifically, in May this year the evaluation report shows significant reduction in the average number of reports for children who participated in the Brighter Futures program. The results are slightly different between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. That tells us that it is a worthwhile investment and families who actually stick with the program have less risk of harm reports of their children leaving the program.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, will you explain what steps the Government is taking to support women and children who are victims of domestic violence to stay safely in their homes? You touched on this earlier.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. We touched on this earlier in the Minister for Women discussions. This is around the Staying Home Leaving Violence Program. I will not go over the whole point again because a number of you—or one of you—has already heard it. Essentially it is a completely different way of thinking about dealing with the issue of domestic violence. Traditionally, if there is a domestic violence situation, it has been women and children who have fled the home to get away from that situation.

The Staying Home Leaving Violence Program was a 2007 election commitment. It is about keeping the women and children in the home. It is really important that children have stability. One of the great outcomes of some early evaluations that we have done is that children do not have to change schools. The women have been able to maintain their employment. Basically it is about a whole range of strategies: risk assessment and safety planning for the individual—importantly some practical things like good security locks, grilles on windows and security doors in the home; support in the process of applying for an exclusion order or an apprehended violence order [AVO]; really good collaboration, support and liaison with the police; financial, tenancy and other personal issues; help with navigating the legal system; and support and resources for clients of Family Court proceedings.

The evaluations have been so positive that we are expanding at a number of other communities. In the Bega example, 75 per cent of Staying Home Leaving Violence clients said they felt much safer at home in the long term. One woman I spoke to said it was just so good to have stopped moving, and her children were different children. I am absolutely thrilled with this program. The creativity and innovation in it really is what we need to pursue in what seems sometimes to be an intractable issue around domestic violence.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Can you outline the Tackling Violence Program and how it aims to lower the levels of domestic violence in communities?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am very happy to talk about that. I have been in public administration and policy development, particularly working with the Aboriginal community, for 30 years. I have very much come to the conclusion that one of the best ways to deal with issues such as domestic violence and issues around protection of children, especially in country areas, is to have local programs and have the people in those communities taking responsibility and driving the programs. Some people may think this is a bit odd, but the perfect marriage to do this, particularly in large Aboriginal communities, is through rugby league. The Tackling Violence Program is in five communities and involves six rugby league teams who have done something very brave: They have put up their hands and nominated their clubs to be the champions of driving down domestic violence in those communities.

We are doing some early evaluations with some fantastic results. We are doing a much more in-depth evaluation. There are six teams, and I hope I can remember them all: the Bay and Basin Sharks in Nowra, the Maclean Magpies up on the North Coast, the two teams in Dubbo—CYMS and Macquarie, the Windsor Wolves and the Tingha Tigers. Three of them have won their grand finals, which is also good. But the players have signed up to a code of behaviour. They are sanctioned if they break that code. Each of those towns has women's organisations, men's groups or local justice committees backing in the program. Local police and local government are involved.

We are running workshops with teams and their partners. It is pretty incredible to see 60 blokes in a rural community, sitting in a room with butcher's paper, talking about and working through domestic violence. It is extraordinarily powerful. It is run by the Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Corporation. Let me tell you—although this is a bad thing to say—they do not pull any punches. They are pretty straightforward with the message. But what is also really important is that it is not just about blokes. What has gone along with this program through the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, NAPCAN, is running LOVE BiTES in all high schools in those communities and also doing things in primary schools about respectful relationships.

One of the other great things about this program is that we have communities now putting their hand up saying, "Can we be part of the program?" The teams wear slogans. There has been fantastic media coverage and in each of those communities for the last eight weeks there have been advertisements on television that they have made about domestic violence, which have had an enormous impact. We have sponsored each club for \$5,000. For all of that, that has been all they got, and it has just been remarkable.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Congratulations, and may I suggest you roll it out with compulsory attendance at all the National Rugby League [NRL] clubs?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: That has crossed my mind. We have had the backing in of the ARL and the NRL. I will not answer for the NRL, but this is not about high-profile teams. This is about local communities. For the winter, that is where everyone congregates, black and white, and that has been a really powerful thing. It has not just been about domestic violence; there have also been some fantastic reconciliation outcomes as well.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Drugs and alcohol should be up there.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: That is part of it. It has been really good.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It is a very exciting program. We have only a minute left and we want to know about the new reporting threshold for mandatory reporting for New South Wales. I reckon that will take more than a minute. We will pass on to the next session.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes, we can. I am happy to quote it to you.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It is too long.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. The important thing is that it will start next year at the beginning of term, and everyone will be trained and ready for it.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: We will do it in the next component.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Okay.

CHAIR: Minister, I just want to quickly go back to the Community Service Grants Program before you go on answering other questions. That program, as you have noted, is getting its first real increase in funding in 15 years in the lead-up to an election. I just wonder—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am not sure there is a connection.

CHAIR: I do not know; it is for others to make that assessment. The additional money going to CSGP from the Keeping them Safe program will be something like \$37 million, I think you said. Is that one-off, or is that a permanent increase in funding?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Can I clarify that? The \$37 million is there for early intervention and prevention. CSGP-type funded organisations, such as neighbourhood centres and women's organisations, would be well placed to go through what will be an EOI process to apply for those funds. I just want to make it clear.

CHAIR: Thank you. There was an Ernst and Young report into the CSGP. When will that be available?

Ms MASON: That was a business case that was prepared after lengthy consultation—it was before my time—with the CSGP roundtable. Ernst and Young produced a report, which was lodged with Treasury, I think, in about February 2008—someone may correct me. I would not see any reason why that is particularly a private document. As I said, it was discussed fairly robustly with the CSGP roundtable at the time. We can make inquiries but I am not aware that that has any Cabinet confidential element or anything so we can make that available.

CHAIR: Turning to the Brighter Futures Program, the Minister's flagship program. How much money has the Government committed to Brighter Futures in 2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13? What is the ongoing commitment?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will refer that to Mr Matthews for an answer.

Mr MATTHEWS: Can I take that on notice?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: We can take that on notice as to the specific years. However, through Keep Them Safe, there is an element of \$27 million over the next four years for 320 additional Brighter Futures places. That is not the entire budget but that is the addition. I want to add that all the new places will be allocated to the non-government sector.

CHAIR: Is it about \$100 million overall?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will take that on notice. The part of Keep Them Safe, it is \$114 million. As for the breakdown in years, I will need to come back and provide that to you.

CHAIR: How many families do you think will be included in that program?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Do you mean in the new figures, or for the overall program?

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The additional \$27 million is 320 additional children. I will come back if this number is wrong, but from memory there are well over 3,000. As at December 2008 there were 3,000 participants.

CHAIR: What is that—3,000 families?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Families, that is correct, yes.

CHAIR: Your comments about the Brighter Futures evaluation report that was in May 2009—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: You noted that a quarter of the participants were Aboriginal children.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: Your view was—I am trying to quote you correctly—that there was dramatically less risk of harm on leaving the program. You commented that there were glowing results, yet the evaluation seems to suggest that indigenous families showed no decrease in the number of reports of harm to DOCS and non-indigenous families showed only a slight or marginal decrease. All children, quoting from your report, the average number of reports prior to Brighter Futures was 2.71 and after Brighter Futures it was 1.65—that is a marginal decrease—and indigenous children went from 2.74 down to 2.49. That is hardly a significant decrease. In fact, it is almost insignificant or no decrease. Is that correct?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I suppose it depends on how you view these things. I will ask Ms Mason to elaborate, but the important point is that the early signs in the evaluation—and this is where we have to be heading—is that early intervention and prevention are crucial to keeping children out of the statutory system. That is what this evaluation is telling us. Another thing is that the evaluation is ongoing. Clearly, with the sort of investment that is going into early intervention, not only through Brighter Futures, the evaluation is critical. I

think that those numbers are significant, and I think the fact that they are maintained or sustained is important as well.

CHAIR: For the amount of money, I beg to differ. I think the evaluation and those figures—spin it however you might want—show that that is not a significant decrease. For the amount of money that is being spent, it is very disappointing. What will you do to improve the effectiveness of that program? Have you thought about that?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will not argue with anyone about their perceptions of that. I think it is significant. We have already highlighted some of the major changes. It is close and collaborative work in relation to the Brighter Futures program and the non-government sector. Some of the caseworkers who specifically work on this are well trained. Ms Stewart might want to add to that.

Ms STEWART: One of the important things to look at is that Brighter Futures is just one component of the funding that is provided through the department for prevention and early intervention activities. We also have programs, such as Families New South Wales, which also deals with the issues facing families and children from zero to eight, and that are based on strong evidence both here and overseas. I think it is important that we look, I guess a bit more globally, around what funding is provided for children and families, zero to eight in particular. In terms of Families New South Wales, Community Services funds a number of programs such as supported play groups, as well as home visiting.

CHAIR: I am sorry, we are talking about the Brighter Futures program, not other programs. Are you intending to continue with the Brighter Futures program?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Absolutely. As indicated in an earlier answer, a significant additional component of over \$20 million through Keep Them Safe will grow that program and the evaluation will continue. In closing, the important thing is that an overwhelming number of families who participate in the Brighter Futures program find it very beneficial and important to them.

CHAIR: On that, I note that it is an opt-in, voluntary program. Some analysis of that report would suggest that these are low-risk families. What do you intend to do with high-risk families with multiple risk factors who do not seem to be involved in this program?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I beg to differ that all the families are low-risk families.

CHAIR: I did not say all of them.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The important thing to remember is that it is a voluntary program, but it is recommended to a number of families through the helpline, through their contact with the non-government sector, whether it is a drug and alcohol program or whatever they are participating in. It is about keeping families from the edge of the cliff, if you like. It is about keeping families from having their children tip over—

CHAIR: I understand the purpose of it. It is the effectiveness that we are querying. The question is: What will you do about high-risk families?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I do not want to go over a lot of the points that I have already made. Part of it—people referred to it earlier—is about implementing the integrated case management program. All of us in our various capacities know that in many of the Human Services agencies often the same family presents itself at a number of the Human Services agencies' doors, be it Juvenile Justice, Police, Health, Community Services or Education. Part of what Justice Wood recommended, which we are implementing, is a program to case manage what we call "frequently encountered families". They are families who most people would find difficult to understand the issues and the complexity that they face. That is just one example, to answer your question specifically about what we are doing.

CHAIR: One quarter of the families in the Brighter Futures Program dropped out without completing the program. What do we know about those children and families after they withdrew from the program? Were they followed up?

Ms MASON: It is probably important to note, as you observed, that it is a four-year evaluation, and the material released earlier this year is, while indicative, in that sense is a staging process in our view and in the

view of the Social Policy Research Centre [SPRC], which is the independents that are carrying it out. You are correct to identify that part of the evaluation is a process to try to seek to follow up, what you might call, a control group of families who opted to exercise their right not to engage in the program, and that is specifically part of the evaluation. Also specifically part of the evaluation is a more boutique project to drill down to look at the Aboriginal families that participated. Both the SPRC and Community Services have a view that perhaps Aboriginal data may not have been adequately captured.

We suspect that in the case of some families you get an observation effect where the fact that they are participating in a program may mean that they continue to get reported for some time after participation in the program but, in effect, over time get benefits. I do not want to sound as though I am prevaricating but we are leaving it to the academics. We are trying to be as impartial as possible because obviously it was a very thoroughly researched and research-based program but we do not want to be putting money into it if it is not the right approach.

CHAIR: Exactly.

Ms MASON: That is why the money has been invested in having such a thorough evaluation because also around the world all the evidence on these kinds of details of early intervention programs is that you often only see the benefits maybe three, four or five years down the track.

CHAIR: I understand the benefits of early intervention. The question on that evaluation was why they dropped out and what will you do about it.

Ms MASON: Chasing up those families is specifically included in the evaluation, to answer your question.

CHAIR: Will the evaluation tell what you will do about those people, why they dropped out and what your action will be?

Ms MASON: As I think the point has been made, Brighter Futures is part of a suite. Because Brighter Futures is quite an intensive and resource-intensive intervention it was designed to be part of a spectrum. We have the universal, and other services that Ms Stewart began to allude to, at this point and then we have family preservation services that are funded under Keep Them Safe. We have intensive family preservation services so it is a spectrum of interventions. We cannot guarantee that a family that opted not to be involved in Brighter Futures will be picked up but Keep Them Safe provides us with probably three or four options that we did not have before.

CHAIR: Minister, why did caseworkers of Community Services not nominate anyone for an award during Foster Care Week?

Ms GALLARD: We took advice from foster carers themselves. We have run awards over a number of years. We had called out to our casework staff to provide nominations. The foster carers felt that while there had been some benefit over previous years the awards can be divisive. There are many foster carers who do a fantastic job and they felt that it was inappropriate to single out just a few of them. So Foster Care Week these days is more of a general celebration of foster carers.

CHAIR: When is the official change of name from the Department of Community Services to Community Services?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will explain that as it is one of the chuckles I have had in the past week. The amalgamation of the human services agencies into the Department of Human Services no longer requires us to have the word "Department" in front of our name. We are now part of the Department of Human Services: it is as simple and straightforward as that.

CHAIR: How much will that change cost in relation to stationery, signage et cetera, particularly at the Community Services Centres?

Ms MASON: I think the administrative orders creating the super agencies went through late July. Those administrative orders, in fact, abolished the departments of Community Services, Juvenile Justice, Aboriginal Affairs, Ageing, Disability and Home Care and so on and formed them into the Department of

Human Services. Therefore, Community Services is now a division of the large super department. Government made an explicit undertaking, and I have enforced it, that there is to be no scurrying out and printing new stationery. Everyone is to exhaust old supplies of stationery. I use business cards and cross out "Community Services" and write "Human Services". We will basically be exhausting existing stationery and then we have designed some badging internally at no cost so, in effect, there will be minimal cost.

CHAIR: Will you take that question on notice and provide the committee with the actual costs for that changeover?

Ms MASON: As at any particular date?

CHAIR: Will there be a changeover?

Ms MASON: It changed in July.

CHAIR: What about signs?

Ms MASON: Again the same has applied, we will only replace signage in the course of ordinary maintenance. We will not run around and badge everything again.

CHAIR: It will be very confusing for people.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Minister, as you are aware, I have been engaged for more than 30 years working with senior members of your department. I must say over all the years there has always been a problem with staff morale at the coalface, particularly, social and community workers. I looked at the department's recruitment patterns and numbers. I noticed that for every five new staff recruited, four experienced staff left. That says to me your department still has a deep-seated morale issue. What is in the budget to redress the issue of high staff turnover, particularly, social and community workers who usually say they are overworked and underpaid?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: My understanding is that the staff turnover for Community Services is about average as with any other government agency at about 7.3 per cent. I asked that question when I first became the Minister just on 12 months ago. Whilst the perception is that there is a huge staff turnover it is actually about the same as most government agencies.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It is a government-wide problem?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: People are allowed to retire, resign, and have babies and things like that. The other thing I am thrilled about is that about 9 per cent of our staffing profile is Aboriginal. In areas where there is a high Aboriginal population, particularly in the Western Division, 20 per cent of our staff in that part of the world is Aboriginal. That is a really tough gig! Imagine being in a really small town, say for example Walgett—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Walgett or Mudgee or Nimbin.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: In any of those places, an Aboriginal caseworker would be related to probably 65 to 70 per cent of the people in the town, either by blood or marriage, and would be working with those people. Without being flippant, we have to admire and recognise the challenges that places on people. I am not quite sure where your figures come from. I can say that our staff turnover is about 7.3 per cent. In relation to anything more specific, such as stress leave, I am happy to go into that. But that is our staff turnover.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Can I continue on from that?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Sure.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: One of my concerns with the development of all those units for child wellbeing, spread over all the various government—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I know what you are going to say.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Well, where does the buck stop, on whose desk? My feeling is that when something really tragic happens, it will become a case of pass the parcel.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I relate to that. That was one of my first thoughts when I read the report of Justice James Woods, and I think it is the first thought that a lot of people have. People can criticise and say that public servants do this and that, but I have to say to you, Reverend Moyes, that what I have seen from the public sector and the cooperation and trust that we are building with the non-government sector over the last six months in the rollout of Keep Them Safe is phenomenal.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Yes. But my issue is: who is going to take ultimate responsibility? Will it be Community Services?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: At the end of the day, it depends on where the report goes. Obviously if it is over the mandatory reporting threshold, then the buck stops with me.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Okay. I predict that the Coroner will look at that issue sooner or later, unfortunately.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Certainly if there is that sort of tragedy, you are right.

Mr IAN COHEN: The Department of Community Services undertook a major tender for the delivery of out-of-home care services from non-government organisations from 2008 to 2009. What percentage of the successful non-government organisations has received funding to provide those services? Of the funds that have not been distributed, how many children and young people are missing out on formal well-supported out-of-home care arrangements such as having a detailed case plan due to the delays in the rollout of that funding?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: That is a really important question and I understand where it is coming from. I ask Jenny Mason to respond.

Ms MASON: I do not know if this is a complete answer, but I can tell you that as of today, as of now, we have negotiated 27 of those contracts. That involves commitments of \$223 million in this financial year—that is my current advice. Of the remaining contracts still to be negotiated, we have roughly \$35 million still to be negotiated.

Mr IAN COHEN: Can you indicate how many children and young people are missing out on the formal processes?

Ms MASON: What that process of contracting non-government organisation placements has done, since the process began under my predecessor, is that we started off with roughly 1,000 non-government organisation placements in a contract arrangement. Currently we are up to about 2,800 and we expect to be well over 3,000 next year. We still have at any given time roughly 1,000 of the individual care agreements [ICAs]. We started off with 1,100 and we are down to about 880. In fact the old ICAs still exist. We also have, as I alluded to before, the same number of the high-cost residential beds and other matters that are still in the system. It is probably a misnomer to say that children are missing out on high-quality care as a result of delays in contracting because the children who would have ordinarily been with the non-government organisations [NGOs] still are covered. Children are either covered by ICAs or NGOs or by our own care.

Mr IAN COHEN: Last year the New South Wales Treasury commissioned a review of out-of-home care funding arrangements through the Boston Consulting Group. The report has been completed, but no further information has been made publicly available. This continues to hold up contracting of out-of-home care services to the non-government sector resulting from the equal employment opportunity process announced in early 2008. As a result, long-term arrangements for changes to out-of-home care and contractual certainty have not been delivered. What were the terms of reference in the brief given to the Boston Consulting Group? What were the key recommendations? When will the findings of the review be made public?

Ms MASON: I will address that. It was actually a joint process between the then Department of Community Services, Treasury and Premier's to bring in the consultancy. It was to look at the major drivers of the fairly extraordinary increase in out-of-home care, what we could do in both policy settings and contractual arrangements to get a better quality outcome. A brief about what those consultants were being asked to look at was distributed to the members of all of our advisory groups that we have set up under the Minister as part of

Keep Them Safe. I am very happy to get those tabled on notice, but they have been distributed fairly widely to the sector. The outcomes of that report are being processed because it was produced as a document for the budget committee of Cabinet. We expect that to go to the budget committee as soon as we can get a listing. Then there will be a public process.

Mr IAN COHEN: The recommendations will be made public eventually?

Ms MASON: Once it has been to budget committee, yes.

Mr IAN COHEN: When will the contracts for this tender be confirmed?

Ms MASON: Sorry, which contracts?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I see how you are making the connection. The Boston Consulting Group was specifically to provide advice around policy and financial settings. Where you are coming from is saying that somehow it is holding up the finalisation of contracts. As the Director General just indicated, contracts are moving forward and being negotiated.

Mr IAN COHEN: Okay, thank you. Will the report impact on the proposal in Keep Them Safe to transfer more out-of-home care services to the non-government sector?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Part of the Boston Consulting Group work was around comparisons, particularly interstate comparisons, in relation to the cost of out-of-home care, and specifically the differences in cost between New South Wales and Victoria. We have to be very careful about making those sorts of comparisons, as they are not always comparing the same thing. It also went into how much it costs a non-government sector [NGO] in, for example, Victoria, as compared to New South Wales. That was part of what they did. Could you please repeat your question?

Mr IAN COHEN: How will the report impact on the proposal in Keep Them Safe to transfer more out-of-home care services to the non-government sector?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: We are not at that point in the discussion. Our commitment, very clearly in Keep Them Safe, is the transfer to the non-government sector. That is still our intention.

Mr IAN COHEN: The supported care allowance—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Excuse me, Mr Ian Cohen, it is our turn. Your bell has gone.

Mr IAN COHEN: No, that was just a little glitch, I do not think it was the official bell.

CHAIR: I note that there has been some dispute today about the time for questions. The crossbench members decided to share their question time, and that bell was for the end of question time for Reverend the Hon. Dr Gordon Moyes. There are 8 minutes and 20 seconds to go. Mr Cohen, you may continue.

Mr IAN COHEN: The Supported Care Allowance contributes to household budgets where children and young people in out-of-home care are placed in informal kinship care. Is the Government committed to continuing this arrangement and funding it?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: That was part of the discussions in relation to Boston Consulting and that will be part of the recommendations to the budget committee. We really have not come to a landing on what that recommendation will be or what the outcome will be. It is very important to give confidence to those people who are receiving the Supported Care Allowance that that will continue.

Mr IAN COHEN: Has the Government begun building work on the proposed nine indigenous child and family centres set to be established in partnership with the Commonwealth across New South Wales in 2009?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The work has begun. I will defer to Sonja to go into detail.

Ms STEWART: There has been a commitment for nine centres across New South Wales and the first three locations are Ballina, Campbelltown Local Government Area and Blacktown Local Government Area. Building has not yet commenced. What have commenced are the really important discussions with community representatives, local government and other government agencies about an appropriate site for the centres, the appropriate service models that these centres should be delivering and whether any further consideration should be given to the important questions to get right before they turn over the first bit of dirt. These discussions are commencing and the Minister and her Commonwealth counterpart recently announced those three locations. It is a really exciting initiative that we are happy to partner with.

Mr IAN COHEN: I appreciate that and I acknowledge the work and the direction, but I could go into a number of situations with the Minister outside this Committee where indigenous people in that part of the world have been waiting for the physical building to start.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It is coming.

Mr IAN COHEN: People have passed away waiting for various buildings.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I understand that but I can say emphatically that the commitment is there for the nine centres and, as Sonja said, the first three locations have been nominated. Negotiations are continuing about sites. As soon as the things she has described are sorted out they will be built. It will not be years away.

Mr IAN COHEN: Will building commence in this term of Parliament? I ask you for that commitment.

Ms STEWART: These centres are the subject of some negotiations and funding agreements between the Commonwealth and the State Government and there are definitive time frames and steps that have to be taken. I can get back to you about the exact timing of the first three sites but my understanding is that we hope to be in a position to go to an expression of interest about these centres, which have up to 50-place childcare centres as well as some wraparound supports. They are a fairly big undertaking and we are after a fairly big physical size. We hope to go to an expression of interest for the provider of these services towards the end of this year and then go through the build. We are definitely looking to do it within the time frames of the agreement. I can table the timing.

Mr IAN COHEN: This might be slightly outside your area, Minister, but with such a project, particularly in Ballina, which has specific issues, is it within your power to have local employment in that project rather than what is happening a lot on the North Coast where large teams of workers are being imported from South East Queensland and employment of the local community is being lost? Is there anything you can do to guarantee that?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I do not know that I can guarantee it but I can certainly input it.

Mr IAN COHEN: What is the department doing to minimise the stressful nature of the court process for kids in out-of-home care when they are required to attend court to give evidence or for other reasons?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Part of Keep Them Safe has been some fairly significant reforms around the court process. We have appointed a president of the Children's Court for the first time ever. I will defer to Annette to deal with the specifics. You will recall that a lot of work has been undertaken in other areas in relation to children's participation in court through videolinking and that kind of approach. With Keep Them Safe we are trying to achieve less interface with the court and, more importantly, a quicker process so that children are not in limbo and we can achieve some stability and permanency for them faster than we do now.

Mr IAN COHEN: What resources is DOCS directing towards preventing bullying in schools of kids in out-of-home care given that a disproportionate number of these children are being suspended or expelled from Government schools following episodes of bullying by other children?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I need to take that on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: Are you aware of that situation?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I am not specifically aware of that. I would be very interested to get any information that the member has. Part of a longitudinal study we are undertaking and which I have just signed

off on is the outcomes for children in out-of-home care in education, participation in the juvenile justice system, and general life outcomes. Part of Keep Them Safe is having out-of-home care coordinators within Education and Training. Positions will be established to assist in the implementation of education plans for students. I will make an assumption that part of that will be not only the way in which the child is performing academically but also the pastoral and important emotional development of the child. Specific education plans for each child in out-of-home care are part of what the Wood reforms will entail.

Mr IAN COHEN: How many of the promised 25 home school liaison officers have been appointed to reduce the number of children at risk of poor educational performance due to habitual truanting during the compulsory school years?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will take that on notice. I am not able to answer whether any of those 25 coordinators—they are the people I have just been referring to—have actually been appointed yet. The commitment is there, the dollars are there and it will happen.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What is the new reporting threshold for mandatory reporters in New South Wales?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: We had some initial discussions about that and without labouring the point, the mandatory reporting threshold is one of the major aspects of Keep Them Safe and a major point raised by Justice Wood. It is a significant and key part of Keep Them Safe. Under the new definition the threshold will go from "risk of harm" to "risk of significant harm". That is why it is important to have these child wellbeing units in place. Families that do not meet that new threshold still need support, and those wellbeing units will provide it. If children reach that risk of significant harm threshold—that would apply to children in serious difficulty—those reports will still come to Community Services. There has been a great deal of consultation in relation to this issue. One of the most challenging aspects of Keep them Safe is to enforce this new threshold.

Importantly, this threshold will apply—as did the old threshold—to children born now and to unborn children. We must keep to the forefront of our minds this challenging but not insignificant issue. Without going over the same ground, that fits into the interagency guidelines for child protection intervention—our common assessment tool. One issue that has kept me up at night is ensuring that all 200,000 mandatory reporters understand the new definition and how it has to be applied before the commencement date of the new threshold.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Minister, in 2008 the former Minister announced an initiative to assist foster carers who wanted to adopt children. What progress has been made since that announcement?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Of late people have expressed a great deal of interest in adopting children, and for many different reasons. I noticed the other day that Elton John had expressed an interest in adopting a child. Our adoption goal is to focus on permanency planning. The younger a child and the more permanent his or her situation, the better the outcome. Mr Cohen referred earlier to that issue. This Government has implemented a number of initiatives. In July 2008 the Government announced an initiative to provide security for children in care and to free up caseworkers for more urgent child protection priorities, as we now have more children in permanent placements.

Part of that initiative relates to legislative reform. Most foster carers care for these children until they reach the age of 18. In many cases these children remain with their foster carers for most of their lives, and often they go into foster care when they are babies. Those foster carers received an allowance to ensure that the needs of those children were met. If those foster carers want to adopt the children for whom they are caring they will continue to receive that allowance, which is a fantastic initiative. As I said earlier, permanency planning relates to the long-term placement of these children. Let me give members a quick update about the number of cases currently being progressed towards adoption in New South Wales.

Most members would be aware that this involves only a small number of children. The carers of 107 children have expressed an interest in adopting them. The caseworkers of a further 181 children are exploring adoption as an option for them, and 74 children's applications for adoption are being prepared for determination by the court. It is terrific that these children now have a say. Once a child reaches the age of 12 he or she can have a say about what is wanted. Quite often they want to be a permanent part of the foster family with whom they have grown up.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, could you outline the development and progress towards the implementation of the national child protection framework?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes, I can. As I said earlier, the States and Territories are doing an enormous amount of work through the Council of Australian Governments process. Sonja and I outlined earlier some of the work that is being done in the early childhood education area. Work is also being done with Minister Macklin and the other States and Territories on a national child protection framework. Last week I was in Canberra discussing the development of a national child protection framework that includes a number of things relating to out-of-home care and, importantly, the exchange of information.

We found this important exchange of information to be extremely beneficial, in particular, in the Medicare area. New South Wales makes the second highest number of requests to Medicare. Parents who abuse their children will not go to the same doctor all the time; they doctor shop or do not take their children to the doctor at all. Through Medicare we are now able to access information relating to the number of times a child has been presented to a variety of doctors, or whether the family has followed up the medical advice that has been given by a doctor.

The first element completed under the framework has been the development of a new information exchange protocol across Australia, and improved information sharing between key agencies—one of the recommendations in the Wood report. For me that is the most important part of this new national framework, which fits in well with this Government's Keep them Safe policies. This Government is also committed to implementing out-of-home care performance measures. The early childhood work, which is occurring through the Council of Australian Governments process, fits in with those measures. Universal access for preschools is an important part of any discussion on child protection issues.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, can you update the Committee on the establishment of the joint investigation response team [JIRT] referral unit?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I can. I am sure that most members of this Committee would be familiar with JIRTs as they are not a new phenomenon. The agencies that are involved include NSW Health, Community Services and the New South Wales Police Force. I am sure that many people are aware of a recent incident that occurred on the Kyle Sandilands and Jackie O program. The case of the young girl who appeared on that program was referred to a JIRT. However, the young woman in question did not want to take the matter any further. Joint investigation response teams have the capacity to investigate issues relating to sexual assault and child sexual abuse.

A special component of these teams is working in the Aboriginal communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah. I visited that team and had discussions with the communities and with the people working on the team. An important and significant issue is that JIRTs are being centralised, which will give us a better sense of what is taking place. Under Keep them Safe there will be stronger interagency and government audits. These important teams, which are comprised of special people, are involved in gruelling work. The one important change that I wish to highlight is the fact that these JIRTs will now be centralised.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Minister, what milestones have been reached in the accreditation of Aboriginal agencies delivering out-of-home care?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Before I refer to that issue, I remind members that \$27 million is available through Keep them Safe to provide capacity building in Aboriginal organisations. I have said before publicly that everyone finds obnoxious the number of Aboriginals in out-of-home care.

Aboriginal young people between 0 and 17 make up 4 per cent of the New South Wales population, yet they make up 30 per cent, if not slightly more, of the out-of-home-care population. I will not go into the details of why that might be, but people understand. Critically important, both legislatively and as part of our responsibility in Community Services, is to make sure that when an Aboriginal child is placed we follow the Aboriginal placement principle. We meet that target between 74 per cent and 84 per cent of the time. That is one of the reasons we need more Aboriginal foster carers.

Part of what we want to move to is a model where Aboriginal people have a say in where a child should be placed. We are looking to emulate the Victorian Lakidjeka model. We have had extensive discussions about that model. We have a number of Aboriginal organisations that provide out-of-home-care places or provide

advice and support to placing those children and part of what we do is to get those organisations accredited. We are having terrific success. In fact, a group of people from the North Coast achieved their accreditation. I will ask Kerry to elaborate on where we are with a couple of other Aboriginal organisations.

Ms BOLAND: The accreditation process has been operating since 2003 in New South Wales. In 2005, agencies were asked to elect whether they would go into a quality improvement program or immediately proceed to accreditation. We encouraged most agencies to take a cautious approach and most did go into the quality improvement program, including a number of Aboriginal agencies. Progressively, over time, they have been working towards accreditation. Earlier this year, as the Minister alluded to, we were pleased that Ngunya Jarjum was successful in being fully accredited under the system. It is important to note that accreditation is a licence to operate and also monitors continuous improvement of those agencies. The importance of this particular agency was that it already was providing care for kids. Its practice was of an exceptional nature in some areas. Last year we accredited an organisation called Link-Up. It is entering into the out-of-home-care area. We accredited that organisation on its policies and procedures. It is known as provisional accreditation. Once it takes children into its care we go through another process of looking at the kids and at the organisation's practice and care. Then they achieve a longer period of accreditation. We also have three other Aboriginal agencies about which we are very optimistic and we believe that in the next two years or so they will be fully accredited.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The one that has already been accredited is from the North Coast.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, what changes have been made by the Children's Guardian for young people employed as models? I believe last year this question was asked by Madam Chair.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Committee members would remember that legislation was passed that gives a safeguard in New South Wales for young models. It applies to both girls and boys. Without going into too much history, essentially this came about when organisers of Australian Fashion Week, who must have been off their game, promoted a young 14-year-old Polish girl as the face of Australian Fashion Week. Essentially, models younger than 16 years need to make sure that their agency goes through the Children's Guardian to ensure they are meeting all the requirements and standards of homework, rest and privacy. It is very much a part of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection—Child Employment) Regulation. The code of practice contains specific requirements about matters such as working hours and travel. Clause 19 of the code prohibits the casting of a child in a role or situation that is inappropriate to that child. Under the legislation we dramatically increased the fine for agencies or employers who do not seek authorisation to use a child under 16. The Children's Guardian and I visited one agency and met a number of young people. I was really impressed with the serious attitude they took with their young models. I learnt a lot through the process. We now have that legislative protection for children under the age of 16.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I congratulate the Government on that important piece of legislation. Can you outline what action the New South Wales Government has taken to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children attending children's services in the State?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Community Services has taken a comprehensive approach to ensuring the safety and health of children attending preschool, long day care centres and the various places for children between nought and six attending some child-care arrangement. New South Wales has 3,400 licensed children services that provide care, love, protection, pre-schooling and a range of other things to 151,000 places for children up to 6 years. One thing for which New South Wales is responsible is licensing and regulation of those services. Obviously, that is an extremely important responsibility, particularly given the age, expectation and number of parents involved. Some very famous breaches have occurred in the recent past. Obviously, the media takes these things very seriously. There was the little boy who was left locked in a day care centre. We took those places to court and had a good outcome.

We have done a number of things. We have set up a website so that people can see what centres have convictions and for what reason. When a centre breaches its responsibility we have powers under the licensing requirements and the regulations to suspend and revoke the licence and also to refuse to grant further licences. We have initiated blitzes, if you like, or unannounced visits to day care centres over a period of time. I am not sure if that came from my Fair Trading experience. We visit every centre annually to make sure they are meeting their regulations and licensing requirements, including following up on the qualifications of teachers and obviously the state of the premises. However, we are moving towards a number of changes. We have undertaken a major regulatory review. Extensive discussions and consultations were undertaken around the

State. We are looking at requiring service records to be displayed and making sure that those who work in the centres understand their responsibilities regarding the closure of centres at day's end. To conclude, obviously we take this issue very seriously and that is demonstrated by the fact that we have pursued centres vigorously when they have not met their requirements.

CHAIR: I have a couple of points I would like you to clarify for me.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: They will not be nice like ours.

CHAIR: Well, they might be nice; you do not know. Earlier Ms Gallard gave an answer involving Foster Carers Week and nominations for foster carers. Is the foster carers' winter newsletter a departmental newsletter?

Ms GALLARD: The departmental newsletter for foster carers is called "Fostering Our Future".

CHAIR: Was one published recently?

Ms GALLARD: From memory, it comes out either quarterly or six times a year.

CHAIR: Recently there was a newsletter that noted that Community Services workers did not have time to nominate carers. Was that in your departmental newsletter?

Ms GALLARD: It would not have been in our newsletter. It was a deliberate decision, as I said, taken after consultation with foster carers.

CHAIR: You would agree that there needs to be some communication repair work done on that?

Ms GALLARD: Absolutely. If we can find out the exact nature of that newsletter, we can write a letter to the editor to clarify that situation.

CHAIR: Just in terms of Brighter Futures, which we have spoken about at length today—appropriately so, given the emphasis funding-wise and otherwise—Minister, I have been talking about it as an early intervention strategy.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: Of course, early intervention is something that everybody supports, I would imagine. Reverend the Hon. Dr Gordon Moyes was talking about bandaid services as opposed to other services. Intervention is what you have been saying in terms of Brighter Futures. I do not know if I called it Better Futures, but I am referring to Brighter Futures.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: There is a Better Futures.

CHAIR: I know. In your view, Brighter Futures is an early intervention program.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: How does that stack up with the review that is being done which says that of the numbers of families that are recorded as participating in the program, 86 per cent have received risk of harm reports in the 24 months prior to starting the program, and of the families who received at least one report in the 24 months before entering into the program, the mean number of reports was 11 and the average per child was five. The report numbers were higher for indigenous families. For the 586 indigenous families, they recorded receiving at least one report in the 24 months prior to entering the program. I could go on. There is a lengthy paragraph at 4.3 in the evaluation. Does that not really suggest that this is not an early intervention program—that it is not a preventative program but really an attempt to repair some of the damage that has already been done?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: The damage that has been done?

CHAIR: If there are reports already, it is not early intervention, is it?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will try to answer that question in the sense that it is important that the Committee understands that there is a range of reports that would come in about a child. Clearly if there is a report or a number of reports in which a child needs urgent intervention because their life is absolutely in danger, that would not be a family that you would recommend to the Brighter Futures program. That would be a family that you would explore in terms of whether that child is safe staying in that family. The families that go into the Brighter Future programs are generally families with what we might call—and I do not like the term—lower-level reports, where they are not coping and where there has been some concern expressed about the wellbeing of the child but not requiring statutory intervention. It is really important to understand that in the context of your question.

The second thing that I would say is that I would argue strongly that it is an early intervention and prevention program because it is about supporting families so that they do not have their child removed; so that their child does not end up in the statutory system. One of the great aspects of Brighter Futures is that it is about helping families get their children into preschool. It is about providing the assistance that they need to have their children go to early childcare services. It is about providing families with the support about how you learn to live on a welfare payment, budgeting and maintaining a home. I reckon they are really early intervention and prevention initiatives.

CHAIR: With all due respect, that is not what your evaluation says, but never mind; we will move on.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Thank you.

CHAIR: Minister, it was encouraging to hear that you want non-government organisations [NGOs] to do more. I think the NGOs would be delighted to hear that. I am wondering in terms of specific NGOs about Family Support which, in 2007, cared for something like 35,000 children and has not received an increase in funding. Is that correct?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Can I just clarify with you what organisation you are referring to?

CHAIR: Family Support Services.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Family Support Services is CSGP. I am sorry, I beg your pardon. Could you repeat your question? I am sorry.

CHAIR: I will phrase it another way. Family Support has not had an increase in its funding. In 2007 it catered for 35,000 children and you are talking about NGOs and wanting them to do more. Given that Family Support estimates it supports the majority of children who are at risk, why did it receive on average only \$740 per family per year?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: CSGP-funded services do not generally deliver out-of-home care or Brighter Futures programs. That is the first thing. As I said, we are talking about local community organisations, community centres and neighbourhood centres. They provide a myriad of opportunities, from yoga to community gardens, to helping people sort out their relationship with the bank. I just want to say that. Going back to the only point that I can go back to, we are working with the peak organisation around providing opportunities for realignment to enable them to have access to EOI processes through the Keep Them Safe program. That is about as much as I think I can say in relation to your question.

CHAIR: Okay. In terms of family support, we are talking about a program, and I just wanted to offer a comparison.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Sure, I know.

CHAIR: The questions were about the comparison in terms of funding and your claims that you want the NGOs to do more.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I beg your pardon, are you referring to PhaMS, which is based out at Burwood? Is that who you are referring to?

CHAIR: No. I am referring to Family Support Services.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Okay. Then I go back to my answer.

CHAIR: But NGO-based programs.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. But I can absolutely say, in terms of the new Brighter Futures—

CHAIR: We are talking about value for money, dollar for dollar, with early intervention. Early intervention is what we have been talking about, and I am just talking about a comparison in terms of the number of children that they impact.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: One of the—

CHAIR: Bang for our buck, I guess, in terms of what they achieve.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: One of the important pieces of work that we are discussing with those types of services is supporting them to be able to say just how many children and families they support—a more evidence-based approach to what they do.

CHAIR: Like many of these sorts of services, family support services must complete report cards, reviews, those sorts of things.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: They have to be accountable for the money they receive.

CHAIR: When you say you are assisting them, how many of those services are you assisting—this has always been an issue with these sorts of non-government organisations—to improve their governance issues?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will refer that question to Ms Gallard. One of the enormous challenges in this sector is that we support something like 800 or 900 of these organisations across New South Wales. It is no small number. Some of them are tiny—for example, Riverwood community centre is a larger operation—and they are governed by volunteers, by local people. Many of those local people are on every committee in the town because they are the people who take the interest. From time to time there are governance issues, but the governance issues are often the bailiwick of the Department of Fair Trading. Mostly they do a fabulous job and we do not necessarily get involved in the politics. It would not be our job to be involved in the politics.

CHAIR: No. We want to know what you are doing in terms of supporting those valuable non-government organisations.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: What we are doing is obviously providing funding, working very closely with the peak organisation. At a central level it would be impossible to work with all of them. At a local level, through our CSG there are important relationships. We refer some of our issues to those services, and obviously our responsibility is to make sure that they are accountable for the funds they receive. As I have indicated, we want to make that easier for them, particularly when the amounts are not large.

Ms GALLARD: I can answer about some specific initiatives that we have in place to assist non-government organisations to develop and provide good services. We have developed some good practice guidelines, and there is a structured series of activities to improve organisation's internal workings. We have been working with organisations on results-based accountability. This helps organisations to identify the results they want and develop strategies that measure and demonstrate success in achieving these results. A non-government organisation training program provides small and medium-size non-government organisations with training on issues such as occupation health and safety, understanding financial statements and audit, and staff supervision. We have put quite a bit of funding into Aboriginal capacity building. We have been working with seven Aboriginal out-of-home care service providers to explore opportunities to expand their service's capacity.

CHAIR: I do not want to interrupt but you can table some of those initiatives. My question is: Are you satisfied that the standards of governance are appropriate? Have you reviewed your accountability measures to see what further assistance could be delivered to non-government organisations? Are you analysing and evaluating?

Ms GALLARD: Yes. We are doing quite a bit of work on that. It is always a balance between making sure that organisations are accountable for government money but not tying them up in red tape. Part of the reviews of non-government organisations that are going on at the moment are exploring that very thing.

CHAIR: I have limited time and I wonder if you could provide the rest of that.

Ms GALLARD: Sure.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I think the problem is that the department is about as welcome as an inspector from the Australian Taxation Office.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Gee, thanks.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I am serious. I think there is a need for an advisory board connection with non-government organisations, and particularly with community-based services, to interface with the department because it is not working. I am getting too many complaints from grassroots groups that know I am interested, and I should not be taking up their cause. You need an interface.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: What I have, I hope, brought with my role as the Minister over the past 12 months is to build on the commitment and the importance of consultation and involvement with the non-government sector. We are about developing respectful relationships and that will become more and more important as we implement Keep them Safe. I have established some high-level groups that help steer us through that process. They involve a lot of non-government organisations. As Ms Stewart has just reminded me, we do not make any major decisions without proper consultation with the appropriate people. I hope that that will start to wash through.

Mr IAN COHEN: One thing I am interested in, Brighter Futures, Keep them Safe, Better Futures—

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I did not choose the names.

Mr IAN COHEN: Is this a consultant advertising agency of some sort, external or from within?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: A number of options were put up by the department and other government agencies in relation to the name for Keep them Safe. It was my decision at the end that that would be what we would call the strategy or the response.

Mr IAN COHEN: You have a whole range of things.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It cost nothing, let me assure you.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It sounds like you are also providing such titles to the Police Force for operation Keep them Safe.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I did not do that. In relation to the other names, they were very much there when I arrived, and I do not think we spend an awful lot of money on working those things out. Do you think we should?

Mr IAN COHEN: No, but sometimes money spent can be money wasted. I was wondering where the inspiration was coming from.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: No, it was extremely efficient, I can assure you.

Mr IAN COHEN: Keep them Safe makes many references to the need for consistent employment conditions between the government and non-government sectors, including short-term recommendation 10.8. However, the indexation applied to non-government organisations in the 2009-10 budget was just 2.4 per cent, compared with 4.5 per cent for government employees. What financial provisions are being made to achieve consistent employment conditions between the sectors?

Ms MASON: As you identified, the non-government organisations are governed—I am sure you are only too painfully aware of this—by the Social and Community Services [SACS] Award, which is still under

negotiation. It is factually correct that the Government provided indexation of the relevant grants by 2.42 per cent. As you would be aware, in the government sector there was 2.5 per cent granted, and then 1.5 per cent had to be found out of internal departmental efficiencies, which was the formula. I suppose in a nutshell the answer on the SACS award is that the major agencies, such as Community Services, and Ageing and Disability, are in active consideration of ways to look at how we will develop the workforce in those areas, because it is a serious workforce issue for us, and how we can find a way to assist those organisations because it is often dubious whether the little organisations that have been mentioned today have 1.5 per cent of efficiencies to squeeze out of them. It is a highly relevant point.

Mr IAN COHEN: What is the actual breakdown and planned roll-out of Keep Them Safe funding to the non-government sector over the next five years? How much funding is to be allocated to non-government services in the first year of Keep Them Safe? What is it for?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I will take that on notice. I know that 40 per cent of the overall funding is for services to be delivered by the non-government sector, so it is 40 per cent of 750. As I indicated earlier, this is primarily out-of-home care places and the new Brighter Futures places. Obviously one issue when the evaluation is complete is the making of further decisions about Brighter Futures and the remaining places.

Mr IAN COHEN: Will you advise the implementation in New South Wales of the Council of Australian Governments' agreement to achieve universal access to quality early childhood education in the year before schooling?

Ms STEWART: The agreement that has been reached at the Council of Australian Governments is quite significant. It is around universal access to a pre-school program in the year before formal schooling by a four-year trained teacher and that is 2013, so it is quite an ambitious target that has been set across the nation. I think the issue fortunately is that the Government had already committed to a form of universal access to pre-school in the Pre-school Investment and Reform Program. We are already on the way to achieving that universal access through the earlier commitment of the Government. It is significant in terms of the budget for this year that we have actually increased funding for our children's services program by some 17 per cent, which is quite significant, \$164 million year.

In the agreement with the Council of Australian Governments we are trying to address two things. One of them is the number of places and the other is of barriers to access. We know that one of the issues of barriers to access is affordability, so you can see with \$164 million that is now being provided in New South Wales that we are trying to increase the places. We need some 10,000 to 10,500 more children to go to pre-school. We already have approximately 80,000-odd children going so we need to be increasing our number of children attending. But we are already at a high percentage and well on the way to meeting that target in 2013 by that increase in funding.

Mr IAN COHEN: Is that funding from the State Government? The New South Wales Government has also allocated \$10.2 million in 2008-09 under the Council of Australian Governments agreement. How will that funding be spent or how has it been spent?

Ms STEWART: We already have a base of what the Government was committing and then we have extra money under the Pre-school Investment and Reform Program of some \$29.8 million this year and we have an extra \$21 million coming on top of that and that gives us \$164 million. To answer your direct question about how we are using one bucket of money compared to the other, the good thing that the New South Wales Government has been able to negotiate with the Commonwealth is to use the money in the same way for the same things on the same drivers. I think that is really important because the outcome is the same. We are aiming for that many hours of universal access. As I said before, those two drivers are the number of places and affordability.

We are funding based on how many children are attending these services and the needs of those children. If I can give an example, we want to really make sure that Aboriginal children get the right access. So we are putting a higher amount of money if you have got an Aboriginal child in your Children's Service because we want to make sure that that fee gets as low as possible to improve that access for that Aboriginal child to that service. In answer to your question, we are not saying New South Wales money will be used one way and Commonwealth money will be used another way; we are actually quite genuinely working together, which is a good outcome.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Director-General, were any staff from the Department of Community Services counselled, disciplined or sacked in relation to the Ebony matter?

Ms MASON: You have had the opportunity to look at the Department of Community Services internal report, which you may not have done. It was released under freedom of information—it went through very closely and found, I do not think, no basis to take any sort of disciplinary action against any staff member. The tragedy of that case, the horrific aspect of that case when you read it, is that what you see is an accumulation of small errors, oversights, files lost.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Indeed, that is why I added the word "counselled", not just sacked or disciplined.

Ms MASON: No. I think it is fair to say that staff were quite catastrophically traumatised by their involvement in that case. We have had to provide counselling, I would say in the therapeutic sense rather than as part of a spectrum of discipline. Having said that, my predecessor, as the Minister alluded to, referred the entire matter to the Ombudsman. If the Ombudsman had come back, which he does sometimes, with recommendations for some kind of individual action, and he had made that commitment, we would do that. But he found nothing that indicated inappropriate—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Just a bundle of errors?

Ms MASON: It sounds glib to say it, but it is undoubtedly the case. He found that the system failed that little girl horrendously. He found many avenues for change. He, of course, has had the benefit of looking at all the other organisations and how the whole system interacted, or failed to interact, so we eagerly await his final report, which he will bring down after sentencing of the parents. Of course, it cannot be forgotten they were found by a jury of their peers to be criminally liable, not just accidental victims of circumstance. There was wilfulness involved.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: We will await his findings?

Ms MASON: Exactly.

Mr IAN COHEN: The 2009-10 budget has an allocation of \$6 million for family preservation services. How will that money be used towards the Keep Them Safe outcome of expanding the number and range of family preservation services? What budget allocation is available to non-government organisations for the pilot due June 2010?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Family preservation services are really intense. The way I describe it, if you think about a railway line, it is the last railway station before something very serious will take place. It can be as intense as daily visits from caseworkers, shopping, and a whole range of things that you will probably find surprising. They are critically important to providing families with that option, sometimes the last option, of getting their act together before Community Services steps in.

Mr IAN COHEN: What budget allocation is available for non-government organisations for the pilot that is due June next year?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: I cannot answer that off the top of my head. I am happy to take it on notice. A majority of the funding for family preservation is to the non-government sector. The exact proportion I will have to provide to you if you need it. Mostly it is delivered by non-government organisations, which is really appropriate because in local communities people know each other and understand the issues.

Mr IAN COHEN: The value of family preservation services is well established and fully supported.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It is very important.

Mr IAN COHEN: It is supported by Keep Them Safe.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: It is; it is a very important component.

Mr IAN COHEN: Previously the Department of Community Services [DOCS] piloted and evaluated family preservation services. What are the costs associated with re-piloting those programs?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Annette Gallard will answer that.

Ms GALLARD: Family preservation comes in a range of different models. The previous evaluation we did was the DOCS internal service, called the Intensive Family-Based Service. We envisage that under the new funds available for family preservation, that will look at a range of different models, not just the home-builders model that we use for Aboriginal intensive family-based services, but other evidence-based models as well. From that we will be able to work out which are the most beneficial models for providing services for kids and families where they are right on the cusp of entering out-of-home care.

Mr IAN COHEN: May I ask one more question? It is very short.

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr IAN COHEN: I refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family preservation services scheduled for delivery in 2011. What money will be allocated to those services in the 2009-10 budget?

Ms GALLARD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Government members may now ask questions.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Minister, can you provide an update on initiatives to support vulnerable Aboriginal children and families in New South Wales at the earliest stages?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes, I can. I will not go over the huge need for this. I think people are very clear on what that is; it goes to the heart of Mr Cohen's question about some specific program for family preservation. There is another one that is very practical and showing some good outcomes. It is called the Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy. It is being rolled out in partnership with the Department of Health. Basically, it provides Aboriginal women with access to midwives, Aboriginal health workers and it is particularly important during pregnancy and during the first few weeks after birth. It is working almost one-on-one in some cases with mums.

Of course, one of the aspects within the Aboriginal community is that a lot of mums are a bit younger, a lot younger in some cases, than in other parts of the community. Another thing that is really important, particularly with antenatal care, is making sure that Aboriginal babies are born healthy, that they are of a good weight, that they are not premature—which is so important for that child's outcome, not just in the first few months or years of life but for the rest of his or her life. The other thing is a specific dedicated pathway within the Brighter Futures Program, and I think we have heard about that. That is particularly for eligible Aboriginal families expecting a baby and very proactive early intervention programs right through.

I have spoken about the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system. It is also clearly an overrepresentation in child protection reports. There is an initiative to provide Aboriginal families with a specific pathway in terms of the Brighter Futures Program. Those issues are specifically around Aboriginal families including those under Keep Them Safe, some specific capacity for the intensive family intervention services as well.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Minister, can you outline how Community Services is working the links to cultural identity for Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home-care?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes, I am happy to do that. We are doing that in a number of ways, and I have already spoken this afternoon about the responsibilities that we have legislatively in relation to the Aboriginal placement principle. That is one of our goals, which I have spoken about, and we do not achieve it in 100 per cent of cases. Certainly we are working towards that with some of the things that we have all described this afternoon. I do not want to belabour this point, but it really is important—we have seen the terrible outcomes of past practices—for Aboriginal children to maintain and have their identity reinforced. That is one of the reasons why the Aboriginal placement principle is so important.

There are other ways we can do that, and one of them is through the Aboriginal Life Story book I may have helped launch it, but I do not remember exactly where, but somewhere on the mid North Coast. It is a fantastic book that travels with a child through his or her out-of-home care journey. It records a child's life. It is like the little books that mothers get when they take their newborn baby to the clinic to record the baby's first year of life. The Aboriginal Life Story is a similar concept and it is Aboriginal culture specific. It has activities units and records special landmarks, special days and special places. It is something that Aboriginal children love to fill out, and it is important to maintaining and supporting their cultural identity. One of the other great things is that it is done in collaboration with a whole range of non-government organisations and Aboriginal children and their carers.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I ask a specific question about the Keep Them Safe advisory groups. Specifically, as opposed to general reflections, can you advise how the Government involves non-government partners through the implementation of Keep Them Safe?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Yes. One thing that I thought was important with Keep Them Safe, and we did not do it once Keep Them Safe was released, we did it in the lead-up to the release of the report. That was to establish three advisory groups, although I may not remember the correct acronyms. One is called CPAG, the Child Protection Advisory Group, that is the overall advisory group. I have taken on the responsibility, very seriously, of chairing that group. That group is made up of the peaks and a number of unions, such as the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies [ACWA], the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat [AbSec], and two very renowned academic women. Also there is the Public Service Union [PSA] and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union [LHMU], because of their coverage of people who work in the non-government sector.

That group is the chief overall advisory group and it has helped me in particular. There is also the Service Systems Advisory Group and the Community and Carers' Advisory Group. The heads of NGOs or their representatives sit on those groups, including people from the bodies that represent foster carers, and people who represent organisations that actually deliver our services. The value and advice that has been given have assisted us in making decisions. That has been taken seriously. They are not there for show but to help us through what we need to decide. There has been a positive spin-off because it has helped us develop personal relationships as well as trusting relationships with those organisations. We started out by saying that we would not agree on everything but we would see where we agreed and use that as common ground to go forward.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: What is Community Services doing to assist the most vulnerable children and young people in New South Wales?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: All the things I have talked about go to the heart of that question. However, I want to talk about the intensive support services for children who have experienced the most horrendous levels of neglect and abuse. As we all know and would expect, these children carry emotional and developmental problems, potentially into their adult lives. Community Services set up the intensive support services in 2005. It is a network of dedicated skilled staff across New South Wales who work with the most damaged children. I visited one of these support services in Parramatta a few weeks ago and met some of the children. They were about to go on a rafting trip, which I thought was very brave as it was freezing cold. They were young teenagers who clearly had travelled paths that were unimaginable for most people.

These caseworkers work alongside community partners such as Life Without Barriers, Marist Youth Care, Allambi Youth Services and Centacare Broken Bay. They receive funding to provide dedicated foster care and residential and independent living placements for children with high needs. The issues for these children relate to self-harm, suicide and, often, extreme bouts of anger, which is pretty understandable. People are needed who know how to work with those sorts of behaviours. One of the really nice aspects is that we work with the Zoo and young people in these categories, which relates to connecting with things and learning how to love. We also provide kinship placements and foster care placements, but they often break down, so the children end up in these special places.

This intensive work is with the most vulnerable and most damaged children, who in many cases will probably never recover from their experiences. It requires a combination of specially trained caseworkers working directly with the providers of care for those children.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: How is Community Services providing expert advice and assistance to caseworkers on drug and alcohol issues?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: One in five of the reports that come into our helpline involve some sort of substance abuse and one in three relate to a combination of complex drug and alcohol use, domestic violence and mental health issues. About 10 per cent of children live in households where parents abuse alcohol or are dependent on drugs. We have done some important work on this with Professor Dawe. We have established a drug and alcohol expertise unit and it is receiving additional funding under Keep Them Safe. That unit is focused on building capacity for front-line staff to deliver services to families with these complex issues. It was mentioned earlier that often the staff are young women. They are incredibly dedicated. I have met hundreds of caseworkers and I cannot tell you how impressive they are. When you are dealing with complex families and these sorts of issues you do need expertise. That is why we have established and are enhancing this particular unit to help our front-line workers do the best they can with those families.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: In the areas of mental health and drugs and alcohol over the years there have been many issues and problems in relation to dual diagnosis and the difficulty that individual practitioners have in that respect. Is your organisation finding the same problem when dealing with this?

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Absolutely. Part of what we are doing is rolling out a range of seminars across the State on drug and alcohol-related topics. Often it is not solely a drug problem or solely an alcohol problem but a combination of the two and mental health problems. A lot of work is going on across Government on that particular issue, but it is complex and challenging.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Is your organisation getting somewhere with the question in relation to health workers? I do not mean just public health workers but right across the health spectrum.

Ms GALLARD: The additional funds under Keep Them Safe for drug and alcohol expertise is also for specialist workers that deal with mental health and domestic violence. I have been advised that it is quite common for workers in the drug and alcohol field to have expertise in mental health, so we will be getting both sets of expertise in the new workers that are coming on board.

CHAIR: Thank you. That concludes questions and we can note there is more to be done, as always. You will receive questions on notice and they are to be returned in 21 days. Ms Gallard tabled a document earlier that has "Cabinet in Confidence" on it. I need to make sure that is okay. It does not give away any secrets.

Ms GALLARD: No, it does not. That page is perfectly fine.

CHAIR: Thank you. That concludes today's hearing. I thank the Minister and staff assisting.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
