

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

INQUIRY INTO CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

At Sydney on Thursday, 24 October 2002

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods (Chair)

The Hon. Dr A. Chesterfield-Evans

The Hon. Amanda Fazio

The Hon. J. M. Samios

The Hon. I. W. West

CAROL GWENDOLYN PELTOLA, Consultant, sworn and examined:

Ms PELTOLA: I am appearing before the Committee in my capacity as a private citizen. I have received a summons.

CHAIR: We could skip those other questions, we know who you are that you are conversant with the terms of reference and you have not made a submission to us. Members of the Committee have some questions we have prepared and we have sent to you, and it is sensible for us to start by asking you, since you came to public prominence on the Four Corners program, we would like you to give us a bit of background about your time in the department, the positions you held and, I guess, the circumstances leading up to your decision to appear on the Four Corners program?

Ms PELTOLA: I should note that prior to coming to the department I had some 15 years in the public sector in Queensland and immediately prior to coming to the Department of Community Services I was lecturing at Queensland University of Technology in child and family studies. Initially I was recruited to a position as principal policy advisor, child and family. However, when I arrived in the department there had been some significant changes in personnel and senior staff had been removed from their positions. So immediately on my arrival I was asked to take up, in an acting capacity, the position of Assistant Director General Policy and Planning. I was in that position acting for a period of some eight months until there was a restructure of the department. I was then appointed on contract, as is standard in the senior executive service, to the position of Director, Child and Family.

That was part of a structure that was a matrix structure. So whilst I only had two staff directly reporting to me, I was responsible for policy direction in child and family and for practice initiatives in the area of the department's child and family business. I was in that position for approximately one year when the department restructured again and then I was appointed to the position of Executive Director, Child and Family, and that position had staff directly reporting to it and it was again responsible for policy and practice in child and family, and that was the position that I was in when I was removed from the position in June of 2001 and I was asked to act in the position of director of a parenting centre, which the department was establishing, and I was there until I left in late August of that year, some three months.

The circumstances surrounding my departure are complex and somewhat painful. I am not sure that there is a lot of value in going through it in depth.

CHAIR: We would not ask you to do that. It is, I guess, to give all of us a sense of your background and your expertise and experience and so on.

Ms PELTOLA: Suffice it to say that that was not my choice to leave. The decisions around appearing on the Four Corners program, I suppose I was deeply concerned about what was happening in the department. I was concerned both at a professional level and at a personal level for the staff who had worked for me and who had considerable expertise and I saw what was happening to them and I was deeply concerned all around and I felt that the Four Corners program was a way of publicly airing those concerns and, I hoped, contributing in a positive way to a debate about what should happen in the department.

CHAIR: Could I ask whether your work as a consultant keeps you in contact with the work of the department or have you more or less separated yourself from that?

Ms PELTOLA: I have separated myself, in that I was asked to act as an adviser to the Gordon Inquiry in Western Australia, which I did from January through until August this year. That was an inquiry into how Government agencies were responding to family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. In that sense I have, until recently, still been involved in looking at public sector child protection services but not specifically in relation to New South Wales.

CHAIR: Given what we know about you and what you have said, we thought we might break the ice, so to speak, by inviting you to give us the top five things the new Director General of Department of Community Services should do to address the problems in DoCS. That is a fairly open ended question.

Ms PELTOLA: It is somewhat of an onus and responsibility to think about that and I think the difficulty is not so much what to do but how to do it. For the moment I will focus on the whats.

I think the absolute critical thing for the Department of Community Services is to look at what the role

of the department and its workers should be. I think the parameters, and this came across in the interim report of the committee, the parameters of the work are particularly unclear and they are more unclear in New South Wales than in any other State. The first thing is to be absolutely clear about the role of the department and the role of the workers.

I think the second thing is about the information system, and that was commented on by the independent inquiry into file tampering allegations. It has been noted on any number of occasions that the information systems in the Department of Community Services are particularly poor. The data is particularly poor and it makes it, I would say, almost impossible to reform a system if you do not have the data to understand what is happening in your agency. I am aware that there has been numerous attempts, including during my time there, to reform that but that has proved incredibly difficult.

The third thing is about professional practice. I think there is not necessarily a culture that what is done by departmental staff is actually a professional service delivery and there are certainly any number of professional underpinnings to the work that is done by the department. I think that needs to be acknowledged. I think that was acknowledged in the dissenting report into the department that this is about a profession.

I think the fourth thing is about the culture of the department and I do not think I could overstate the dysfunctional nature of the culture of the Department of Community Services. In doing that I am very conscious of the damaging effect of further criticism but I think it is important that that is acknowledged in any reform process in the Department of Community Services. I was with the Department of Community Services for a little over three years, starting in 1998. Even before I started I think that the culture of defensiveness had started and I think that it will take more than simply a new Director General and new Minister to overcome a culture that is profoundly about secrecy. I believe unless that is changed and there is a commitment, to use the words in the interim report, to openness and transparency and I would say a commitment to a moral stance in the department, things will not change.

The fifth thing is openness, and whilst that might be seen to be part of the issue of culture, I think it deserves a statement on its own.

They are five things that immediately came to me but I would just like to talk about surrounding matters.

CHAIR: We obviously will cover some of them in the further questions but talk about them now by all means.

Ms PELTOLA: I think the question has to be asked as to whether the areas covered by the Department of Community Services are too big. I will talk about that a little more because you have specifically asked. I think it is very important that overall there is a focus on some specific things that can change and to get those right. Again, if you would like me to talk about this later, feel free to let me know.

I think what has happened in the Department of Community Services is that there has never been a substantial reform process. Child protection over the last 30 years has changed dramatically. I can talk about that in more depth if the Committee wishes me to. The Department of Community Services has not changed substantially. You have layer upon layer of attempting to fix a problem in a more bandaid approach rather than a more substantial change. The attempts to fix the problem in fact are likely to make it worse and have made it worse. You actually need very substantial reform around the issues of what is the role of the Department of Community Services and the things that I talked about.

I think it is going to be impossible to fix all those things at once. Therefore, I think focusing on a specific area, getting that right and building that change process is the way to rebuild the trust that has been destroyed in the Department of Community Services, and to rebuild, I suppose, the faith and belief of the staff themselves.

CHAIR: You said when you started answering that question that you were going to tell us, if you like, the five "whats" but there is the important issue of how. Is that what you were getting at when you just said then about the need to reform chunk by chunk?

Ms PELTOLA: Yes, I think that is probably one of the strategies of how. I think the how is a very much bigger question and I think part of it is about engaging the Department of Community Services' staff in that process in a meaningful way and I also think it is important to actually ask the question whether all the staff have the skills that are necessary to do the job because it is a highly professional job. There are very complex questions that have to be answered on a daily basis and decisions that are made. I also think that it is important

to ask about the skill base of the staff.

CHAIR: Other Committee members may take up some of these questions with you but just to start off, we thought it was important to ask you about your views on the measures the Government has announced over the last few months, and we may not necessarily deal with them in order if you prefer, but obviously they include the appointment of a new Minister and Director General, the decision to have a structural separation between prevention, the out of home care area and the broader child protection area - which comes back a little perhaps to what you just said - the extra case workers and support staff, the role of the Kibble committee and its comments on staffing and information systems and so on. Then you also referred briefly to the independent inquiry which has just reported on the file tampering allegations.

Ms PELTOLA: It is probably easier if I go through those as they are written.

CHAIR: Other Committee members may want to hop in on aspects of those if it is okay.

Ms PELTOLA: Absolutely. I think that from what I have said already a lot of these things are interwoven, so it is not often easy to talk about them discretely. I think the appointment of the new Minister and Director General has been essential to a reform process. I have seen some very positive things coming out of that, and whilst I made the point on Four Corners, and I make it again, that the problems with the Department of Community Services are not just about one or two people, Minister or Director General, I do think this is a very important first step in a reform process.

The structural separation I think is a very good one and I think it is absolutely imperative that there be a quarantining of resources for each of those separate areas. I think there is still a big question, and it is raised again later, from memory, in your questioning, but the department for child development, which has been recommended as a result of the two inquiries that are happening, one of which I believe is completed, I think that structure cannot be seen to be a panacea, but there are some structures that will not work. I think anything that allows a focus on children and the critical importance of child development is positive. The comment I would make very strongly about any structure is that there must be a balance because there is no one perspective on this. There are any number of perspectives on how you provide services and to whom you provide services, and I think what is required is some balance, so that there are implications for that in terms of whether you have everything in the one department or not, because if you are a Director General and you are under scrutiny for your child protection investigations, then you will move your resources to that unless they are strongly quarantined.

I think the positives about a department for child development are that it quarantines those resources in an absolute way and allows for that focus on the positive. Certainly, there are some activities that the Department of Community Services carries out now that could go in to the department for child development. I will probably talk about that a little more in number four.

Again, whilst I do not think there is any one correct way of structuring service delivery in this area that we are talking about, I think the critical thing to keep in mind is that there must be a balance of perspectives and a balance of service delivery. So prevention, early intervention, child protection and out of home care are parts of a continuum and it is important that there is focus on each of those parts. The critical question that the Committee needs to consider is whether child protection is able not to eat into the resources of other parts of the department and how you might structure the department and structure the accountability of the department so that that does not happen.

I have talked about the need for role clarity and I will talk about that a little more in four. That is absolutely critical as well. I think structurally it is very important to separate out the parts of the continuum whilst allowing for an integrated service delivery system. I do not think New South Wales is alone in not having that continuum in place. The issue of the case workers and support staff - in the area of child protection the demand is always there but I would really caution that unless there is clarity of role you could have a thousand more case workers and I do not think they would be able to respond adequately, simply because at the moment there is an expectation that the Department of Community Services' workers will somehow be able to do everything, and that is simply not the case.

New South Wales has, as the interim report points out, many more notifications or reports of child abuse or children at risk than other States, even compared to its population, and, similarly, it has many more children in the out of home care system. The danger is that more workers will simply allow for more of the same rather than some fundamental reform in how services are delivered. So, I do not know that we know what is an appropriate level of case workers because the clarity about what the department should be doing is not there.

I just refer you to Victoria, which has always been much clearer about what it does and it is able to cost every step of its child protection process so it can tell you how much it costs to do an investigation, how much it costs to go to court, how much it costs to have a child in out of home care, and it is only when you are able to do that that you are able to adequately say how many workers you need for the work that is there.

I am conscious of the time and I probably need to speak quicker or say less.

CHAIR: We will see how we go. Mr Samios has some questions he wants to ask you too. Usually we find that as we get further through our questions you have already partly answered them.

Ms PELTOLA: I can probably be quick about the last two. I think the issue of demand management and the Kibble committee, without knowing a lot about it, is going to be very important, and I think if it needs to be extended, then that is important rather than rushing it. I think it was important for the Director General to call for that independent inquiry. I think whilst nothing specific has come out of the specific allegations made in Four Corners it is again clear that the state of the files is inadequate and I think that the potential for files to be changed is great, as long as workers do not see themselves as professionals with a professional base to work from.

In the speech I gave to the Association of Child Welfare Agencies, which I understand was forwarded on to the Committee, I again talked about the need to balance professional service delivery with a business or management structure, and I think if you see it as simply a business, then you can forget some of the issues of professionalism and some of the professional underpinnings that would see workers not understand the seriousness of changing files, and certainly in Scotland there have been instances where the culture of an agency changed to the extent that workers were instructed to change files and that was very much the beginning of the downfall of that particular agency.

It is a very important issue and I think it is absolutely critical that the culture is changed so that the idea that somebody could be asked to change a file is simply no longer contemplated, where I think at the moment that is something that would be believed by people.

CHAIR: Could I invite Mr Samios to ask a couple of questions that are not on our list.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: Miss Peltola, on Four Corners---

[Interruption from the gallery]

CHAIR: People in the gallery should not interrupt Committee proceedings.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: Ms Peltola, on Four Corners a Department of Community Services officer alleged that the Department of Community Services' officers were sometimes required to tamper with files to ensure the Department of Community Services' failings were not disclosed to investigating bodies such as the Ombudsman or the Community Services Commission. Now, from your experience can you comment on whether this is consistent with the culture that you mentioned operating within the Department of Community Services?

Ms PELTOLA: I think I have touched on that in what I said previously, in that there is a culture of secrecy, and when I say there is, I am talking about my time in it. I am really not free to speak about since then, which is now a year. I want to make it absolutely clear I am talking about my time. There was absolutely a culture of secrecy, a lack of openness and I think that that kind of a culture puts pressure on people to behave in ways that are not professional. I think changing files is part of a culture that sees defending the department as its top priority rather than open accountability, both to clients and to the public.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: There are also allegations on Four Corners that the Department of Community Services' officers felt so intimidated and fearful that they kept their own personal files separate from the official files on controversial cases, particularly where they had to make changes to the official files under pressure from management. What is your knowledge of this practice and can you comment on why it would be occurring?

Ms PELTOLA: I am not really able to comment on direct practice in the field. Because I was a relatively senior officer in head office, I do not claim to have direct knowledge of the day to day practice in offices. Certainly the issue of keeping separate files was raised in the independent inquiry and I think the issue there is that the files themselves were so poorly kept and the information systems were so poor that officers tended to

take action to, I suppose in a way, ensure that they knew what they were doing rather than seeing themselves as part of a system.

That certainly came out when we were looking at a new client system. It was clear that there were significant amounts of information that were kept separate from the official client system itself and that that grew out of both the pressure of work, the difficulties with the current client information system, or the one that operated when I was there, which again has been referred to, and I suppose a sense, which is an important part of understanding the culture of the Department of Community Services, of the enormous work load pressure, the pressure of working in an agency that has such a level of dysfunction.

The public scrutiny of the Department of Community Services means that you, as a worker, often see yourself in isolation and that then lends itself to practices like keeping your own independent notes rather than seeing yourself as part of a system. If you have no faith in that overall system, you tend to separate yourself out, and so part of the reform process for the Department of Community Services is, I believe, to give workers confidence that they are part of a system that does work and that they will be protected if they, I suppose, behave within that functioning system.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: Is it true that the Department of Community Services regularly employs people with no appropriate professional training and is it also true that they are placed in the Department of Community Services' offices across the State before receiving any training and in some cases wait for months within the Department of Community Services, until the Department of Community Services is ready to run the training course?

Ms PELTOLA: Again I want to make clear that I am speaking for my time in the department, I cannot speak for the last 12 months. Unlike most other States, it is not an absolute requirement to have a relevant degree to work in the Department of Community Services. If you look at the policies and procedures, it will say you need to have a degree, but that is not always put in place. That occurred particularly in the recruitment of temporary staff who then go on to become permanent.

That then presents particular difficulties in relation to training because temporary staff are not necessarily, or were not necessarily, trained before they engaged in child protection work. So it could be a consequence that workers were engaged in day to day important Department of Community Services work without having been through training and, in some instances, without having a degree. I am not able to comment on whether it was common or how common it was. I am only aware that it did occur.

CHAIR: We will come back to the questions we sent you. Number four you referred to earlier in the comments you were going to make there. It fits in with what you have already said, I think, about the five things that should be done and so on. We are interested in further comments you have got about the appropriate role for the Department of Community Services and its roles, but in particular relating that to the role of the substantial non-Government sector in the areas of early intervention and prevention, child protection and of out of home care, can you give us some comments on those?

Ms PELTOLA: I have to say I am very influenced by my Queensland experience and sometimes it is hard to see outside a perspective that you have had for a very long time but I am of the view that prevention and early intervention are best performed by the non-Government sector in terms of service delivery.

My reason for saying that is that no matter how much you separate the aspects of the department's work, in general people tend to see the department as the statutory agency. The community finds it very hard to see that statutory role of the department separate from that early intervention and prevention. I do not think it is impossible, and certainly some areas have done that. Western Australia has parenting centres that are run by the department, some of them are contracted out, but, in general, unless you are able to get an absolute separation, and in the sort of current jargon, separate branding, for that service delivery, I think the community finds it confusing with those two separate roles. To state it more simply, I do not think it is impossible to have service delivery by the department but I think it is neater and easier if that service delivery occurs through the non-Government sector.

I think when we talk about child protection, it is there as if we all know what that is. I have probably bored you already with my statement that there has to be some role clarity about that. Child protection can be anything. It is seen often, and you will see this in the literature, as referring only to the formal investigative part, or it can be seen as the full spectrum, from intervening where families may be at a degree of risk to on going service provision, and sometimes it even includes out of home care.

I think what is important within that child protection is to be clear as to whether the Department of Community Services wants to have a role that is broader than investigation or assessment, which is the current language, and case management. I think they are the important core aspects of a statutory agency, and within case management I am also referring to putting matters before the courts.

In saying that, I am conscious that in some areas of Canada, for example, they have non-Government agencies delivering all their child protection services. It is not out of the question that all service delivery could not be contracted out to a non-Government agency. I think the culture within Australia, and our expectation, is that the statutory agency will at least provide that initial investigation or assessment, some case management and any court related activity.

CHAIR: Could I just hop in there with a question? Those professionals you were talking about before and the importance of them knowing exactly what their job is and being comfortable, if not happy, in doing their job, some of them have put to us the importance of them having a broader role so that they are not quarantined into, I guess, the toughest investigative crisis end. That point has been put to us by some Department of Community Services workers working in community service centres. That relates, they have said, to areas of responsibility that are given to the non-Government sector and they feel a well functioning community service centre would gain by actually being able to deliver a range across the spectrum you have described. I wonder if you have any comments on that?

Ms PELTOLA: Again I do not think there are any absolutes in this. The question, the critical question, I think we have to ask is do the Department of Community Services, not the Department of Community Services workers, but child protection workers, want to do that because of the incredible demands of child protection hard end and the need to have some balance, in a sense to have some sense that there are functioning families out there. Workers can really develop a distorted perspective on what is normal if they see that hard end all the time.

Nevertheless, it is incredibly difficult to be in the role of someone who is trying to uncover what has happened to a child and also be in a supportive role with that family. I do not believe that is impossible but I think it requires a lot of skill. I also think that our perspective - this is really a much larger debate - our perspective about how much investigation should occur and how much broader support for families is one that really needs to be explored more fully. Australia-wide only about ten per cent, from memory, of reports actually end up in court. So the vast majority of matters that come to the attention of statutory child protection agencies requires other than a court based intervention. The reason you have such an investigative response is that you may need to present that formally in a court.

I am sure the Committee would have heard this time and time again, the change from a focus on what adult did what to what child, specifically, to a broader understanding of the needs of a child to grow up healthy and happy and what is happening in that child's environment that may be helping that or may be impeding that is the new focus in child protection, and certainly one that needs to happen, but one that the Department of Community Services is struggling with. When you look at that different role of being there as more assessing what is happening in that child and family's life, then I think it is easier to have that supportive role with the family.

What Western Australia has done, for example, is separate out all their reports into ones that they believe require an investigative approach versus one that they assume will have a supportive approach. I am not saying that is the right way to go. I think there needs to be more in depth analysis of what matters come before the department that actually get that investigative approach, which is a very hard thing to do because the family usually is quite threatened by your being there. They are threatened that they are going to lose their child. More analysis is needed of what requires that supportive assessment.

In the early days of child protection it was often the case that families were not known to departments and so uncovering what was happening was very important. In the vast majority of families that come to the notice of statutory child protection agencies these days, there is actually somebody involved with that family and it is not new information. How you manage it is the critical piece of information and how you coordinate that.

CHAIR: We were struck by that in our travels around, talking either to interagency groups or the Department of Community Services workers. When we asked them what percentage of cases came from the help line, for instance, or in any other way, they stressed that overwhelmingly the families involved were already, in some sense, their clients or known to them.

Ms PELTOLA: Absolutely.

CHAIR: They had heard of them.

Ms PELTOLA: The question is how do you provide services to those families rather than how do you, time after time after time, investigate. Certainly in my time there were up to 20 individual reports or notifications on individual families. I want to acknowledge that often that is driven by the community concern about investigation and the anxiety of the workers that if they do not investigate this and something happens to that child there could be a tragedy, whereas what is more likely to lead to a tragedy is the failure to engage with the family and provide the appropriate supports to that family. That can be more of the focus of child protection, and again I think that will depend very much on individual situations. New South Wales is a diverse State. I think that has to be different in different parts of the State. In rural and remote areas it may well be the Department of Community Services worker provides a range of support to a family and may even do what is termed community development because they may be the only worker in that small town and that may be different.

I think the critical thing is not what they do but the clarity about what they do and who is doing what, at the end of the day that the Department of Community Services staff are not left to carry the can for what happens. If there is a clear plan for the family, people are clear what needs to be done and who is doing it, then responsibility needs to be given to those agencies, which may be the non-Government sector.

CHAIR: I think we could probably pass over number five because you have said quite a bit about our own suggestions or interim report. Mr Chesterfield-Evans, did you want to ask question six? Some of those dot points are probably issues you have a particular concern with.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: I was interested in when you actually had been in the Department of Community Services, you were the head of prevention, is that right? Child and family services was the preventive arm of the three arms of the Department of Community Services?

Ms PELTOLA: Those three arms were not in existence. Disability was still part of the department and so there was a child and family stream, there was a disability stream and there was a sort of policy and strategy area. The early intervention and prevention, child protection and out of home care were not the labels in place when I was in the Department of Community Services.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Which bit of the Department of Community Services were you looking after?

Ms PELTOLA: Out of home care, child protection and the role about prevention and early intervention was an unclear one. I had responsibility for children's services, but the policy stream, the strategic policy had responsibility initially for the funding of the non-Government agency in the areas of early intervention and prevention, and with the restructure, there was a community partners stream and that was responsible for funding, and a lot of that funding was prevention and early intervention.

If I am sounding confusing, that is because it was confusing. In a matrix structure the responsibility was a shared one. Even though I was directly responsible for child protection and out of home care, I had some input into prevention and early intervention funding activities and also had some shared responsibility for funding for out of home care. It was confused and it was difficult.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You were not entirely responsible for prevention?

Ms PELTOLA: No.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: And nobody else was either, is that really the situation?

Ms PELTOLA: I think that is the situation, yes.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: This shared care with the non-Government sector, or some other word you used for it -

Ms PELTOLA: Out of home care.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: The concept of sharing responsibility?

Ms PELTOLA: It was a matrix structure.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: The non-Government sector seemed to say to us that they were sharing the responsibility but they were not sharing the money.

Ms PELTOLA: The issue of funding in out of home care is an incredibly vexed one. I earlier referred to the difficulties when you do not reform a system fundamentally, when you simply add on, and what happened is that as out of home care became more complex, more difficult, more challenging children, the Department of Community Services relied on a particular vote that it had access to which was initially intended to provide additional things for children. If a child needed additional medical care or if they needed an aeroplane fare, or travel expenses to visit their parents, or their parents to visit them, that kind of thing. There was a special vote allowed for that.

What the Department of Community Services did as it came under pressure and as the non-Government sector indicated that it had some difficulty in caring for some of those more difficult children, it used that pot of money to provide direct care for children and the way it did that was to often pay private individuals or private agencies for the full-time care of those children and that was the situation where children may have been placed in motels with a 24 hour carer until appropriate accommodation could be found for that child.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: This is very much crisis stuff. There is no prevention in that. Presumably that eats up the money.

Ms PELTOLA: That is exactly right. So what that did was have significant over-spending in out of home care, but it was exactly that, it was a crisis response to having nowhere to place a child. Even though the total amount of money actually increased, the way it was spent was not systematic and it was not planned and it was not directed in a way that had the best use of the money.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: This is up to how long ago?

Ms PELTOLA: Certainly up until the time I left.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Which was when?

Ms PELTOLA: In August last year.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You left because you felt ---

CHAIR: We went through a great deal of this in the half hour before you arrived. I really think we do need to move on to other areas. We did go in some detail through Carol's career. I thought you were going to ask about some of the specific aspects of the evidence that has been given.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: At the time she is telling us about, we were being reassured that everything was okay by the Parliament. I think that is worrying. She has obviously left because there was not prevention---

CHAIR: We went through this evidence before you arrived this morning. Mr West, you had a question too.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Carol, thank you for your assistance this morning. I would like to ask do you have any comments to make on the Committee's suggestion for prevention and early prevention as set out in our interim report?

Ms PELTOLA: I have touched briefly on that. I think it is very important that that area is separated. I do not mean separated ideologically or in terms of service delivery. There needs to be a continuum of service. I do think the separation and having money set aside specifically for that is very important. I think the department for child development is a way of ensuring that those services are integrated, and I think the other thing about having a department for child development, and a point I wanted to make, overall it is very hard for agencies to become client focused. It is a word bandied around, but certainly I have seen it here, and when we were looking at the Western Australia public service delivery, agencies focus on themselves and how they are going to deliver a service rather than on the client and what is going to be best for the client.

If you are a family and your child is struggling, and Britain has very much taken this perspective, it does

not matter if it is because the child has a disability, or if you are impoverished, or if you are homeless, what is critical is that the child needs change in their family. They need their family to be supported so they receive adequate support. I think that the recommendations of the Committee go some way towards saying the focus has to be on the child and family rather than on the department that is delivering that service.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Are you able to give us any assistance in that dichotomy of trying to separate the service delivery between the department and the non-Government organisations in those regional areas? I think you made comment on it earlier, the flexibility of service delivery in those regional areas.

Ms PELTOLA: I do think it is important to have flexibility, and again I just emphasise that whilst I do think it is possible for the department to separate its service delivery, there has to be a way of monitoring its service delivery so the resources do not go into high profile areas like investigation of child protection. When I left the department, the split of moneys between the department and the non-Government sector in terms of service delivery and out of home care were grossly skewed towards the non-Government sector. That is simply because they were able to be articulate and say, "We will not provide service unless you fund us adequately", which is an absolutely essential stance to take.

The department does not have that luxury. It is not able to care for this child unless we are adequately funded. In that sense you lead to a skewing of the system where the non-Government sector has a capacity to provide service delivery for which it is adequately remunerated and the department does not have that luxury.

Then you have that further skewing, which I spoke about to Mr Chesterfield-Evans, that the department then drew on and overspent what was meant to be a sort of a top up budget for basic service delivery. You get skewing on skewing. It makes it much neater, I think I used that word before, much neater and cleaner if you said the non-Government sector provides out of home care. You then have to be confident that they will provide for the most difficult children, otherwise you then get those children passed back to the department and the department then attempting to provide care for its most difficult children without adequate funds to do so.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Is it not the case that part of the current skewing of funding in favour of the non-Government sector for out of home care is in fact due to the philosophical commitment of some non-Government organisations to try and make a major change in the lives of children who have a difficult and complex set of needs. Barnardos and Burnside have a philosophy of taking some children who are very difficult to provide assistance and support to.

Do you think that is a fair comment as well, that they have asked for far greater funding in respect of those children because those children's needs are far greater than a lot of children that are dealt with in out of home care by the department?

Ms PELTOLA: I do not think it is true. In fact, I do not think we know. I think it is anecdotal and impressionistic as to who has the more difficult children. I do not wish to minimise for a moment the professional commitment of the non-Government sector to children. I think where I have a difficulty with what you have said is that implied in that is that the department staff do not, and I think they do. What I think they lack is a capacity to be absolutely firm and say, "If we do not have the money, we do not take the child". You can honour your professional and philosophical commitment if you have that capacity. It is much harder to honour it when you have got the child on your doorstep and you have to provide a service.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Does that mean that the Department of Community Services effectively has to provide services that they know are inadequate because they do not have sufficient funds?

Ms PELTOLA: Absolutely. And that leads to worker stress. One of the questions you ask is about morale and morale is linked to your sense that you are doing a good job, you are doing the best you can and you are making a difference in people's lives. Again, I think there were some quotes in your interim report where people said, I am paraphrasing, "We know we are not giving what we should to that family". So day after day doing a job that you know is not meeting the needs of a family or a child is incredibly stressful and incredibly demoralising.

I think it is important that people understand that Department of Community Services workers are not uncaring people, are not uncommitted people, but the circumstances in which they operate - it is not just a resource issue, but the chaos of the department - lead them to experiencing enormous difficulties in delivering a service to their clients.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: In the prioritisation of cases, we understand a large number of the middle management were prioritising cases as to who would get any service at all.

Ms PELTOLA: That is right.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: That must have been demoralising also.

Ms PELTOLA: Absolutely, and it leads you not to sleep at night when you know you have said we are not investigating or assessing those ten, 20, whatever, cases. They live in a constant state of stress about that.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You were in charge of this to some extent and you left. Was that because you did not know how to fix it or you could not fix it or what was the problem?

Ms PELTOLA: Look, I have questioned myself about why I was unable to make more of an impact. I had two major change strategies, the Care 2000 and the Service 2000 strategies, which were about reform of the out of home care and the front end of child protection that I have talked about. We had considerable input from professionals in the field. We had a forum that involved significant players right throughout Australia. I believe that reform process was a solid one. Implementing the reform process was the difficulty. I think I was unaware of just how mired in chaos the Department of Community Services was and, therefore, how difficult it is to take that first step out of that chaos.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do those problems remain, do you believe?

Ms PELTOLA: I feel uncomfortable talking about the last 12 months because I think this is such an important issue and it is such an important inquiry that I only feel able to give information that I know.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do you think those were the correct directions, the direction of that reform was correct and would still be correct?

Ms PELTOLA: I think there were some important directions for change that would be worth considering and I do not know how much of that reform process has been continued since I left.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: They were consistent with the interim report.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: I wanted to ask you about one of the issues in question six, and it is jumping a fair way ahead, but it is something I think we probably have not had a lot of information on in this inquiry and it is valuable. In terms of research and evaluation, my understanding from the evidence we have received to date is that the department has been responding to child prevention issues in such a way and resources have been directed in such a way that the capacity of the department to undertake any research and evaluation into the most efficient ways of dealing with those issues and in dealing with solutions and models for out of home care has not existed for some time.

Realising that the benefits of that research and evaluation could be very beneficial in terms of the quality of service delivery outcomes for the children and the staff of the department, what suggestions have you got for ways in which the research and evaluation role could be promoted within the department and the ways in which it could improve outcomes?

Ms PELTOLA: I agree that research and evaluation is incredibly important. I think there are two aspects of that. In a sense the pure research, whereby access to what is happening in the rest of Australia and overseas in terms of, for example, out of home care, is important. That is not a hard thing to do. The Institute of Family Studies and the Child Protection Clearing House, who worked with me and my team when I was in the department, have a wealth of knowledge and experience. They did a literature review for a very small amount of money for the Western Australian inquiry in relation to Aboriginal child protection issues. I think there is quite a solid body of research. It is not all that clear but there is a body of research about ways to deliver services. I think the department should access that and should use that to underpin.

Having said that, I should note that it is not always that clear about the best ways of delivering services. Part of the reason it is not clear is that the intangibles in this business we are talking about are complex and they are often not articulated in a research agenda. For example, one of the key things that we know about intervening in families, and particularly in children's lives, is about relationship, relationship with the person who is working with them, and often relationship is not one of the factors that is looked at in the out of home care research.

Having said that, access to that research is important and not all that difficult. Evaluation is much much harder, and the reason it is hard is, as we have talked about before, the data systems in the Department of Community Services are so inadequate that looking at what the Department of Community Services does is almost impossible.

The way information is put into the client information system is not consistent. There are no clear definitions. I should say that there was a lot of work done on this, but unless something dramatic has happened in the last 12 months, the information systems do not allow you to make important decisions about what works and in what particular circumstances. The Department of Community Services faces an enormous challenge in that.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: One quick question to follow up on that. Do you think the department has a role in ensuring that different models of service provision that perhaps are provided by non-Government organisations are actually evaluated to see which are the most effective in terms of outcomes and expenditure? From what I can gather that does not happen.

Ms PELTOLA: That is correct. Whilst the non-Government sector do some of their own evaluation of service delivery, the evaluations tend to be one off rather than consistent. Let me give you an example of the kind of within department research that is important. Queensland, in trying to solve the problem of what to do with that front end of reports and notifications, actually set up three different systems, three different pilots, of how to manage that. They are evaluating those before they roll out whatever they see is the most efficient to the department. That is the sort of thing that is important to give you an understanding of what works and what does not work.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: Carol, are you aware of extreme concerns of front line Department of Community Services officers as to the function of the Help Line and the relationship between Help Line and front line staff in community service centres across the State? If so, can you detail those concerns?

Ms PELTOLA: Again I refer to my time in the department rather than the last 12 months. There has been enormous concern right from day one and I think Help Line is one of the questions that you specifically refer to. Let me say that the Help Line is one of the great disappointments of my career because it had such high hopes, and if I can just talk a little bit about the thinking in establishing Help Line. If I go off the topic please feel free to direct me back and I will try not to become too passionate about this.

If you look at an agency that is dysfunctional at a lot of levels, one of the strategies is to take a particular area and rebuild it and get some success, and that starts to improve the morale, it provides a model of service delivery. That was certainly the thinking behind Help Line. There was new legislation and it required a brand new approach to the way child protection services were delivered. If we could change what happened at the front end of child protection we might have some hope of changing, gradually, the culture and the way services were delivered. Bringing together experienced staff, training them, giving them the vision of what the investigation was meant to provide and having a very good information system we thought would start to bring about culture change within the department.

I know there are more rumours than anybody has hot breakfasts about why the Help Line was started and whatever, but in my mind, and I was involved in looking at that front end, there needed to be a radical change in the way people thought about child protection, and getting it at the beginning was a way to do that. Then, because of the culture I have talked about and because of the lack of clear management and clear responsibility, everybody gets in on the act and adds their own particular focus, and before you know it you have this thing which you just kind of say: What would it take to make this thing work? How can it be that we are this far down the track?

We had somebody from Texas, a woman in Texas, who had 750,000 reports, not just of child abuse, they covered corrective services and a range of other things. She ran the equivalent of a Help Line there. She came here, she gave us her time free and we sat with her for two days and the poor woman was exhausted. She went all day with staff and I would take her out to dinner and pump her for the next couple of hours. I think we did everything we possibly could from my perspective to get a focus. What happened is just so distressing. Instead of having experienced child protection staff, which is absolutely critical to the front end, they recruited new staff who had no child protection experience.

My staff were not involved in the training of those workers, were not involved in the selection or the training, and the information system which was meant to facilitate them was not ready, and so they were working

with an extremely old system which was cobbled together with some new fields to try and deal with it. So you had inexperienced workers who in my view did not have the appropriate level of training and did not have any information system and had something like a third of the staff that it needed when it opened.

The Hon. JAMES SAMIOS: Foster care has had an increase in their fortnightly payment to \$350 but had removed their basic entitlements to additional special payments. This was sold by the Government as an increase in funding for carers but is it not true that this change actually saved the department money?

Ms PELTOLA: I confess my memory is not clear about the figures. I do not believe that there was less money allocated. I believe there was more money allocated, but it was fundamentally about the redistribution of that money. What I think was the problem in that piece of work, and they had an outside researcher do it, was there was a failure to examine the level of care and level of need of the children in the system. This is exactly what I mean by putting solutions on top without fixing the fundamentals.

The level of need was an existing system and it was very much geared to children with a particular physical disability. You scored points dependent on whether you had a physical disability. Whilst children with a physical disability, or indeed an intellectual disability, may well need a higher level of care, the children who need the highest level of care are those who are severely conduct disordered, those who have very difficult behaviour. This system had been devised many years ago and that was not one of the factors taken into account.

When they went to Treasury and argued the case, the various categories did not reflect current need. It reflected an assessment of need that had been devised many years ago. As I say, I may stand corrected on some of those figures, my recollection is not that there was less money but that there may not have been an adequate assessment of those high need children. In fact, there was no assessment of the level and numbers of high need children.

CHAIR: We really need to bring you back to the Help Line. I know you prepared material on what needs now to be done to improve the Help Line. In answer to Jim's questions you were talking about the tragedy of what happened, but can you say, given your experience, what we do now? There have been all sorts of suggestions made. Where should the Help Line go as of now?

Ms PELTOLA: I have two options here, I can answer that question. I was in the middle of answering one. Do not let me forget about that. I was just referring in my previous answer to the pool of money I think you were referring to for special items, what happened. You would think there would not be confusion about money. There is or is not an amount of money. That is not the case. There is an amount of money which the Department of Community Services is allocated which it has consistently overspent, and so often, when there is an allocation the next year, it might be an increase in what was allocated last year, but it will be less than what the Department of Community Services spent and that then leads to confusion because the sectors say, quite rightly, we have less money than last year. The department and the Minister say, no, you have more money than last year, and in fact both those perspectives are correct.

CHAIR: Let us get back to the Help Line then. We have all those specific things under that heading. What specific things need to be done to improve? We need to get some of them through. We will finish a few of these things first.

Ms PELTOLA: That question about the Help Line, I was kind of "Oh, my God". I still cannot understand why the initial vision cannot work. There may be information that I do not have that is current. There are now, I understand, 130 workers on the Help Line which was what was projected to be needed. I still believe if you have the right number of staff who are adequately trained, with an information system that is easy to use and that works, I cannot see why the Help Line cannot work if you have those systems in place. There are other things like a good link to the community service centre.

CHAIR: Which is a consistent criticism, even coming from amongst the Department of Community Services workers themselves.

Ms PELTOLA: Yes. What I do not understand is why the Help Line is not able to meet the vision of being a sorting place, where it says this conversation suggests this child is at high risk, we are referring it to the community service centre and the community service centre can get on and respond to that.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Can I interrupt you on that point. Something that concerned me for a long time is the information that the Department of Community Services already holds about families and contact they

have had with them and previous notifications of children at risk. Do you think for the Help Line to operate properly with that sorting function, it would be necessary to undergo a major data collection exercise where they listed all of the previous histories for the last five years of families?

Ms PELTOLA: They have access to that at the moment.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: On the client information lists?

Ms PELTOLA: Absolutely. They are able to access all of the history recorded on the client information system. What it does not do, if individual officers keep their own records, then of course the Help Line cannot access that. That is a really unhealthy way for an agency that needs to have information to operate. In theory, and I understand in practice, the Help Line is able to access all the information on the client information system and they should do so and it is important to do so when making a decision about level of risk to a child.

CHAIR: There have been issues raised with us, particularly from a range of people from women's refuges, and from all of the different groups, we have talked to quite a few interagency committees where they talk about the lack of feedback, whatever it is, and that breaks down between the Help Line and the community service centre or between the Help Line and the reporter in the sense that the reporter, say if it is someone from a refuge, is someone who is not an outsider in any sense, they are often very much involved in the entire process. We have had so many complaints. It may well be that things have improved. Certainly since these inquiries have started, the numbers of workers have been increased. Can you comment on inquiries that are raised with the Help Line and its relationship with others in the field?

Ms PELTOLA: There are a couple of points I want to make. One is about people's perspective, and I am not for a moment saying that the Help Line is operating well. I know that it had major problems and that people were waiting hours, et cetera. But can I say people's perspective that they got a fabulous service from their community service centre and now they get a shocking service from the Help Line was not one that I heard before Help Line started. People were incredibly critical of community service centres and things like not being able to get through, not getting information about what was happening with a case, et cetera. Some of those criticisms of Help Line were absolutely criticisms of community service centres, but before it was a localised phenomenon, whereas the whole State now experiences these troubles. It is seen as a problem for Help Line but I think a lot of those problems were fundamental to the Department of Community Services and just became apparent with Help Line.

The second thing I think that is problematic is that the Department of Community Services had a culture of, it is an important culture, that you understand the confidentiality of your client, but I think that went further into experiencing confusion about what information you can give to people and what information you cannot. So the concept that these are colleagues and need to know information sometimes presents difficulties for them.

I have to say at a very simple level this does not seem to me to be insurmountable. You make clear what information you are giving to people and you check that it is given. Having said that, what the dysfunction breeds is more dysfunction. So what happens is reporters are not confident that they are going to get through. When I was there they did a number of things; they would phone and they would fax and they would contact the local community service centre. In that kind of an environment it can be unclear as to whether somebody has already given information back to those people or not. I do not know whether I am just getting naive in my old age, but it seems to me to be a simple matter that you say: This is the information you give to callers, this is the timeframe that you give it to them and these are the people who give it to them, and you simply check that that is being done.

Whilst this sounds utterly cynical, I sometimes wonder whether some people do not have a vested interest in things failing. When I saw continually the Help Line starting to get better and then major changes being made which tended to make it worse, I really wondered whether there was not such a dysfunctional culture that success was actually a foreign concept.

CHAIR: Part of that is the next dot point we had in this series of questions about what can be done to improve things with the functioning of community centres and the role of workers. When we talk to different workers, in some cases with Help Line workers and community service centre workers in the same room, there is obviously a lot of tension in terms of who is doing whose job and so on. Would it be true to say, for instance, that if the community service centres were functioning better, and you might like to comment on whether that means more staff or more clarity of roles or whatever, and whether there was a better system of case work, of clinical supervision, if the CSCs were functioning better, would that in turn solve a lot of the problems with the Help Line?

Ms PELTOLA: I do think the Help Line does have those problems inherent to the service - the blame game, the CSC workers saying it is the Help Line and Help Line workers saying it is the community service centre. It is problematic.

In that question you talked about the role of case workers, and again I probably bored you by saying any number of times there must be clarity about the role of those case workers. In some circumstances it does not matter about the role, as long as there is clarity. I did talk about the complexities of melding a range of roles and it might be different in different parts of the State.

The other thing I say about community service centres is I think there should be a greater range of workers, rather than just having case workers. For example, in Queensland there are family resource workers and youth resource workers who are para-professionals who are able to offer some of the services to the families. Not all these families actually need a professional response, many have intense practical difficulties in their lives that can be helped, and I think some really problematic practice like employing non-professionals on a contract basis to deliver children, to contact with their parents for example, is intensely problematic. That reflects a non-professional view.

If a child needs to go to a parent, we will pay somebody in the community \$15 an hour to deliver the child and take the child home. Contact with the parent is an absolutely critical part of re-engaging that child with the family and assessing how things are going and making decisions, but it does not necessarily have to be the case worker. It can be a family resource worker who is engaged with a family who the child knows. If you have been abused by a parent, having a stranger take you to see that parent is a truly frightening thing. So you need a range of workers, and that is where we cannot necessarily recruit professionals. Fine, let us give them a different role that they are capable of. There are very many people who do not have degrees who are very capable but their capabilities lie in particular areas. I think they could look at different positions with different skill sets.

CHAIR: What exists to prevent that happening?

Ms PELTOLA: I have no idea.

CHAIR: Does it come back to the culture and the dysfunctionality and unwillingness to think through new ways of doing things?

Ms PELTOLA: I think so.

CHAIR: Is it a work practice problem? Are there staffing or union issues involved in a bigger range of jobs?

Ms PELTOLA: I am not sure. When I raised that with the department I was told that the non-Government sector has those positions and that is probably very important, but there are lots of activities that can occur within a community service centre by staff who are what I would call para-professionals. It is part of the deep mystery of bringing about change.

CHAIR: The family support network, would some of those workers be better located there, so that the Department of Community Services has the view that some of those things are done by the family support services?

Ms PELTOLA: They may well do.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Why could not you get these changes through? You said there is a good understanding now. What is wrong that you could not get these changes happening?

Ms PELTOLA: I am not sure what the situation is at the moment.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: When you were there, why could not you get them in?

Ms PELTOLA: All I can say is that there was a culture of chaos and that the main focus was about how the Department of Community Services looked, rather than more fundamental change. Fundamental change is a really difficult process and you are quite vulnerable during that process of change. The Department of Community Services needs to decide on its change regime and absolutely stick to it, and if something happens in

the media or some political process says look over here, if it is agreed that the Department of Community Services is doing A, it needs to do A and not be distracted by B and C and D.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Did you have trouble because you tried to keep focus on the changes you thought necessary?

Ms PELTOLA: That was my intention and capacity, to divert, and the Help Line was one of those major diversions for me. I basically spent two months of my life going to the Help Line every day.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You tried to fix that as your change agency?

Ms PELTOLA: I had a range of changes that I was working to. I felt that unless the Help Line worked there would be no basis for trust of the Department of Community Services, and that is exactly what happened. It has not worked and the Department of Community Services still has - there is distrust of the Department of Community Services.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You were blamed for that?

Ms PELTOLA: I was certainly seen to be part of it.

CHAIR: Can I interrupt at this point? We are not permitted to sit while the House is sitting. I know you have put quite a lot of work into preparing notes. Would it be possible for our Committee staff to talk to you about following up the areas that we have not touch on at all?

Ms PELTOLA: Yes.

CHAIR: Without putting you to a great deal of extra work, could we get some written things from you where you have prepared notes, or do it over the phone? Would that be okay with you?

Ms PELTOLA: I would be happy to do it over the phone. I am back in Western Australia tomorrow, so next week would suit me. I find it quite easy to put things on tape because I am a slow typist. Rather than undertake to do something which I may not then do, I would be a happy to put something on tape and send it to you and we could e-mail any directions.

CHAIR: We would be grateful if you could do that. So one of the staff will talk to you and perhaps identify the areas that you feel we did not get a chance to talk about.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 11 am)