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Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

ESTIMATES

(Supplementary Budget Estimates)

THURSDAY, 23 OCTOBER 2008

CANBERRA

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SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON**COMMUNITY AFFAIRS****Thursday, 23 October 2008**

Members: Senator Moore (*Chair*), Senator Siewert (*Deputy Chair*), and Senators Adams, Bilyk, Boyce, Carol Brown, Furner and Humphries

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Arbib, Barnett, Bernardi, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Brandis, Bob Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Ellison, Farrell, Feeney, Fielding, Fieravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Hurley, Hutchins, Johnston, Joyce, Kroger, Ludlam, Macdonald, Marshall, Mason, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Milne, Minchin, Nash, O'Brien, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Scullion, Stephens, Sterle, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

Senators in attendance: Senators Adams, Bernardi, Bilyk, Boswell, Boyce, Carol Brown, Conroy, Fielding, Fisher, Furner, Heffernan, Humphries, Ludlam, Lundy, McLucas, Moore, Parry, Payne, Polley, Scullion and Siewert

Committee met at 9.03 am

**FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS
PORTFOLIO****In Attendance**

Senator the Hon. Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship

Senator the Hon. Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Senator the Hon. Ursula Stephens, Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector, and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion

Senator the Hon. Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**Executive**

Dr Jeff Harmer, Secretary

Ms Glenys Beauchamp, Deputy Secretary

Mr Bernie Yates, Deputy Secretary

Ms Robyn McKay, Acting Deputy Secretary

Ms Peta Winzar, Acting Deputy Secretary

Mr Bruce Hunter, Acting Deputy Secretary, Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer

Group Managers

Ms Cate McKenzie, Group Manager, Women, Children and Parenting Support

Mr Evan Lewis, Group Manager, Mental Health, Autism and Community Support

Mr Barry Sandison, Group Manager, Families
Mr Steve Jennaway, Acting Group Manager, Business and Financial Services
Mr Sean Innis, Group Manager, Social Policy
Mr Tony Kwan, Chief Information Officer, Group Manager, Information Management and Technology
Mr Phil Brown, Acting Group Manager, Legal and Compliance
Mr Andrew Jagers, Acting Group Manager, Housing
Ms Donna Moody, Group Manager, Program Performance
Ms Frances Davies, Group Manager, Disability and Carers
Mr Robert Knapp, Group Manager, Corporate Support
Mr Nicholas G Hartland, Group Manager, Pension Review Taskforce

Cross Outcomes

Mr Stuart Long, Acting Branch Manager, Public Law
Dr Kim Vella, Acting Branch Manager, Budget Development
Dr Loucas Nicolaou, Branch Manager, Audit and Fraud
Ms Melissa Clode, Section Manager, Budget Strategy and Annual Report, Budget Development
Mr John Shevlin, Procurement and Risk Management
Mr Kurt Munro, Financial Accounting Branch
Mr Scott Dille, Branch Manager, Financial Management and Governance
Mr Wayne Cassidy, Branch Manager, Social Security Policy
Ms Michalina Stawyskyj, Branch Manager, International
Ms Carol Ey, Acting Branch Manager, Research and Analysis
Ms Jo Wallis, Procurement and Coordination Section Manager, Property Environment and Security
Mr Gary Michajlow, Remote Housing Section Manager, Property Environment and Security
Mr Andrew Lander, Branch Manager, Communication and Media
Ms Susan Black, Ministerial, Parliamentary and Secretariat Support
Mr Bryan Palmer, Branch Manager, Strategic Policy
Mrs Lynette Maclean, Branch Manager, People Branch
Mr Andrew W Whitecross, Branch Manager, Pension Review Taskforce
Ms Christine Williams, Branch Manager, Long Term Strategies Unit

Outcome 2—Seniors, people with disabilities, carers, youth and women are supported, recognised and encouraged to participate in the community**2.1 Support for the aged**

Mr Andrew W. Whitecross, Branch Manager, Pension Review Taskforce
Ms Alanna Foster, Branch Manager, Seniors and Means Test

2.2 Support for people with disability

Ms Christine Bruce, Branch Manager, Disability Participation and Reform
Ms Helen Bedford, Branch Manager, Disability Policy and Coordination
Ms Nicole Pearson, Branch Manager, Disability and Carers Payments
Ms Vicki Brown, Branch Manager, Autism Spectrum Disorder
Ms Lee Emerson, Branch Manager, Carers

Ms Carol Brain, Branch Manager, Mental Health

2.3 Support for carers

Ms Lee Emerson, Branch Manager, Carers

Ms Christine Bruce, Branch Manager, Disability Participation and Reform

2.4 Addressing youth homelessness

Ms Laura Beacroft, Branch Manager, Homelessness Taskforce

2.5 Support for women

Ms Sally Moyle, Branch Manager, Office for Women

Ms Janet Stodulka, Branch Manager, Office for Women

Outcome 3—Families and children have choices and opportunities

3.1 Support for families

Mr Ty Emerson, Branch Manager, Family Programs and Governance

Ms Fiona Smart, Branch Manager, Family Safety

Ms Robyn Fleming, Branch Manager, Family Relationship Services

Mr Mark Warburton, Branch Manager, Family Policy Development

Mr Gavin Matthews, Acting Branch Manager, Welfare Payments Reform

Ms Allyson Essex, Branch Manager, Children and Parenting Support

3.2 Child Support

Ms Pamela Kinnear, Branch Manager, Families Research and Data

Mr Ty Emerson, Branch Manager, Family Programs and Governance

Outcome 4—Strong and resilient communities

4.1 Housing Support

Ms Clare Wall, Branch Manager, Office of Housing

Ms Sue Ham, Acting Branch Manager, Affordable Housing

Ms Laura Beacroft, Acting Branch Manager, Homelessness Taskforce

4.2 Supporting Financial Management

Ms Jill Farrelly, Branch Manager, Community Support Programs

4.3 Community Recovery

Ms Beryl Janz, Branch Manager, Disaster Recovery

4.4 Community Partnership and Delivery

Ms Jill Farrelly, Branch Manager, Community Support Programs

Ms Beryl Janz, Branch Manager, Disaster Recovery

CHAIR (Senator Moore)—Good morning, everyone. I declare open this supplementary hearing of the Senate Community Affairs Committee considering the budget estimates for the portfolio of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The committee has before it a list of the outcomes relating to matters which senators have indicated that they wish to raise at this hearing. In accordance with standing orders relating to supplementary hearings, today's proceedings will be confined to matters within the relevant outcomes. Senators are reminded that written questions on notice in respect of these supplementary hearings must be lodged with the secretariat by the conclusion of the hearings—that is, close of business on Friday, 24 October 2008.

Under standing order 26, the committee must take all evidence in public session, and this includes answers to questions on notice. Officers and senators are well versed in the privilege protection and immunities and the scope of questioning for estimates. If you do need

reminding or want reminding, the secretariat has a copy of the usual rules applicable to estimates hearings. I do not propose to read them out, but I could.

I welcome Senator the Hon. Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship representing the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the departmental secretary, Dr Jeff Harmer, and officers of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Minister, do you wish to make an opening statement?

Senator Chris Evans—No, thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Harmer—Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wish to clarify our understanding of the proceedings today. First of all, just to make it clear, I have not got officers here today to cover outcome 1, output groups 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 and the Indigenous affairs aspects of output group 3.1, Support for families, which are subject to tomorrow's special hearing on Indigenous affairs. Officers will be available to the committee for questioning at tomorrow's hearing on all of those matters. Also in relation to today's hearing, we understand that the committee will consider output group 2.5, Support for women, at 11.30, as Senator Ursula Stephens will be in attendance for that. At the conclusion of output group 2.5, we will move to output group 4.1, Housing support, when Senator Jan McLucas will be in attendance. Also for the committee's information, Senator Evans will be with us today until the dinner break, after which time Senator Conroy will be joining us at the table.

The only other thing I would like to do is draw the committee's attention to the department's annual report, which was tabled on 14 October. We are very proud that we have been able to do that well before time and produce a very good report.

CHAIR—Congratulations, Dr Harmer. Thank you very much.

Senator Chris Evans—Chair, I suggest we hold the threat of Senator Conroy coming in over senators to keep them brief and moving along.

CHAIR—I think that is an incentive, Minister. I just want to confirm at this stage that I have had no requests for any other changes of order and it is the intention of the committee to move through the program in that way. We will commence with cross-outcomes and corporate matters. Are there any general questions for the department under this outcome? Senator Boswell.

Senator BOSWELL—I think the question I want to ask does come under this heading.

CHAIR—Give it a go, Senator Boswell.

Senator BOSWELL—I refer to planned changes to the adjustable taxable income definition that restricts eligibility for a range of assistance measures. We know from the past answers that the inclusion of salary sacrifice superannuation contributions and adjustable taxable income is expected to lead to reduced benefits for around 74,000 families receiving family tax benefits and 18,800 families in receipt of childcare benefits from 1 July 2009. The inclusion of the net investment losses in adjustable taxable income is expected to lead to reduced benefits for around another 20,100, and 12,700 will lose all their family tax benefits A and B. The question is: is it right that once they lose family tax benefit A, families cannot

get the education tax rebate or the \$1,000 per child benefit from the economic stimulus package?

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, is that this one or outcome 3?

Dr Harmer—I am sorry to let you go on with that long question but it will help my people because they now know the question, but it is in fact in 3.1.

CHAIR—That is what I thought.

Senator BOSWELL—Okay.

Dr Harmer—My people will have had a warning about that, so hopefully we will be able to give you some answers.

Senator BOSWELL—When is 3.1?

CHAIR—That is this evening, under Families, but we can contact your office then or, now that we know that that question is there, we can make sure somebody else asks it for you.

Senator BOSWELL—No, I will ask it myself.

CHAIR—I would not anticipate getting on to that particular outcome until after dinner.

Senator BOSWELL—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you, Senator Boswell. Any other general questions? I have to admit that I have not yet read your annual report, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—That is all right, Senator.

CHAIR—I hate to have to admit to that, but I have to. Does it have a current staffing level and an organisational chart for the whole department?

Dr Harmer—I am confident it does, yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. If there are no questions that we have identified as general questions, Dr Harmer, we will move on to 2.1, Support for the aged, but that is not to say we will not stray.

Senator BERNARDI—I should just make the point that we do have general questions on notice. We just do not need to cover them here.

[9.09 am]

CHAIR—Are there questions on 2.1, Support for the aged. Senator Adams.

Senator Chris Evans—Just give us a second while the officers come to the table, otherwise you will have to repeat it.

CHAIR—We have lost half the officers now. They are disappointed we have not had general questions.

Senator Chris Evans—Productivity in the department will improve, though!

Senator ADAMS—Good morning. Dr Harmer, thank you very much for that annual report because it was certainly welcome.

Dr Harmer—Thank you.

Senator ADAMS—The first question I would like to ask is on the age pension. In light of the general financial downturn and poorly performing superannuation funds, how many extra people have claimed the pension so far this financial year?

Dr Harmer—This financial year?

Senator ADAMS—Yes.

Dr Harmer—I will hand over to one of my colleagues, Senator, who may have that information with them. I hope they have. If we have, we could give it to you straight away.

Ms Foster—In the normal course of events we monitor the number of age pension commencements. This particular year there have been a number of factors that have changed in terms of policy settings and some quite major changes such as the halving of the assets test taper. Given recent economic developments we have been monitoring closely. At the moment it is not clear that there has been any increase in commencements as a result of the economic downturn. However, we can say that the number of age pension commencements in the past financial year was about 180,000.

Senator ADAMS—180,000 new ones?

Ms Foster—Yes, and most of that increase we would attribute to the halving of the assets test taper.

Senator ADAMS—Just in the last month or so you have not noted anything?

Ms Foster—We have not, not in terms of commencements.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you. How many new pensioners do you project will be added to the current number by the end of this financial year with the problems that I have just spoken about? Have you done any modelling or had any thought about the number that may come in?

Senator Chris Evans—I think that effectively asks the department to predict the future of the stock market for the rest of the financial year, and I do not think even the most experienced stockbroker does that with any confidence. I think we could certainly talk about deeming changes et cetera. I think the department could probably tell you what their expectations were based on growth in age of population. If you are asking what the impact of the financial crisis might be, clearly, if people lost a lot of money there might be more relying on the pension, but I do not think we would be able to help you with any sort of sensible prediction of any value till it becomes a bit clearer what the impacts are.

Dr Harmer—Senator Evans is absolutely right, we will not at this stage. We are obviously monitoring it, and we will be required as part of the budget for 2009 to produce an estimate for the number of pensioners we expect in 2009-10. It will be also in the MYEFO, I am advised. So we will be estimating, and of course in that estimation we will be taking into account policy changes, as Ms Foster has just talked about, but also potential impacts of the economy which might make more people eligible for pensions.

Mr Innis—Just to add to Dr Harmer's answer, when we do provide updates of estimates, which we do twice a year, we tend to focus on the dollar amounts rather than specifically customer amounts. So the published documentation always focuses on dollars rather than numbers.

Senator ADAMS—I am just wondering if there have been more requests coming in or people trying to get information about how they go about it if they have to go on the pension. Would that be a question for Centrelink?

Dr Harmer—We can certainly take on notice a question which asks, ‘Have there been more inquiries about eligibility for pensions?’ if you would like us to do that.

Senator ADAMS—That would be fine.

Mr Innes—Senator, I can give you an answer now. There has been an increase in inquiries to Centrelink about the age pension very, very recently and a small upturn. How that translates to actual grants of age pension is not clear yet.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you. Can I refer you to an article in the *Courier-Mail* on 17 October in which it was reported that the head of the federal government’s pension rates review is expected to recommend that single pensions increase to more than \$320 a week? If this was true, what would be the cost of this measure based on the current pension and numbers? Are you aware of that article?

Senator Chris Evans—The first question is: have you been leaking, Dr Harmer?

Dr Harmer—No, I have not. Senator, that was a press report. It was not based on any fact or anything that came from the department, and we have not costed, as we do not usually, a press report anticipating measures.

Senator ADAMS—No. The review is still due in February, isn’t not?

Dr Harmer—It is.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you for that. I think that is about all at the moment.

Dr Harmer—Senator, given we have been talking about pensions, a relevant issue that we are clearly monitoring is the deeming rate. This is one of the things that we have been anticipating and need to do some work on: our responsibility to make sure that the deeming rate is appropriate to the changed circumstances. So we have been working on that to make sure that we will be responding and making recommendations to the government in relation to the extent to which pensioners are disadvantaged by the changes in the economy, the reduction in their asset value or the reduction in the deposit returns they can get from savings—on the extent that the financial crisis impacts on pensioner finances.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you.

CHAIR—In what time frame, Dr Harmer?

Dr Harmer—We are constantly monitoring that, and we will be making recommendations or giving advice to the government as soon as we have sufficient evidence that there is a significant case.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Senator Siewert.

Senator SIEWERT—I noticed a report, which I do not know if you have seen, released by the University of Western Australia—and research in WA is always top quality—that indicated there had been a drop in the use of essential medicines by pensioners when the

copayment increased. Are you aware of that? Were you consulted in the study or have you looked into this issue?

Dr Harmer—I will let Mr Innis or Ms Foster answer the question. It would normally be something that the health department would focus on, but they may have contacted us.

Senator SIEWERT—I realise that it is an issue in terms of the cost of medicines, but it actually impacts on pensioners and pensioners' quality of life, so I am just wondering if it is been an issue that has been raised with you at all.

Mr Innis—Senator, not specifically with us. I am not sure, but we will check, whether anyone in the consultation process for the pension review has raised it. I am not aware of that being a significant issue that has been raised with us. If it is raised, it is likely to be direct either to Centrelink or to the health department. I can certainly check with our Centrelink colleagues whether they have seen a recent increase in the number of people asking about that issue.

Senator SIEWERT—It would be appreciated if you could.

Mr Innis—I would be happy to do that.

Senator SIEWERT—I realise that it crosses portfolios.

Mr Innis—Of course.

Senator SIEWERT—But it is an issue when we are talking about support for the aged. If it is a significant issue, it should be on the radar because they are saying that their use of particularly essential medicines like cholesterol-reducing, osteoporosis and asthma medicines has reduced, and all of those are important for people trying to survive on the pension. If you could take it on notice, that would be much appreciated. Thanks.

CHAIR—Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—Just a couple of brief questions. On the Christmas bonus figures of \$1,400 for singles and \$2,100 for couples announced for pensioners as part of the economic security strategy, why were these figures chosen?

Dr Harmer—A government decision, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—So you were just told; the government made the decision entirely?

Dr Harmer—The government makes the decision on amounts, as governments have in the past for those bonuses.

Senator BERNARDI—Was there any consultation with the department?

Dr Harmer—I was asked for advice.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, I think I can say that the minister has made it clear it was a policy decision and all the evidence from the Senate committee and from other sources was that single pensioners were doing it particularly hard.

Senator BERNARDI—I seem to recall saying that a few times myself in the Senate.

Senator Chris Evans—The minister has made it clear from the first day, I think, that she took the Senate's report seriously, and I have no doubt she paid attention to your views as well, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—I am sure she did.

Senator Chris Evans—But you will reflect, I think, that the single rate is 66 per cent of the couple rate. So there was, if you like, a policy decision to lean towards a greater than the double—

Senator BERNARDI—I accept that, but I just want to know why. Why was the rate of \$2,100 for couples chosen? What was the thinking that went into it?

Senator Chris Evans—I do not think I can help you much more in the sense that I was not personally involved in the decision but I know the minister has made it publicly clear that that was part of the thinking. But clearly the decision was taken by government to set those rates at what it thought was appropriate given general budgetary considerations, the need to stimulate the economy and the needs of pensioners and other recipients. The figure was a decision by government. What I can tell you is that that sort of emphasis on the ratio was based on the assessment about single pensioners.

Senator BERNARDI—I accept the decision about the ratio, but what advice, then, did the government ask for in regard to these figures?

Dr Harmer—Senator, I cannot tell you what advice they asked for, and I cannot tell you about the advice I gave, but what I can tell you about it is that I did give advice on our work on the pension review, which is progressing very well. We have finished the consultations around the country and finished receiving submissions. We are doing a lot of work. The minister asked me for advice, and I gave it.

Senator BERNARDI—Do these figures reflect the advice that you have given?

Dr Harmer—Senator, I cannot answer that.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, you have been around long enough to know you are not going to get that, and Dr Harmer has been around long enough to know that he will not give it.

Senator BERNARDI—I should wait for Senator Conroy. I might have get it through, you reckon?

Senator Chris Evans—I have spent years cross-examining Dr Harmer and he has never given it to me, so I would be very disappointed if he gave it to you.

Senator BERNARDI—Whilst I understand we are on support for the aged, I will telegraph a couple of questions because they are related to figures specifically on or about the Christmas bonuses that are being delivered. I am actually interested in exactly how many people or couples will be receiving the bonus in various categories, such as the aged, disability support—

Dr Harmer—If you want to give us the categories, Senator, we can probably give you those numbers today.

Senator BERNARDI—That is what I was hoping you would be able to do as we get on to disability support pensioners, carer allowance recipients.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator BERNARDI—There have been some general figures out there for couples, disability support pensioners and carer's allowance recipients.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator Bernardi, I will just check with Dr Harmer how we can best make that available most quickly.

Dr Harmer—We will likely be able to read it back into *Hansard* possibly this morning. If you give us precisely the categories you want, I suspect we will be able to give them to you this morning.

Senator BERNARDI—I am interested in how many disability—

Dr Harmer—We may able to do it now.

Senator Chris Evans—Has the officer got it with him?

Senator BERNARDI—I am happy to take the age pension recipients now.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the officer at the end might be able to give them to you as you go through, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Mr Whitecross, I am interested in how many age pension recipients will receive the singles bonus and how many age pension recipients will receive the couples bonus.

Mr Whitecross—These are approximate numbers, obviously, but about 910,000 would receive the single rate of the bonus and about 1.12 million people will receive the couple rate.

Senator BERNARDI—Which is 551,000 couples?

Mr Whitecross—Well, it is 1,051—1,050, so one—

Senator BERNARDI—Sorry, did you not say 1.12 million people would receive the couples bonus?

Mr Whitecross—Yes, that is right.

Senator BERNARDI—You have to divide that by two for couples.

Mr Whitecross—That is right, yes. One thousand are partnered, so it is 1,000—

Senator BERNARDI—The maths is pretty simple.

Senator SIEWERT—It is about 500,000.

Mr Whitecross—Yes, about 500,000, 550,000 couples.

Senator BERNARDI—About 550,000?

Mr Whitecross—Yes.

Mr Hartland—The maths is simple in a way, but there are some people who are on a couple rate where the other member of the couple is not eligible.

Mr Whitecross—Or is not an age pensioner.

Mr Hartland—So it is preferable to present it in the way that Mr Whitecross did.

Senator SIEWERT—As individuals.

Senator Chris Evans—I think in rough terms you are right, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—It is 550,000, more or less.

Mr Whitecross—As a rough rule of thumb, Senator, that is a reasonable way of going about it. It is just that age pensioners are not necessarily married to age pensioners. That is all.

Senator BERNARDI—So if you are married to someone who is not eligible, you receive the couple rate?

Mr Whitecross—You receive \$1,050.

Senator BERNARDI—Even though you are part of a couple?

Mr Whitecross—If only one member of the couple is eligible, you only receive half of the couple amount.

Senator BERNARDI—So you receive \$1,050. The other figures that I am interested in along a similar line are how many disability support pensioners will receive the singles bonus. You may like to take that and give it to me in the disability section, or you might like to give it to me now.

Mr Whitecross—Once again, these are best estimates. About 475,000 will receive the single rate and around 240,000 individuals will receive the couple rate.

Senator BERNARDI—How many carer allowance recipients will receive the singles bonus?

Mr Whitecross—A bit more than 45,000 would receive the single and about 85,000 couples. That is carer payments, sorry. That is the income support payment. I think you said—

Senator BERNARDI—I did say carer allowance.

Mr Whitecross—Carer allowance is the one that is paid to carers of a person with a disability. I would have to take it on notice to see if I could actually get a single-couple split on that. I am not sure that I can, because they will just receive an amount for each eligible person they care for, and the marital status is not a relevant consideration in eligibility for that payment.

Senator SIEWERT—Can you say those figures again, sorry?

Mr Whitecross—There are roughly 440,000 carer allowance recipients caring for roughly 470,000 eligible care receivers. So the carer allowance recipients would receive \$1,000 for each care—

Senator SIEWERT—Oh, okay, for each person they care for.

Mr Whitecross—Each care receiver.

CHAIR—Mr Whitecross, it might be useful, just to have it absolutely clear for everybody, if you could provide on notice these figures in the form you have done—what people are receiving and their status. I think it would be useful to have a table of that kind.

Mr Whitecross—Sure. I am happy to do that.

CHAIR—Then there will be no confusion.

Mr Whitecross—Yes.

CHAIR—Go ahead, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—And for the carer payment recipients as well.

Mr Whitecross—They were the numbers I gave a second ago.

Senator SIEWERT—It was the 45,000.

Senator BERNARDI—Four hundred and forty.

Mr Whitecross—No, the 45,000 and—

Senator BERNARDI—And the 85,000.

Mr Whitecross—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—They are carer payments?

Mr Whitecross—Yes. That is a pension payment.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Mr Whitecross—A carer payment.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. It would be appreciated if you could table those in that manner.

Mr Whitecross—Sure.

Senator BERNARDI—I just have a couple of questions on the pension review. Dr Harmer, you suggested that the pension review consultations had concluded?

Dr Harmer—Our public consultations have concluded and we have now, I think, received all of the submissions. We are busily analysing those.

Senator BERNARDI—Were all state capitals visited as part of the review?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—And how many regional centres?

Dr Harmer—Three regional centres: Newcastle, Wangaratta and Rockhampton, I think.

Senator BERNARDI—Is that right? No other regional centres?

Dr Harmer—No.

Senator BERNARDI—What decision was made not to visit any other regional centres? Why was that decision taken?

Dr Harmer—We have a very small team doing this. We wanted to spend a lot of time evaluating the submissions, which were open to anyone in the country. How many submissions did we get, Nick?

Mr Hartland—Eighteen hundred.

Dr Harmer—Eighteen hundred submissions—so people have been very engaged with providing us with information, but it is really a matter of timing and resourcing, and we have to put in our best effort.

Senator BERNARDI—Do you know how many people attended these consultations?

Dr Harmer—We do, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Could you tell me, please.

Dr Harmer—I do not know whether we have brought it with us, but if we have it we will give it to you during the morning. We will have a number, because we were asked for registration.

Mr Hartland—We do have that: 474.

Senator BERNARDI—Four hundred and seventy-four attended the public consultations. Did you keep records of how many of these people were actually in receipt of pensions themselves?

Mr Hartland—No, we did not.

Senator BERNARDI—Do you have any idea of how many were disability support pensioners or carers or age pensioners?

Dr Harmer—We do not, I do not think. I will let Mr Hartland correct me if I am wrong. I do not think we asked whether they were on a pension or, if they were, which one, but I only attended the two big ones in Sydney and Melbourne. I am very confident we had representatives from the age pension groups, certainly singles and couples. We had disability support pensioners there, and, of course, we had carers there as well. So we had the three key groups that are in my terms of reference.

Senator BERNARDI—So you do not have a proportion. You have received 1,800 submissions. Have you categorised those by pension type?

Dr Harmer—No. Well, we may have for analysis. Many of the submissions deal with all of the types, because they come from bodies or organisations that are interested in the pensions generally. Of course, we got a lot from individuals, and the individual submissions are likely to deal with the particular pension that the person is on.

Mr Hartland—In the analysis of the submissions we have recorded the pension type where it has been identified, but, of course, not all people writing in identify themselves in relation to a pension.

Senator BERNARDI—Would you be able to provide the information that you know, then, in regard to the 1,800 submissions about how many you have categorised?

Mr Hartland—We have some results for the first thousand. We have been able to identify about 50 per cent as age pensioners, 13 per cent on DSP and three per cent on carer payment. But, as I said, we did not set requirements in the public consultation, written feedback or in relation to providing a written submission that people identify themselves in relation to their payment type. This is just to get a feel for the weight of the submissions. It is not precise.

Senator BERNARDI—I understand that, and I accept that. But a thousand is a reasonably representative sample, one would guess. Are these figures that you have given me, the 50 per cent, the 13 per cent and the three per cent, reflective of pension recipients?

Mr Hartland—You mean in terms of numbers? Mr Whitecross's mental arithmetic is better than mine.

Mr Whitecross—Fifty per cent is broadly representative of the proportion of pension recipients. It is probably a little bit higher than their proportion of the population. I think there are about two million age pensioners and there are about 3½ million pensioners, 4½ million income support recipients, so it is in the order of—

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, okay. So it is around—

Mr Whitecross—It is in the right ballpark.

Senator BERNARDI—And what about carers? There were three per cent of submissions from carers?

Mr Whitecross—That sounds about right, and so does the DSP. They all sound about proportional to the representation in the population. Another eight per cent of people put in submissions identified as receiving an income support payment but did not specify which one, so some of them may have been in those groups as well.

Senator BERNARDI—What about the other 25-odd per cent?

Mr Whitecross—Well, we could not tell anything about 20 per cent of them, so we do not know what their situation is.

Senator BERNARDI—Sorry, what, then, is the difference between them and the eight per cent that you just talked about?

Mr Whitecross—The eight per cent is explicitly identified as receiving an income support payment, but they did not give us sufficient information to tell which one they were on. That is all.

Dr Harmer—And the other groups in there would include some who are on a pension and others who just have an interest in the review who may or may not be on the income support payment: it may be parents or children of someone on a payment; it may be an organisation that represents pensioner groups.

Mr Whitecross—There were about three per cent of submissions from self-funded retirees.

Senator BERNARDI—Are the submissions going to be publicly available, or are they publicly available?

Mr Hartland—We are not anticipating making the submissions publicly available. When we asked for submissions we did not identify that we would publish them, so we feel that might be unfair on people who provided them to us. A number of organisations have already put their submissions into the public domain, in any event.

Dr Harmer—And many of the submissions are individual. You could almost call them letters. Some are substantial submissions, some are a letter, and, given that we did not inform them in advance, it would not be appropriate to make those public.

Senator BERNARDI—There are a dozen or so members of the reference group. Did they all attend the consultations?

Dr Harmer—A number of them did attend various consultations when they were able to, but I do not think we could say that they all—

Mr Hartland—Not all of them were able to attend because of their other commitments.

Senator BERNARDI—Did every individual member of the consultation group attend at least one of the hearings?

Dr Harmer—I am not sure. We might take that on notice.

Mr Hartland—We would have to double-check it.

Senator BERNARDI—I would be interested in knowing how many of them attended—four or three or two.

Dr Harmer—We will take it on notice whether they have attended one, but certainly—

Senator BERNARDI—I would like to know more than that actually. I would like to know how many of them and who attended more than one. You could break it down by individual, couldn't you, and say: 'They attended four; they attended two'?

Dr Harmer—We will have a look at that.

Senator BERNARDI—It should be pretty straightforward, shouldn't it?

Dr Harmer—Yes, it should be. We did require registration for those who were coming along. I am not sure whether we recorded everyone who attended, including the panel members, but we will do our best to give you that.

Mr Hartland—We might have to make some inquiries. Those of us up the front did not necessarily see everybody in the audience.

Senator BERNARDI—But the panel members are remunerated, are they, for this process?

Mr Hartland—Yes, but I do not believe we provided sitting fees for attending the public consultation.

Dr Harmer—No, I do not think we did. We will check that, but I do not think we did.

Senator BERNARDI—I would guess the most basic premise is you have to know who attended. It should not be too hard. I would be disappointed if you did not know who attended.

Dr Harmer—We may, but we would not necessarily have it with us. We will do our best to get it for you.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I accept that, but I would like it at a reasonable time, if that is okay.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator BERNARDI—Did Minister Macklin attend any of these consultations?

Dr Harmer—I do not think so, no.

Senator BERNARDI—She did not attend any? The biggest review of pensions, and she did not attend any?

Dr Harmer—Minister Macklin is frequently meeting with pensioner groups all around the country and in her office here in Canberra. There is no shortage of contact between various pensioner groups and the minister, I can assure you.

Senator BERNARDI—Did any member of parliament—

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, it was a formal inquiry established by government, but I think you would be complaining if we were interfering in it by the minister being there. I think it is perfectly appropriate that—

Senator BERNARDI—Oh, you would be surprised!

Senator Chris Evans—the inquiry go about its work. As Dr Harmer indicated, I got into trouble for calling Minister Macklin an Energiser bunny, but there is no doubt she is actively involved in her portfolio and would be meeting pensioners weekly, if not daily. So I think you will find she is well across the issues.

Senator BERNARDI—Did any members of parliament, then, attend any of the hearings?

Dr Harmer—I do not think any members of parliament on either side of politics attended the consultations. We would check that, again, for you, but I do not think so.

CHAIR—I was going to and then could not, and people from my office attended.

Senator BERNARDI—But that would have been appropriate for you to attend that, Senator Moore.

Dr Harmer—We will need to double-check that again. I am not 100 per cent sure about that.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. If you could take that on notice, I would appreciate it.

Ms McKay—I just wanted to clarify, Senator Bernardi, that there were members of staff of politicians that attended the consultations, or at least some of them.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Thank you, Chair. I have nothing further.

CHAIR—Senator Adams.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you. One of my constituents has brought to my attention that the federal government—and, Minister, you might be interested in this—provides a single refugee with a monthly allowance of \$1,890 and each refugee can get an additional \$580, so they get a total of \$2,470 per month, and a single Australian pensioner, after contributing to the growth and development of Australia for 40 to 50 years, receives only a monthly maximum of \$1,012 in old age pension and the guaranteed income supplement. I think a statement like that really does show that we perhaps need to do something more for our pensioners. Coming back to the Christmas bonus, I was quite amazed to find out that if people were not in the system by Tuesday, 14 October, pensioners would not be eligible for the bonus

and that the public were made aware of this on 13 October. So is it true that a number of pensioners will miss out on this bonus?

Mr Hartland—No, Senator. Everybody who is eligible on 14 October will receive a bonus.

Senator ADAMS—But would there be other people who could have applied if they had been given more time than one day?

Senator Chris Evans—Do you mean apply for the pension?

Dr Harmer—Senator, the eligibility—

Senator ADAMS—They had to be actually in the system, obviously, and they had one day to actually apply for the bonus.

Senator Chris Evans—You do not apply for the bonus, though.

Mr Whitecross—Senator, you do not have to apply for the bonus. The bonus is paid to eligible income support pension recipients. So provided that you have exercised your right to claim the relevant pension, whether it is the age pension or some other pension, you would be eligible for the bonus. Obviously, if individuals have not claimed a payment, then they are not eligible for the bonus payment.

Dr Harmer—Senator, this is not the first time that a bonus has been paid. They have been paid for a number of years, and the same rules in terms of eligibility at a point in time applied for the previous five or so years that a bonus has been paid as apply for this one.

Senator ADAMS—How long does it take for someone out of the process to apply for a pension? Given the way the financial situation has changed, if somebody's super has gone and their other financial arrangements have left them below the threshold all of a sudden so that they need to apply for a pension, how long does it take for that process?

Mr Whitecross—Senator, I will check with one of my colleagues what the Centrelink standard is for processing a pension claim. It does vary depending on what kind of pension they claim, but the grant of pension would be backdated to the date that they commenced the process of claiming a pension. So if they had begun the process prior to the 14th and there was subsequently granted and payable an instalment of pension in respect of a period, including the 14th, then they would be eligible for this payment.

Senator ADAMS—But can you tell me how long it takes?

Mr Whitecross—Okay.

Senator ADAMS—If I want to get the pension I go to the office and apply. How long—

Dr Harmer—Senator, we will try to answer that question. It is obviously something that is administered by Centrelink, but we probably have some information about the average length of time from application to granting.

Mr Innis—After the secretary has indicated we do have information, I do not have any available. It is something that is within the remit of the Department of Human Services and Centrelink, but we will endeavour to find out what the average processing time is for you and come back while we are in session.

Mr Hartland—Senator, when you approach Centrelink and make an application for payment, and this is across all of the payments, at that point sometimes you have all the information that Centrelink requires to determine your eligibility, and that can be done very, very quickly, on the same day. If you do not, then you might have to go away and get some more information, or Centrelink might have to make some other inquiries. If that takes a period of time, then your application will be granted from the time you first approached Centrelink.

Senator ADAMS—All right.

Mr Hartland—So the fact is that you may need to gather information and it may take some time. There are standards that we ask Centrelink to meet in relation to doing that quickly, because obviously people who approach Centrelink need support, but the fact that it might take some time to finalise that application does not actually affect when your payment starts. Your payment will start from the time you first approach Centrelink.

Senator ADAMS—All right. Thank you. That is good.

Mr Innis—A little earlier in the hearing an email was referred to about humanitarian entrants.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Innis. I was hoping you would pick up on that.

Mr Innis—Whilst I do not have details available, we do provide additional assistance to humanitarian entrants when they first arrive in the country. I am not aware of it being in the form of large payments, though, and we would need to check to determine the accuracy of the facts in the email Senator Adams referred to. But I do not think we can assume that that is correct. It is correct to assume that it is a payment.

CHAIR—Senator Adams, are you prepared to put the email before the department so they can verify the figures?

Senator ADAMS—I can certainly do that.

Senator Chris Evans—This is not the hoax email that has been circulating about the—

CHAIR—I think it is, Senator. We need to get it.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator Adams, there has been a hoax email circulating for months, which I think originated in Canada. It claims refugees are paid more than pensioners and double the rates and all this stuff.

Senator ADAMS—Well, that is possibly where it has come from.

Senator Chris Evans—If that is the one, it has been a hoax.

Senator ADAMS—It is not that email; it is an email from a constituent but—

Senator Chris Evans—It has been going around the system for months. I have been trying to advise senators and members that it is a hoax. The department has been writing to papers trying to deal with it. It is a complete nonsense. I can certainly get you the information on settlement payments for humanitarian refugees et cetera. It is a very upsetting email, but it is completely wrong.

Senator BERNARDI—Just concerning this, Minister, I have quite a genuine request. Why does the government or the department not provide a standard response that is non-partisan so that we can respond, because I write back to people and say, 'This is not true,' if constituents do it.

Senator Chris Evans—I have certainly got a response, Senator. I can get the immigration and communications unit to give you the details. We have been—

Senator BERNARDI—I know you have been out there saying it is a hoax and all of that.

Senator Chris Evans—The communications unit of the department has been going on radio, writing to papers, making themselves available everywhere to do it. Certainly if you want some information—as I say, it has been published in the papers—I will undertake to circulate to all members and senators the proper reply.

Senator ADAMS—Thanks, Minister. I appreciate that.

CHAIR—Are there any other questions on support for the aged?

Senator BERNARDI—I would be interested to know the remuneration afforded to people on the pension review reference group. I know it is in keeping with part-time officeholders and things, but I have not looked it up. I am just interested to know what it is.

Dr Harmer—We can provide that to you.

Mr Hartland—Senator, we have a Remuneration Tribunal determination. They get sitting fees of \$531 a day. We pay for their accommodation and travel expenses to come to meetings as well.

Senator BERNARDI—When you say you pay for accommodation and travel expenses, do they get a travel allowance or do you actually book the accommodation and give them—

Mr Hartland—We book, I believe.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you.

Senator Chris Evans—Madam Chair, just while we are changing over, can I offer the table the standard response we have about the refugee payments in response to the email. We have been providing that, as I understand, to anyone who has asked for it and using it as the basis for letters and responses. I thought we had circulated it fairly widely. I am just checking that, but I will table that. I will also take up, if we have not done so already, advice to all members and senators.

[9.50 am]

CHAIR—Any more questions on that portfolio outcome? We will now move to 2.2—Support for people with disability.

Senator BERNARDI—Minister, the government announced a national people with disabilities and carers council was going to be formed. Can you confirm that this replaces the Carers Ministerial Advisory Council?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. What was the reason for replacing the Carers Ministerial Advisory Council with a new council?

Ms Beauchamp—The previous council was formed under the previous government with different priorities. This government has a number of priorities around disability and carers, and it was actually increased and strengthened, particularly to support the development of the National Disability Strategy.

Senator BERNARDI—There are 28 members of this council, I believe.

Ms Davies—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—What is the remuneration of these 28 members?

Ms Bedford—The remuneration is set by the Remuneration Tribunal. If you just give me a minute I will find it for you. The chair receives \$597 per day sitting fees, members receive \$531 per day, and that is in accordance with payments based on the Remuneration Tribunal's determination 2004-03 and 2008-07.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure. And they receive travel and accommodation as required as well?

Ms Bedford—Yes, in accordance with the Remuneration Tribunal.

Senator BERNARDI—Which is a travel allowance, or do you book and pay for their accommodation?

Ms Bedford—We book and pay for their accommodation, but they also get a travel allowance.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. The council had its first meeting on 3 September. Is that correct?

Ms Bedford—Yes. It is also meeting today and tomorrow in Melbourne.

Senator BERNARDI—What is the expectation of how often the council will hold meetings?

Ms Bedford—It is the expectation that the council will meet probably monthly or reasonably frequently while we are out consulting around the National Disability Strategy. It is also expected that there may be some teleconference meetings to progress work and maybe some out-of-session work.

Senator BERNARDI—But there is no formalised agenda for it; there is no requirement to have a minimum number of meetings or anything else?

Ms Bedford—Not that I know, no.

Senator BERNARDI—So who is responsible, then, for determining that a meeting is necessary? Is it the chair in consultation with the department?

Ms Bedford—And with the minister and the parliamentary secretary. The council reports quarterly or at the minister's discretion on its progress.

Senator BERNARDI—But no less than quarterly?

Ms Bedford—Or at the minister's direction.

Senator BERNARDI—So the minister could say, 'No, we only want to have a half-yearly report'?

Ms Beauchamp—I think during the time we are going through the consultation process on the National Disability Strategy the chair will provide ongoing reports and updates to the parliamentary secretary on how things are going. There is an intensive piece of work over the next little while around the National Disability Strategy consultations.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I just wanted to make sure that the parliamentary secretary could not say, 'I do not want a quarterly report,' could he?

Ms Beauchamp—He is not likely to.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I am sure he is not likely to, but all sorts of strange things happen in government occasionally. But that is not the case, is it?

Ms Beauchamp—No.

Senator BERNARDI—Part of their mandate is that they have to report quarterly?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—And additionally if that parliamentary secretary requests, or the minister?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—You mentioned before about the National Disability Strategy. The individual members of the council are free to make contributions to that as well, outside of their role as council members? Is that correct?

Ms Bedford—Yes. The council also has indicated an interest in attending the consultation sessions. So we will be able to assist other people providing their input into that as well, so seek other people from the disability communities and assist them through that process to provide submissions or input into that. So they are a very important part of the consultations on the strategy development.

Senator BERNARDI—Is there a reasonable concern that if the council is going to be making a consensus advice to the government and give the advice to the government, not all members of the council would agree probably with that advice, because they have individual efforts? If the council is making a contribution to the National Disability Strategy, could not the council's work actually be compromised a little bit if the individual members are out there freelancing and submitting independent opinions?

Ms Davies—The National Disability Strategy is a national strategy, so there are a number of players who will contribute—the commonwealth government and its departments, state governments and their jurisdictions—and the council is one of the important contributors to the likely outcome of that strategy.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, but it still does not answer my question. Is there not a potential for the council to be providing general advice or making a contribution and that individuals, who comprise the council, to be making conflicting recommendations?

Ms Davies—I think it is unlikely that, in the development of any national strategy where you have advisory bodies, especially large ones, you would get 100 per cent agreement on the

content. This is about trying to accommodate as many views and come up with a strategy that people are generally content with.

Senator BERNARDI—Which does not answer my question. There is a potential, then, for conflict, is there not?

Ms Davies—There is a potential for people not to have unanimous views on all aspects of all details.

Dr Harmer—I think I know what you are saying, but there is no difference from any other advisory group or mechanism. For example, even our pensioner reference group, just going back to the previous discussion, is a very useful review reference group, but they would not necessarily all agree on everything. We do not feel, nor, I suspect, does the minister or the parliamentary secretary feel, that they can fetter their private opinions outside that context. So there is nothing terribly unusual about that. It is still, I think the minister and the parliamentary secretary would believe, a very useful forum for discussion and to provide one element of the necessary advice to government.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I accept that there is value in having it, but also I do see that there is the potential to undermine, for want of a better word, the general consensus of the council. If it makes a recommendation X and one or more members of that council then say, 'Well, no, we recommend recommendation Y,' does that not diminish the contribution of the council? That might be a good thing.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, I do not think anyone is frightened by a diversity of views. It is the great strength of our democracy, the great strength of this sort of process. But the bottom line is that the government will make the decision. I am not referring to this inquiry, but, as you know, governments sometimes accept the advice, reject the advice or take bits and leave other bits. At the end of the day this is to gather community views, to give people with an interest the chance to have an informed discussion and debate and provide advice to government, but you have to be clear that at the end of the day the government will make the decision. But a diversity of views, a healthy debate within the process, quite frankly, I find highly useful.

Senator BERNARDI—As I said, Minister, it might actually be a good thing.

Senator Chris Evans—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—But I just wondered whether consideration had been given to it, and clearly there has been some consideration.

Ms Beauchamp—The attraction was around the diversity of backgrounds and views on the council. In my participation in those discussions I have certainly found no shy and retiring members; they are quite happy to put forward their views. One of the attractions in terms of participation is working through the issues that have been raised by members.

Senator BERNARDI—Ms Beauchamp, I have met with some of them. I can confirm that the ones I have met with are not shy and retiring.

CHAIR—Ms Beauchamp, in terms of membership, there is no requirement when people become members of these committees that they are limited in their ability to speak publicly about issues or to have opinions? There is nothing that stops people doing that?

Ms Beauchamp—Certainly not, and in this particular case they have been encouraged to consult widely within their states and territories and, I think, gather the views and contributions of a range of people.

CHAIR—And that is a standard process for any of these advisory committees?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—The National Disability Awards occur in December, I think, of every year.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes, that is correct—international.

Senator BERNARDI—What is the budget? There is actually a budget for this year's awards. I am interested in how it compares with last year. It is a pretty straightforward question.

Ms Bedford—It is the same as last year, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—No increase; no account for the rising cost of living, you say, with the massive five per cent inflation rate that is befalling us all!

Ms Bedford—We got the contract signed early. In 2007 the estimated budget was \$495,000, and the estimated budget for this year was \$496,000.

Senator BERNARDI—Oh, so you have accounted for the cost of living increases?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—What does that go to? Does it pay for people to attend?

Ms Bedford—It pays for the people with disability and their carers, where necessary, to attend; it pays for the organisation of the event and the community service announcements. There have been ads on free-to-air television and in some print media.

Senator BERNARDI—Sorry to interrupt, but do you pay—

Ms Bedford—It pays for the developments and the filming of those and then they—

Senator BERNARDI—They are put on for free?

Ms Bedford—Yes. And for some of the public relations-type roles. We have disability ambassadors so that they can get out and meet people and progress their work; awareness raising and profiling of the disability stories in the media, so their story is developed to highlight achievements around disability; and some promotional products, balloons and wrist bands and things like that.

Senator BERNARDI—So that \$496,000 is allocated into cost centres, I guess?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Would you be able to table a breakdown of how that \$496,000 is spent?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Ms Davies—We can table that now for you, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—That would be fine. It does not have to be now but at some point.

Ms Bedford—I have written on it.

Ms Davies—You have got a copy.

Ms Bedford—And there is also—I did not talk about this—a call centre so that people can register events and register for interest around that.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. I would like to turn your mind now to the Helping Children With Autism package.

Senator BERNARDI—Welcome, Ms Brown. I would like you to be overly helpful, once again, if you would not mind.

Senator Chris Evans—You are supposed to say that. It is a good thing to say.

Senator BERNARDI—I should not say I am surprised to see you back, but I do appreciate your forthrightness and cooperation.

CHAIR—Good luck, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—On 25 June this year—I will address this to you, Dr Harmer—the government announced \$12,000 funding over two years for eligible families with a child with autism spectrum disorder. The media release said it was up to \$12,000. That clearly implies, and I am asking if it is true, that some families will actually receive less than \$12,000 over two years.

Ms Brown—That may be the case, Senator, but, generally, children lose eligibility, for example, by turning seven, because the package is only available for children zero to six. If they have gone to formal compulsory schooling, then they also lose eligibility for the package.

Senator BERNARDI—So if they go to school when they are five, they lose eligibility for the package?

Ms Brown—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—So between five and seven it is only those who are unable to attend a regular school or any sort of educational institution?

Ms Brown—It is normal, full-time compulsory schooling.

Senator BERNARDI—If they can attend part time they would still be eligible?

Ms Brown—If they are going to compulsory formal schooling, then they are no longer eligible for funding under the package.

Senator BERNARDI—There is a transition period, I guess, where a child with ASD could attend school as part of a process or a program to help them develop. In that case they would lose eligibility for the funding.

Ms Brown—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Even if it was just a morning a week?

Ms Brown—I think we might need to check that. My understanding is that the criteria are that once a child goes to normal formal compulsory schooling they will then lose eligibility for the package.

Senator BERNARDI—I would like you to check that.

Mr Lewis—The system relies on people being at school and the whole school system cutting in. It is my understanding that they are still eligible if they are at school part time, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Would you be able to confirm that?

Mr Lewis—We will confirm that, but that is the short answer.

Senator BERNARDI—How was the \$12,000 figure decided upon?

Ms Brown—The \$12,000 figure was decided upon based on the number of people that we anticipated would fall into the category of children zero to six that were diagnosed, and that was also based on carer allowance data, where people have indicated that the reason they are seeking a carer's allowance is because they are looking after a child with autism.

Senator BERNARDI—So a pot of money was allocated, for want of better words, and then it was determined how many people that would be expected to support? That is how the figure was derived. Would that be right?

Ms Brown—Yes, that is right, Senator. Obviously we needed to make those estimations. A figure of \$90,000 has been allocated for the early intervention component.

Senator BERNARDI—It just goes to process that. If the government made that decision of allocating x million dollars, it was not predetermined by the actual need or the cost of supplying services to individual families; they just said, 'Well, here is a chunk of money. Do what you can with it'?

Ms Brown—There were limited funds, a limited envelope available for the package, but after consultation with a wide range of stakeholders our focus has been on the early intervention component.

Senator BERNARDI—But the limited funds, and I accept there are limited funds—there are limits on everything—were not determined by the requirements of the families; it was an arbitrary figure that was determined and then it was decided how much you could give to each family or each child?

Mr Lewis—Senator, the fund package was a decision of the previous government. The envelope was revisited in terms of how best to use the money as part of the early work, and the estimation, as Ms Brown has given you, was based on the potential number of people who would access the service. If it turns out that people do not access it to the extent that we are estimating, then there may be some provision for flexibility within that envelope. In addition to the \$12,000, which is \$6,000 per annum, there is a \$2,000 remote allowance on top of that for families who have difficulty accessing services in their region. So, yes, the figures are in a certain envelope at this time and the money has been distributed on best knowledge available. Obviously, it is up to the government how it chooses to do that, and going forward I am sure it will be looking at this program and the take-up rate very closely.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, I accept that, and I also accept that the support for autism package was announced by the previous government as well.

Mr Lewis—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—But there are slight differences in it, and I am just going to this package that was announced under this government. This government has announced that the early intervention component will be rolled out from 27 October. Does that mean that eligible families will receive money, or the funding, soon after that, and how soon after that?

Mr Lewis—My understanding is that the programs will be available from 27 October, so, in that sense, yes. As soon as they have gone to see their autism adviser to get some sort of advice on the most appropriate range of services that would be most useful for their child or their family, they can start accessing those services. So that is Monday week, Monday next week.

Senator BERNARDI—They have to visit with their autism adviser?

Mr Lewis—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Does that mean it is theirs or is it one that is mandated by the government?

Ms Brown—We have gone through a process to select who will be the autism advisers, and the people that will be available will be in the peak autism associations across the country. They will be providing those autism advisory services. Parents who already have a diagnosis or receive a new diagnosis over the course of the program will need to see their autism adviser. Basically the adviser is the gateway or the entry point into the package. So they need to receive that advice from their adviser about what service is available and which providers will be funded by the government. Then families can choose which provider suits their particular child's needs and see the provider. Then FaHCSIA will reimburse the provider up to the amount of the \$12,000 over the two-year period.

Senator BERNARDI—But it is one of the approved advisers in the initial instance approved by the government?

Mr Lewis—As you can understand, Senator, one of the key things that was significant was to make sure that the service range and quality were appropriate and that there was some sort of accreditation aspect to it. So, yes, these advisers will be ones that have been screened and that have appropriate advice.

Senator BERNARDI—How many of these advisers are there going to be?

Ms Brown—There will be up to the equivalent of 40 full-time advisers.

Senator BERNARDI—Up to the equivalent?

Ms Brown—Well, we do not know exactly because we are still in the process of finalising agreements with the associations.

Senator BERNARDI—This starts on 27 October.

Ms Brown—It does.

Senator BERNARDI—On 27 October how many will be available?

Ms Brown—We have already signed agreements with five of the eight autism associations, and we expect to finalise the remaining three in the next couple of days.

Senator BERNARDI—So how many autism advisers will be available for people on the 27th who are desperate for this service to ring up and make an appointment with?

Mr Lewis—The intent is that in the original round there will be 32 available from 27 October, but you could understand that some of the organisations as they employ people and bring them on line may be not as speedy. That is our estimation from the 27th, but 32 is the target.

Senator BERNARDI—And these would be 32 full time, or would they be part-time people?

Mr Lewis—Full-time equivalent. Coming back to the number of 40 that you asked about, there is nothing to stop an organisation using the money creatively and saying, 'Well, okay, we have funding for six or seven if we get part timers.' Often you get some sort of synergy in a part-time arrangement and get more for your money.

Senator BERNARDI—But you have told me that 32 full-time equivalent people are expected to be available. There could be 32 people working part time and the other positions have not quite been filled. You have just funded 32 full-time positions.

Mr Lewis—That is possible initially on day one, but the intent is to have 32 full time. As with any organisation that uses its money flexibly and gets paid to provide a service, the way that the organisation employs people is not something that we would determine down to the micro detail.

Senator BERNARDI—But do you not think you should know?

Dr Harmer—Senator, we do know. Mr Lewis has just said there will be 32 full-time equivalents from the 27th.

Senator BERNARDI—You will be funding 32 full-time equivalents.

Dr Harmer—Yes. And we will be expecting the funded organisation to deliver what we have funded, and we will be monitoring it.

Senator BERNARDI—Each funding of each full-time equivalent staff member or adviser is on an annual basis? Is that right?

Mr Lewis—We have funded each organisation with an annual quantum into the next three years to provide, as Dr Harmer has said, a number of services or providers. How many they have on deck at any given time—we cannot determine the job market down to the micro detail. A company or a provider that you engage with will have ons and offs. We cannot guarantee that they will have five on one day or 10 on the next month. People have life issues that sometimes mean they are not continuing.

Senator BERNARDI—But potentially they could put on the bare minimum on 27 October and backload it and put on lots of part timers in six or eight months time.

Mr Lewis—We will be keeping an eye on it, Senator. That is how we do it.

Senator BERNARDI—But you cannot micromanage it.

Mr Lewis—No, we will keep an eye on it.

Dr Harmer—But we will monitor it.

Mr Lewis—We will monitor the contract.

Senator BERNARDI—I would be interested to know how many people on 27 October are actually going to be available for consultation, because—

Senator Chris Evans—I think we are going to have to take that on notice. The department has made it clear to you 32 full-time equivalents—

Senator BERNARDI—Have been funded.

Senator Chris Evans—There is a contract with organisations. Organisations do great work in the community. They are gearing up. We will be able, if you like, to do a post-match analysis to see how many people were answering the phone on that first day, but they are obviously very keen to get on with the job. There is a huge unmet demand, which governments of both persuasions have acknowledged. The system will be in place from next Monday. It will no doubt ramp up. But all the officer can tell you at the moment is that he expects 32 FTEs to be available from Monday and provided for. At the next estimates or on notice he can probably tell you how many people were at their desks, as best he can, but he is not going to be able to tell you that today.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I understand that, but I am just trying to get to the strength of this.

Dr Harmer—Senator, my team are busy now, but we could possibly make some contact and give you an estimate of how many we today expect will be in place on Monday, if that would help.

Senator BERNARDI—It would be helpful.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, it might be useful in terms of the question to find out what the monitoring process is and whether you have a monitoring strategy.

Dr Harmer—We do have one and we can make that available.

Senator BERNARDI—Going back to the families and the \$12,000 funding, it is \$6,000 per annum for two years? Is that right? Up to?

Ms Brown—It is up to \$6,000 per financial year.

Senator BERNARDI—How will families receive this payment?

Ms Brown—Families actually choose the provider from the panel of providers. They choose which provider they want to attend. The provider actually invoices the department, and then we fund the provider.

Senator BERNARDI—So the families do not receive it directly; the service providers do?

Ms Brown—They do not receive cash in the hand, no.

Senator BERNARDI—And clearly there is a panel of approved providers. Are there limits to the services that families can spend this on?

Ms Brown—Yes. We have gone through a process of selecting providers to be on a panel, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Not just the providers but, I guess, the services, because you might have an autism association that provides a broad range of services related to ASD. Are there any limits on the services that the panel can provide?

Ms Brown—Yes, there are. One of the requirements is that they provide for or have available a multidisciplinary team and that they have approved early intervention types of services available, yes. So we will only be funding those approved early interventions, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Does the funding go to diagnosis as well or do you have to be diagnosed as having a child with ASD?

Ms Brown—You need to have a diagnosis before you can access the funding package, and that is something that the autism advisers are required to check and confirm before any funding is allocated or distributed to providers. Also as part of the package the Department of Health and Ageing has been responsible for establishing new Medicare items, which became effective from 1 July this year. So they cover the expenses involved in seeking a diagnosis—not all of the expenses, obviously, but there are new Medicare items in the Medicare benefits schedule.

Senator BERNARDI—I read the other day that there was a new early diagnosis available for autism. I think it was developed by Flinders University. Have you had any knowledge of that?

Ms Brown—No, Senator, we have not.

Mr Lewis—Perhaps just to comment, Senator, on the process in terms of how the panel was chosen, we have an autism spectrum disorders expert reference group, which is made up of the authors of what is recognised as a best practice document, and I think we mentioned that last time to you, Pryor and Roberts. They are both involved with us in looking at appropriate services that would clearly benefit children with this spectrum disorder and were involved in the assessment process of the panel to determine that the services were suitable and consistent with best practice.

Senator BERNARDI—The application process for families of children with ASD to receive this funding, do they have to complete a form or does it just happen automatically when they go to one of the service organisations?

Ms Brown—They need to initially go to the autism adviser. As I said earlier, the autism adviser will confirm that they have received a diagnosis. Then the autism adviser will register them on a financial system, so that is confirmation for the department that there is a diagnosis, and they are given advice about the range of providers that they can attend. The provider is the one that invoices the department directly.

Senator BERNARDI—Ms Brown, I will ask you this; you may not know the answer. From February next year the Parenting Research Centre in Melbourne is delivering workshops for families of children with ASD.

Ms Brown—Yes, that is correct, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Is there any portion of funding in the Helping Children With Autism package going towards these workshops?

Ms Brown—Yes, that is a key component of the package, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Can you tell me how much money is going towards it and a bit more about the workshops?

Ms Brown—We have finalised an agreement with the Parenting Research Centre for \$6 million over the next two years. They are currently in the process of developing and designing, consulting with relevant stakeholders and looking at how they are going to build those workshops. As you said, yes, they will be being implemented from February next year.

Senator BERNARDI—Is there an expectation of how many workshops will be held?

Ms Brown—We do not have those final details as yet because, as I indicated, they are currently developing the workshops.

Senator BERNARDI—You gave them \$6 million and said, 'Have as many as you like'?

Mr Lewis—No.

Ms Brown—No, we certainly have not said that, Senator.

Mr Lewis—Senator, we have funded them to be fully operational. They provide 2,500 places for families each year. We will be monitoring very closely how many workshops they run within that. Certainly the consortium that forms the body will have a view on that. It is an impressive and long list of members. They will obviously tell us as part of the consultation with families about timing of workshops and how many and so on, but we have had an agreement with them that 2,500 would be places for families each year to start them off. So it is not unlimited.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Could I just ask briefly about ASD playgroups? Has the roll-out of the playgroups started?

Ms Brown—Yes, it has, Senator. We are anticipating that there will be approximately 10 playgroups before the end of this calendar year, a further 40 before the end of this financial year, and that we will have about 150 playgroups over the four-year period.

Senator BERNARDI—So 10 before the end of this year?

Ms Brown—Yes, that is what we are expecting: 10 before the end of this calendar year and another 40 by the end of this financial year.

Senator BERNARDI—Just on the 10 before the end of this calendar year, where are they going to be located?

Ms Brown—We are still working with Playgroup Australia in relation to that. They are the provider, and they are currently consulting with various people examining need and demand to make sure, obviously, that we get best value for money in terms of the playgroups.

Senator BERNARDI—Isn't there an expectation that these are to start in October?

Ms Brown—As I said, Senator, we are expecting 10 before the end of this calendar year.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, but when you say that there is a roll-out due to start from October, you would think that there was one that would be operational. Are any operational?

Ms Brown—Not currently, Senator. It is a progressive roll-out, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—What have we got? We have got seven days to get one happening.

Mr Lewis—Playgroup Australia, Senator, has been running playgroups across the country for many years. The new service that they are going to be offering called PlayConnect playgroups will be an extension of their existing infrastructure and routine service. They will obviously modify it and tailor it to children with autism spectrum disorder, and that is appropriate. So it is not unsurmountable that they would be running one within the next seven days, if that is your question.

Senator BERNARDI—When was the ASD playgroups announcement made?

Mr Lewis—They were announced as part of the package announcement by the Bill Shorten and Jenny Macklin on 25 June.

Senator BERNARDI—Four months.

Dr Harmer—It is not unusual that when negotiating these things they take some time to start up. If our estimates are correct, we will still have 50 in place by the end of the financial year.

Senator BERNARDI—An announcement was made on 25 June. It has been four months.

Dr Harmer—The early phase always takes some time.

Senator BERNARDI—You said the roll-out is going to start in October. It is near enough to the end of October. There has not been one as yet. It is pretty poor form.

Dr Harmer—I would not accept that at all, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—No, I did not expect you would, but I am just saying I think it is very poor form.

Dr Harmer—We are working hard on it, as the officers have said. We expect to have 10 by the end of the year, 50 by the middle of next year, and while we would like to do it quicker, there is a reality in the negotiation of this and getting geared up. It always takes time. In my experience of many, many years running government programs, when you are negotiating with service provision from non-government organisations, et cetera, the start-up is always slower than you would hope, but we will be doing our best to make sure that those services are in place.

Senator BERNARDI—So perhaps they should have said November: ‘We will have them ready by November.’ Anyway, I will look forward to the press release when it actually comes out.

Senator BILYK—I thank the staff for the hard work they are doing. Obviously it does take a while to get some of these programs into place. After a gap of a number of years I certainly appreciate it from where I sit. I want to talk about the autism advisers again. I listened to the responses to Senator Bernardi, but I got a bit distracted, I am sorry to admit. Are parents able to access the provider panel?

Ms Brown—Yes, they are. However, the entry point into the package is by way of seeing the autism advisers first, because the autism advisers need to confirm that there is a diagnosis

and confirm the age of the child as well. Also, what the autism adviser will be able to do is advise them on the treatment plan that they have received from their diagnosing physician or doctor and then give them the range of advice and information that they need post-diagnosis to select a provider for their child from the panel.

Senator BILYK—That is great. Also, 2 April next year, I noticed, the United Nations has delegated as the World Autism Awareness Day. Has the department got any plans to do anything in regard to that?

Ms Brown—We have no plans at this stage, Senator.

Mr Lewis—I should say, Senator, that this year we had a week of activities and an auditorium session within the department. Many people participated in that to raise awareness of the disorder. I am sure our intent ought to be bigger and better and we will build on that.

Senator BILYK—That is wonderful. Thank you.

Senator FURNER—Can I take you to the MyTime program. Firstly, I think you need to be commended for the growth in that particular area. In 10 months you have gone from seven groups to 100. I went to the website, and the contemporary newsletter indicates there are 35 per cent of the groups in rural areas. Can you enlighten the senators on the growth of other groups across the nation, please?

Ms Bruce—Thank you, Senator. There have been 139 groups rolled out to date, and there are 1,190 parents or carers currently registered. I have details on the locations of the groups. There are three in the ACT, 41 in New South Wales, two in the Northern Territory, 15 in Queensland, 14 in South Australia, six in Tasmania, 45 in Victoria and 13 in WA.

Senator FURNER—And how many parents and carers attend those groups, roughly?

Ms Bruce—There are 1,190 parents and carers who have been registered to date.

Senator FURNER—Excellent. What sort of feedback are you receiving from those parents and carers on the access and involvement with the program?

Ms Bruce—We are getting really positive feedback. As you would probably be aware, the parents and carers of young children are often isolated and socially disconnected, mainly due to the intensity of their caring role. The MyTime group allows parents and carers to be in contact with others in similar circumstances, and, as I mentioned, the feedback from the parents, carers and coordinators has been overwhelmingly positive.

Senator FURNER—Thank you.

CHAIR—I think that is the end of the section on autism. So thank you very much. We will now break for 15 minutes.

Proceedings suspended from 10.32 am 10.48 am

CHAIR—We return to our questions in the area of autism.

Senator BERNARDI—Ms Beauchamp, you are nodding so I will address this to you. The location of the autism centres has been announced—that is correct?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Is the \$17.9 million—which was the figure that came out of June estimates—that has been allocated from FaHCSIA allocated to each centre in any particular way or will they all be receiving an equal amount of money?

Ms Brown—Senator, we currently have an assessment process underway so it is really going to depend upon the applications that we receive as to how much may be allocated to each particular centre.

Senator BERNARDI—So the locations of the centres have been determined?

Ms Brown—The general locations—yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Then you have gone out asking for tenders, or whatever would be the correct word, to build them?

Ms Brown—Yes, we have gone out to a process.

Senator BERNARDI—How is that process undertaken?

Mr Lewis—There was an open selection process for applications to deliver the centres. The applications closed on 26 September. Because we are currently assessing those applications it is probably not appropriate that we talk too much about that process at this time.

Senator BERNARDI—But it could be that one centre could receive significantly more money?

Mr Lewis—It is possible, depending on the major services they are providing, but we do not want to pre-empt that at this time.

Senator BERNARDI—When would you expect the successful service providers to be announced?

Mr Lewis—That is dependent on the government decision, obviously, but we expect two centres to be operational before June 2009—early next year.

Senator BERNARDI—I understand that. Is there an expectation of when the announcements of—

Mr Lewis—That will be a government decision; I cannot predetermine when government will choose to announce its decision in that regard.

Senator BERNARDI—That means that there are seven or eight months before you are expecting to have two centres operational. Given that two of those months include December and January, during which quite often not a lot happens in construction, do you still think it is feasible and realistic to have two centres operational by June?

Mr Lewis—At this time we do, knowing what we know now. One of the issues for us is that, as you could imagine, we want a centre that is appropriately equipped and designed for these children. That means that we need to do appropriate work in making sure that is the case. It is not simply a matter of deciding on who is going to provide the service and handing over the money; it is a matter of working in partnership with our colleagues in Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to ensure that the funding component in

relation to the infrastructure is appropriately used and that the centres are equipped and designed for these children.

Senator BERNARDI—I accept that, and that is a very good intention, but I have heard today already on a couple of occasions that deadlines have been set but the wheels of government have ground slowly towards them. This is quite a significant and ambitious target—to have two centres up and running in seven months. I am not trying to have a chip at you but I just want to know whether you really do believe that having two centres operational in June is a realistic proposal.

Mr Lewis—We certainly are endeavouring to make it happen and we do think it will happen in that time. It is a big ask—I agree with you—but we think it is doable. I suppose the other thing is, as we touched on earlier, that the consultation and engagement with the sector by the parliamentary secretary have been enormous and intense. He has endeavoured to ensure that the centres and the other elements of the broader package are the most appropriate use of the money. It goes to your earlier questions about whether the envelope is fixed and how we are going to determine how much people get. There has been an enormous amount of work in considering how the mix of the money that is available would be best used, and that has taken time. In terms of the centres, yes, two are doable; yes, it is big; and, yes, it is going to be complex. All of that is true.

Senator BERNARDI—There is, for example, a centre allocated to Adelaide—there is going to be one in Adelaide. What are the criteria for determining exactly where in Adelaide it is going to be and what serviceability it is going to have?

Ms Brown—That will really depend on the applications that we receive. As we said, we are in that process at the moment.

Senator BERNARDI—So you have received the applications?

Ms Brown—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—They have closed, have they not?

Ms Brown—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—And the consideration would be not only to the range of services but to the number of families that would potentially benefit in a geographic area?

Ms Brown—That will be one consideration that we take into account in deciding.

Senator BERNARDI—What would be some of the others?

Ms Brown—Another key criteria is an affiliation with a teaching hospital or other research centre where there is some expertise in autism so that the centre can benefit from that expertise—preferably located nearby.

Senator BERNARDI—Anything else?

Ms Brown—I am sure there are other things.

Mr Lewis—Senator, we will provide to you a set of the criteria for which tender is applied. We will give that to you this afternoon.

Senator BERNARDI—That would be very helpful; thank you. Finally, when the centres are up and actually operational, what does the department have in mind for informing people that these centres are there for families?

Ms Brown—Definitely there will be a communication strategy to inform people about the location of the centres and what the centres have available. There will be an awareness-raising program. Obviously we want families and children with autism to benefit from these centres as much as they possibly can.

Mr Lewis—In addition, Senator, I am sure the autism bodies who we are contracted with, through a range of other services that we have gone through already, will have a keen interest in communicating to their constituents that these are available. The autism advisors will have a role there too.

CHAIR—I think we are finished on the issue of autism. We have other questions on disabilities. I know Senator Bilyk has one general question under this area, so we will go to her first.

Senator BILYK—Thank you. I am wondering what we are doing in regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, specifically in regard to how and if we are supporting Professor Ron McCallum's candidacy.

Ms Beauchamp—Thank you. We are taking a very active role in supporting Professor Ron McCallum's candidacy. The Australian government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 17 July. Because we were one of the earlier countries to do that, we were able to put forward a candidate for election to the committee. Our candidate is Professor Ron McCallum. We consulted with the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations on a range of candidates and he has a great depth of skills and expertise in this area.

Senator BILYK—He does.

Ms Beauchamp—Professor McCallum has been over to the UN, over to New York already, and has spoken to a number of disability organisations and other countries. I will be supporting Professor McCallum at the vote on 3 November in New York. So the department is providing quite a lot of support for his candidacy.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I will go back to you Senator Bernardi for your next area.

Senator BERNARDI—We are going to touch on the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement. Senator Siewert would like to start with that.

Senator SIEWERT—Can we have an update on progress on the CSTDA? I thought we would start broad.

Senator Chris Evans—It is going well.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for that. I would like a little bit more detail.

Senator Chris Evans—You have to get better questions.

Ms Beauchamp—As you would aware, there have been a number of COAG meetings. At the last COAG meeting on 2 October, progress was made around looking at roles and responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the states and territories in relation to

community residential care for aged and disabled people. The next COAG meeting is on 17 November. There is also a Treasurer's meeting, I think, the week before that, where a number of agreements, including on disability, will be looked at. We have been working quite closely with our state and territory colleagues in developing a disability agreement looking at roles and responsibilities, performance indicators, frameworks and those sorts of things. It has been taking quite a bit of our time and the time of state and territory jurisdictions as well. There will be a paper provided for the next COAG committee meeting on 17 November.

Senator SIEWERT—The paper being specifically around roles and responsibilities?

Ms Beauchamp—Roles and responsibilities work is actually being progressed through senior officers or first ministers' agencies, and we are providing input into that process.

Senator SIEWERT—When you talk about roles and responsibilities, is this progressing the discussions that we touched on last night in Health and Ageing—the talk of splitting ageing and disabilities, with states taking responsibility for disability care and the Commonwealth taking responsibility for aged care?

Ms Beauchamp—Part of the arrangements is looking at a number of programs—the disability program, the HACC program and the mental health program.

Senator SIEWERT—In terms of disabilities specifically, I just want to drill down into what undertakings you are seeing from the states in terms of disabilities. Is it now part of the CSTDA that states and territories are taking on responsibility for the provision of care for disabilities?

Ms Beauchamp—The states and territories have always had prime responsibility for people with disabilities. The Commonwealth do make a contribution under the agreement. What we are doing is progressing a series of reforms—which are on the public record; I think there are eight key areas of reform—through the negotiation of the next agreement and looking at elements of those reforms and what is currently in the base of CSTDA.

Dr Harmer—Senator, because the agreement will be a Commonwealth-state agreement, there will still be Commonwealth interest and involvement in disabilities. We will be funding it, and with the states we will be setting agreements around performance indicators, outcomes and all of those sorts of things. So we will still have a very keen interest in the outcomes and the performance.

Senator SIEWERT—I am trying to get to the bottom of what it means. How are things changing with the splitting of the states and territories taking responsibility for people with disabilities under the age of 65 and the Commonwealth taking responsibility for aged care? I want to know what difference that makes to how it is funded and what impact that has on the agreement and service delivery.

Ms Davies—I think it would be premature to have that level of detail.

Dr Harmer—Senator, you are right; that makes sense, but I do not think it has yet been agreed. Until it is agreed, it is very difficult to answer your question about precisely what it means in terms of funding.

Senator SIEWERT—What does it mean in terms of the differences between what you foresee as the new arrangements and the arrangements as they are now?

Ms Davies—I think what was agreed at COAG was having a set of principles against which you would test how to reform and build a seamless national service system for the aged, people with disability and people with mental health issues. It is a high-level agreement to the area of reform and a set of principles against which you would develop the detail.

Senator SIEWERT—Those are the principles that came out of the last COAG communique?

Ms Davies—That is right.

Senator SIEWERT—In that case, are you looking at the states then putting in more funding?

Ms Beauchamp—All decisions around funding arrangements under the new Commonwealth-state relations will be managed through treasuries and COAG itself. What we have been doing is agreeing the reform agenda and where collectively we would like to take the disability sector to improve services. Those funding decisions will be made by treasurers and COAG.

Dr Harmer—This is a break from the past. In the past, Commonwealth-state agreements were negotiated between line ministers in the Commonwealth and the states and territories and those discussions included discussions on funding levels. That is not the way the new government are doing it; they are doing the funding at central departmental level.

Senator SIEWERT—The noise you can hear is my brain trying to process that.

Dr Harmer—The various COAG working groups, or ministerial councils, as is the case for the disability agreement, have been working out objectives, outcomes, performance indicators, roles and responsibilities, directions for reform, and the framework agreement about what each level of government is going to do, the priorities, how we are going to measure success and how we are going to get agreement around those. The funding ultimately will be determined by the Commonwealth Treasury to state and territory treasuries and premiers. In the disability area, there is more certainty because there are certain financial commitments already made in relation to the disability assistance package and state matching of that, which I will perhaps let Ms Davies talk about. In the disability area there are already key funding decisions made. But some of the funding decisions, particularly the ones that might relate to any split between the Commonwealth and the state of HACC and aged care and disability, have not yet been made.

Senator BERNARDI—To put it into two sentences, instead of having a pot of money and then seeing what you can do with it, you are looking at the service requirements and then finding how much money you require to deliver those services?

Dr Harmer—That is one way of looking at it.

Senator Chris Evans—That is one long question.

Dr Harmer—Yes, it is.

Senator BERNARDI—I am just trying to distil the essence of what Dr Harmer just said.

Dr Harmer—It is certainly possible to see it that way, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Would that be reasonable?

Dr Harmer—Most certainly.

Senator BERNARDI—I am a very reasonable person.

Senator SIEWERT—What does that mean in terms of the bottom-line dollars for disabilities?

Dr Harmer—We will not know exactly what the bottom line for disabilities is until some of the decisions are taken around the funding of any split that might occur in HACC, for example.

Senator SIEWERT—Last night, when we were talking about this with Health and Ageing, I understood that you were hoping to reach in-principle agreement on 17 November.

Dr Harmer—That is what we hope will happen.

Senator SIEWERT—How long will it take for that in-principle agreement to translate to decisions on funding?

Dr Harmer—We cannot answer that. The first ministers, at their meeting on 17 November, will no doubt discuss that and probably set a time frame. We are not aware of precisely what that is at this point.

Ms Beauchamp—At the moment, on the public record, we are working towards a new agreement to be implemented on 1 January.

Senator SIEWERT—Which is 18 months from the last one.

Ms Beauchamp—1 January 2009.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—But that is 18 months from when the last one ran out?

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator BERNARDI—On that, Ms Beauchamp, you said at the last estimates that the renegotiation of the CSTDA would depend on negotiations between now and the end of December.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Is it still realistic to have the new CSTDA agreement in place by 1 January?

Ms Beauchamp—We are working towards that.

Senator BERNARDI—I understand that you are working tirelessly.

Ms Beauchamp—Obviously a COAG meeting is to happen between now and 1 January and, depending on what agreements are or are not made on 17 November, that will impact on our ability to deliver by 1 January 2009.

Dr Harmer—That is the current intention, Senator; that is what we are working to.

Senator BERNARDI—Do you take confidence out of that, Senator Siewert? No, nor do I. For the *Hansard*, she is shaking her head. Have the various state and federal disability ministers actually met since they met at the end of May to discuss the CSTDA?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—On how many occasions have they met?

Dr Harmer—We will have that information, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you.

Ms Bedford—Senator, can you just repeat the question so I get the right dates?

Senator BERNARDI—The question was: have the disability ministers met since the end of May to further discuss the newest CSTDA and then how often have they met and when?

Ms Bedford—They met on 3 September and they are due to meet again on the week of the 27th, and there was another on 23 July.

Dr Harmer—So 23 July, 3 September and then again on 27th.

Ms Beauchamp—Sorry, and again scheduled to meet on 7 November.

Ms Bedford—So the week of the 27th they are due to meet.

Senator BERNARDI—So they are going to meet next week and 7 November?

Ms Davies—That is right, Senator.

Ms Bedford—Yes, because they have got a number of papers to sign off to progress to COAG. The meeting on the week of the 27th is scheduled to be a teleconference.

Senator BERNARDI—So there is a 7 November meeting scheduled, they have got two meetings from now and yet 17 November is when the paper is going to be provided. So they will not have access to the paper when they are discussing this on the 7th?

Ms Davies—Officials have been working on this for a while, so ministers have been looking at drafts individually within their jurisdictions and when they have met. So, it is sort of iterative process.

Senator BERNARDI—You have been working on it for a while. I accept that. I acknowledge that. That is part of the concern, I guess.

Ms Bedford—Ministers may also have the opportunity to look at papers out of session before the 17th.

Senator BERNARDI—So it is not just going to be sprung on them on the 17th?

Ms Beauchamp—No, absolutely not.

Senator BERNARDI—That is reassuring.

Ms Beauchamp—They have actually been provided with quite a few papers from both treasuries and line agencies in terms of developing the next agreement.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, I think we all know that if there is money involved, the states will be paying close attention and the ministers will be well briefed—if there is a dollar there.

Senator BERNARDI—I will leave it there because I do not want to go after the states today.

Ms Beauchamp—Can I also reassure you that the working groups underneath the disability ministers at official level meet very regularly and we are in discussions on an ongoing basis.

Senator BERNARDI—But, as we have been reminded, ultimately it is a decision of government in these things, and we just want to make sure. We are mindful that sometimes ministers ignore the advice of working groups or departments.

Dr Harmer—It has happened, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—It has, on occasion. I believe so. I have nothing further on the CSTDA, Chair.

CHAIR—The next topic?

Senator BERNARDI—I would like to talk about the National Disability Strategy if we can.

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—During June estimates it was reported that the community consultations for the NDS would be completed by October of this year. But, according to a media release from 17 October by parliamentary secretary Bill Shorten, the consultations will only actually begin next week and conclude in November. What happened between June and now?

Ms Davies—A number of other big reform processes, like COAG—as we were just talking about—have been going on. This is a national strategy between the states and Commonwealth, as we said earlier, so there has been delay. The council that we talked about earlier has only just been appointed. As you said, the consultations were announced on the 17th and will run for six weeks, so there has been a bit of a delay.

Senator BERNARDI—When these statements were made about how consultations are going to be affected and things of that nature, you must have known that you had all these other things to do as well—the CSTDA and the disability strategy. These things are not just cooked up over the weekend surely, are they? Can you confirm they are not cooked up over the weekend?

Ms Davies—No.

Senator BERNARDI—That is refreshing. A lot has not been done. I do not mean to reflect poorly on the department, but in this instance you are meant to have consultations finished by the end of October, because that is what we were told—and they just started last week.

Dr Harmer—What Ms Davies is saying is, and I stand to be corrected, but I am assuming the decision was made on the basis that the consultations needed to be meaningful and they needed to be against the background of as much certainty or as much definition around the likely future directions and priorities. And, because of a range of things that were happening, it was judged that that was not the case until about the middle of October.

Ms Davies—That is right, and because the new council only commenced meeting in September and one of its important roles is to contribute to that strategy.

Senator BERNARDI—Let us go back. It was judged not to be the case in the middle of October?

Dr Harmer—It was judged that it was not until the middle of October that there was sufficient of the framework in place to have meaningful discussions. So the establishment of the national disability council, the progress in the negotiations on the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement within the COAG context and a range of other things were still in a state of development. We could have had, no doubt, consultations earlier but the parliamentary secretary and minister judged—I am assuming this is the case just looking at Ms Davies—that there was not sufficient certainty around it to have the meaningful discussions, but there now is.

Ms Davies—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—Part of my concern is that there seems to be a pattern here of ‘We are going to set a deadline or a date when something is going to happen’ and we kind of consistently misjudge it.

Ms Davies—I do not think we are consistently misjudging; we are still on track to deliver to government advice around the National Disability Strategy, so we are still working on time to a target. What we have done is set up arrangements with our state and territory colleagues and now with the new council to progress that. I think just going out consulting without the advice of people with disabilities and others involved in the process would have been a bit remiss of us. It does require consideration in terms of making the consultations targeted and accessible. We have developed a discussion paper to go out, which was launched last week as well. So, I think we will have a much more informed discussion and consultation process now.

Senator BERNARDI—That is a very noble aim, and I support you in having an informed consultation process rather than just going through the motions, but the dates are kind of put out there as reasonable expectations. You can say, ‘Well we can’t do this, we can’t adhere to this date, because the date on forming another committee or another organisation was not done and that was not done because of another thing.’ There are lots of excuses and they all sound very plausible but when there are lots of them and they consistently come up with regard to dates, how can we realistically rely on the dates that we are being given by you today? Do I have to ask these questions in February and say, ‘Why haven’t we received this sort of material according to the date?’

Ms Beauchamp—I am not being defensive in saying that there are lots of excuses.

Senator BERNARDI—No. You are being very open.

Ms Beauchamp—I think we are not going to miss our deadline in terms of the commitment to provide a National Disability Strategy this financial year.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, I think, to be fair, the officers have explained to you why it has been put back. I think there is a pretty good rationale in all that. You make the point that it is late compared to the announcement; that is true, point made. But I think the officers have explained the processes. They think they are going to get a better result and the overall objective, which we all support, looks like it is still on track.

Senator BERNARDI—Just on that then, Minister, I will go back to Ms Beauchamp. On track—you said this financial year?

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator BERNARDI—The interim feedback of the report is due in early 2009. I think that is what your website says.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—How do you define early 2009?

Senator Chris Evans—Before 30 June.

Dr Harmer—Before 30 June.

Senator Chris Evans—That is the safest answer.

Dr Harmer—Yes, indeed—in the first half of the year.

Senator Chris Evans—In the fullness of time.

Senator BERNARDI—Then how do you define mid-2009?

Dr Harmer—Exactly on June 30.

Senator Chris Evans—We have got to stop parodying ourselves. What is the best estimate?

Ms Beauchamp—In the first couple of months we should be able to deliver an interim—

Senator BERNARDI—So February?

Dr Harmer—March.

Senator BERNARDI—March?

Ms Beauchamp—I am just wondering what I am going to be saying at the next estimates.

Senator BERNARDI—This is the thing.

Dr Harmer—Around about March but—

Senator BERNARDI—Around about March, so it could be April or it could be February.

Dr Harmer—Senator, it is not wise for an officer to give a date and to be held accountable, because the officers of this department are not totally responsible for the decision on the timing.

Senator BERNARDI—I accept that. The dates are given by the ministers or the parliamentary secretaries quite often and the question is whether they are just arbitrarily chosen or whether there is actually some research into these dates about the capacity of FaHCSIA to fulfil the requirements of it.

Senator Chris Evans—I think best endeavours will be made and we will see how we go.

Senator BERNARDI—Let us talk about the consultations for the NDS; are they going to take place in capital cities?

Ms Davies—Capital cities and regional centres.

Senator BERNARDI—Have any regional centres been identified as yet?

Ms Bedford—We have not got the list of regional centres yet. The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations is going to do the consultations around regional centres to feed into the consultation process and they will shortly be advising the department of where they best think those would happen and work with the department on those.

Senator BERNARDI—When will the consultants actually commence? When is the first one scheduled?

Ms Bedford—On Monday.

Senator BERNARDI—Where will that be?

Ms Bedford—Darwin.

Senator BERNARDI—Will the consultations be visiting all the capital cities?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—When will you be making the decision about what regional centres?

Ms Bedford—In the very near future.

Senator BERNARDI—Early in 2009?

Ms Bedford—No, as soon as we get advice back from AFDO.

Senator BERNARDI—When would you expect that?

Ms Bedford—In the next week.

Ms Beauchamp—Can I say that they are not the only consultation mechanisms. We do have a website and an 1800 number where people can provide ongoing input into the process as well.

Senator BERNARDI—What is the 1800 number? I am interested in how many calls will be received by that number.

Ms Davies—It is 1800077765.

Senator BERNARDI—And what was the other mechanism for providing feedback?

Ms Davies—There is an email address, the 1800 number, we are also having a national youth forum and we will be talking to Indigenous and CALD groups.

Senator BERNARDI—All within this next month, by 26 November?

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—As it has not started yet I would be interested for future reference to find out how many calls have been made, how many people attended these various things, emails received and those sorts of things.

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—I think we have already a number of people that have registered the day after the number was made available.

Senator BERNARDI—Lots of people would be interested and I would like to know how many. Will the consultations and any submissions received be public?

Ms Davies—I guess that is a call for the minister and the parliamentary secretary.

Senator BERNARDI—There has been no advice to people that their submissions may be made available on the public record?

Ms Davies—No, Senator.

Senator Chris Evans—I will take that on notice. It is a reasonable question. I think people ought to know in advance if there is an intention to make them public.

Senator BERNARDI—Which is consistent with what Dr Harmer said before. I am interested.

Senator Chris Evans—We will take that on notice, but I think it is something the department should clarify.

Dr Harmer—Yes; we can find out probably today.

Senator BERNARDI—Given the nature of these consultations—and I understand what the minister suggested to me before—is there any intention for Minister Macklin or Parliamentary Secretary Shorten to attend any of these?

Ms Davies—I understand the parliamentary secretary will be. I am not sure about the minister.

Ms Bedford—We have advised the minister's office and the parliamentary secretary's office of the dates and they are looking at their commitments at the moment to see whether they can attend some of those consultations.

Senator BERNARDI—Once again I would be interested to know whether the parliamentary secretary or the minister attends or members of their staff. Obviously FaHCSIA staff will be attending.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—How many staff do you think will be attending? Will it be the same core group of staff that will travel around to all the consultations and be looking after it or will it be—

Ms Davies—It will be a couple of core people but we also have a regional network, so some of our state office staff will attend, as will people from state and territory governments.

Senator BERNARDI—Will members of parliament and senators, state and federal, be advised of these consultations in their area and be invited to attend?

Ms Bedford—The facts of the consultation are public and in the releases and information is freely available about these.

Senator BERNARDI—But you will not be specifically—

Dr Harmer—I do not think there is any intention to specifically advise members of parliament, but we can check that.

Ms Bedford—I am not sure—the parliamentary secretary and the minister may have some other processes in place, but anyone can register to attend one of these sessions.

CHAIR—Senator, you have more questions on disabilities. We will break at 11.30 am and move into the program as we have got it for the questions on outcome 2.5, support for women, and then we will move into housing support, depending on how the time goes, and we will come back to disabilities at the end, which will be after lunch.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure.

CHAIR—Because I know you have got more questions, as do Senator Siewert, Senator Boyce and some of the senators from the Labor group. It and families are the two areas where we have dedicated the most time for today's sessions.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure.

CHAIR—On that basis we have got five minutes before 11.30 am, Senator. Do you want to pursue that in five minutes or go straight into the next segment?

Senator BERNARDI—I do not see there is much more in it, so I am happy if you want to go on to women, or if other people have a few questions on NDS.

CHAIR—We will go on to women in case people start a question and then, as happens regularly, want to follow up and we will be right in the middle of a series of questions. On this basis I suggest that we suspend this particular program—but we will be returning to it.

[11.26 am]

CHAIR—We will now move into output group 2.5, support for women. Welcome, Senator Stephens. I know that Senator Boyce has questions. Senator Hanson-Young had questions but she cannot come to this session, so her questions will be on notice. She had indicated that she has some questions in this area. Senator Boyce?

Senator BOYCE—Thank you. I might start out by asking about the secretariat of the Office for Women. It used to be in PM&C but it has gone to FaHCSIA. Where is it physically located? What are the staffing levels? What difference has this made?

Ms Beauchamp—The Office for Women is separately identified within our organisational chart. It was moved from PM&C some time ago. Staffing levels are probably about the same as they were a couple of years ago in PM&C. I guess it is more than just a secretariat-type service; we have actually policy programs around the Office for Women.

Senator BOYCE—For instance, if you go to the website you go through a little circle that takes you from the Office for Women to FaHCSIA to Office for Women, I think is how it works.

Ms Moyle—Yes. There is a process of review of the Office for Women's websites at present. They will be updated shortly and then a further review of the websites will be undertaken in the context of FaHCSIA's website review. That will make it a lot clearer how the website functions. There were a number of websites that were run by the Office for Women that are now no longer current.

Senator BOYCE—Could you talk me through what has happened in terms of the reporting lines for the Office for Women?

Ms Beauchamp—The Office for Women still has an executive director that sits over the top, which is at group manager level, who reports to me and we still have an Office for

Women branch in the portfolio. The Office for Women itself reports to Minister Plibersek, so it is a separate minister.

Dr Harmer—I might just add that this is exactly the same arrangement as was the case in Prime Minister and Cabinet, where the head of the Office for Women there was a division head level, the same as they are now, and the reporting line was to a deputy secretary in Prime Minister and Cabinet. Ms Beauchamp is the deputy secretary in FaHCSIA who has primary responsibility for the Office for Women function. Essentially the structure and the profile are the same as they were.

Senator BOYCE—Without wanting to be in the slightest bit disrespectful, Dr Harmer, there has been expressed to me some concern about the fact that perhaps being within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet demonstrated a higher level of concentration on the topic than being in FaHCSIA might.

Dr Harmer—Yes, that is one view, but there is an alternative view which suggests that the Office for Women being located in the department that is the biggest-spending department of any, that has more programs directly relevant to women than any of the others, is actually a very good place for it to be.

Ms Moyle—Could I also add that the Office for Women does have a policy coordination role across government, and that is retained in FaHCSIA.

Senator BOYCE—Yes. I will go on to some more general questions now. There was a Labor election commitment to support new mothers who wished to breastfeed. Two million dollars was actually promised in election funding to the Australian Breastfeeding Association. Was that in the last budget and how was that allocated?

Ms Beauchamp—That initiative is being delivered through the Department of Health and Ageing.

Senator BOYCE—But I noted that Minister Plibersek's media release on grants to women's groups, which I have here, gave \$99,949 to the Australian Breastfeeding Association. There seems to be some overlap here in her role as—

Senator Stephens—I think, Senator Boyce, that Minister Plibersek gives the voice to the overarching policy role of the Office for Women and does that across a number of portfolios where it is relevant.

Senator BOYCE—But we have a statement here from Minister Plibersek saying that Labor will provide \$2 million over four years for the Australian Breastfeeding Association. We will put that question to Health and Ageing then. I wanted to look at some commitments around the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, which was a commitment. What funding has been allocated for that?

Ms Stodulka—There was an election commitment to establish the national council. That occurred at the end of May.

Senator BOYCE—I am not talking so much about the council as about the national plan to prevent violence. I realise the council would be part of that plan but it is the plan in general.

Ms Stodulka—The national council is working to deliver a draft national plan to government by the end of December and is on track to deliver that draft plan.

Senator BOYCE—Perhaps now we should talk about the council and the other ways you get around to having a national plan. The council was established in May?

Ms Stodulka—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—How many meetings has that council had?

Ms Stodulka—The council has had four formal meetings to date. It has two more formal meetings prior to its delivery of the draft plan to government at the end of December.

Senator BOYCE—Could you talk me through what the council did to develop this plan.

Ms Stodulka—Certainly. I must say the council is still in the process of developing it. The council has been operating for nearly five months.

Senator BOYCE—What has the council done to date?

Ms Stodulka—The council has undertaken a number of research activities. It has also undertaken a number of consultation activities and is currently in a process of rural and remote consultations. It will then be running a number of expert roundtables.

Senator BOYCE—Could we just go through each of those one by one?

Ms Stodulka—Sure.

Senator BOYCE—When you say research activities, what does that mean?

Ms Stodulka—The council first undertook, with support from consultancy, an extensive national and international literature review examining areas of particular interest to them in terms of the development of the national plan. From that, they have also undertaken an ‘as is’ analysis to research the system across all jurisdictions as it is at the moment in terms of domestic violence and sexual assault. We have some research also being driven by the Australian Government Solicitor on our behalf that is assisting with examining opportunities to improve harmonisation of domestic violence and sexual assault laws nationally, and it also has some work being undertaken to develop a monitoring and evaluation strategy to support the national plan.

Senator BOYCE—Then we went to consultation with communities; what was that?

Ms Stodulka—Consultation has been a very important part of the work of the council. From the moment it was appointed, it undertook a national consultation process, a facilitated process, with 27 meetings across 10 locations around Australia. It complemented those meetings, those consultations, with online surveys and one-on-one interviews with victims, survivors and perpetrators. It also ran a process calling for public submissions and it received over 350 public submissions to support it with building its evidence base for the plan. I would say that the 11 member council has also to date undertaken approximately 100 other one-on-one meetings by council members or presentations to the national women’s secretariat, the national rural women’s forum and other meetings where it has either been invited or it has seen an opportunity where it could go and engage. So, consultation has been a very important part. As I said, now it is conducting some rural and remote visits.

Senator BOYCE—How many of those will there be?

Ms Stodulka—Four. It has just been to the Kimberley, Mount Isa, Torres Strait and is to go to Darwin and Alice Springs in a week and a half's time. It then will run a number of expert roundtables that will support the key subgroup areas that the council has been working on—primary prevention, services for victims, legal issues and working with perpetrators. Those specialist roundtables are occurring during November and the very beginning of December.

Senator BOYCE—You would be aware that there was a deal of criticism from Women With Disabilities Australia about the fact that there was no woman with a disability representative put on that council.

Ms Stodulka—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—What consultations were done presumably in the hope of redressing that?

Ms Stodulka—Council certainly has sponsored Women With Disabilities Australia to come to its August meeting in Brisbane and present and workshop with council to ensure that council was understanding the particular issues that were important to women with disabilities. Women With Disabilities are also being included in all the expert roundtables so that we ensure that we have their voice contributing consistently throughout the development of the plan.

Senator BOYCE—Given that they experience a higher level of violence than almost any other group in the community, that would seem to be a reasonable thing to do.

Ms Stodulka—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Part of the national plan that was put out in the government budget statement of 2007 for women said that state and territory governments would be improving access to crisis accommodation and improving transition from crisis to long-term, secure, affordable accommodation as part of the plan. What work has actually been done with the states and territories on this?

Ms Stodulka—This is an area on which there is a close alignment obviously with homelessness work as well. Office for Women, earlier this year, commissioned specific research to look at women, domestic violence and homelessness and have been able to provide very helpful input, I believe, both to the council and to the homelessness white paper. The deputy chair of the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, Heather Nancarrow, also sat as a member of the steering committee on the homelessness white paper. She has also been able to advocate strongly for the needs of women fleeing domestic violence. The council has also been given advanced briefing on key issues and key directions in the development of the white paper so that it can ensure that areas where it believes there may still be gaps or areas it wants to particularly reinforce, it will be able to highlight within its plan. So it is working closely with the homelessness area. It has benefited from research that has been undertaken and certainly has had many submissions from the public submission process as well as the consultation process where people have raised the issue of homelessness and particularly the issue of the need for crisis accommodation. It is very much at front of council's mind and will be a plank within the plan.

Senator BOYCE—So we are still in the planning stage and really to talk about the national plan to prevent violence against women and children having improved access to crisis accommodation is really the flip side of the homelessness strategy? It is not a separate strategy at all?

Ms Stodulka—I think that it very much is a complementary strategy or there are complementary elements in the plan.

Senator BOYCE—But if I went to the homelessness material I would find a similar point saying—and women are a prime group in this area?

Ms Stodulka—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Or victims of violence are a prime group?

Ms Stodulka—And certainly our colleagues in the homelessness area have—

Senator BOYCE—So it is really just a restating of another thing. The other material out of the budget statement 2007 was that there would be the implementation of a public health issue response to violence to reduce violence before it happens. What has gone on there to specifically combat violence against women?

Ms Stodulka—Certainly public health as well as human rights frameworks are going to underpin this draft national plan. In terms of primary prevention, the government made a commitment to roll out respectful relationships resources into Australian high schools.

Senator BOYCE—And has that happened?

Ms Stodulka—It has not happened yet. However, significant work has been undertaken to ensure that we have the evidence and access to what are considered best practice or promising practice programs that are already in operation in Australia, to test them out in other localities around Australia.

Senator BOYCE—So are there pilots happening?

Ms Stodulka—They will be rolling out from February, from first term next year. We are now looking at more than rolling out in high schools but also to look at non-school settings which the research has encouraged.

Senator BOYCE—So, people who have fallen through the net before they have gotten to them in the high school area?

Ms Stodulka—There are a lot of young people who are not strong attendees at school but we can also capture young people in other environments—faith based settings, youth, sports, refuges—so that we actually capture young people in all their diversity. We have also had a lot of encouragement to look at not just youth, teenagers, but that we should be also focusing on young people of a much younger age.

Senator BOYCE—Much younger?

Ms Stodulka—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—So that would be a second component? You have got material that you will be sending to some high schools in February next year?

Ms Stodulka—Yes, and other settings, other youth settings.

Senator BOYCE—So you will be extending it to non-school settings immediately?

Ms Stodulka—Yes, and there will be strong recommendations in the plan about how it sees that primary prevention education can be rolled out for government's consideration.

Senator BOYCE—Is there material on the public record about this and how it will roll out, where it will go and how many schools et cetera?

Ms Stodulka—No, there is not. It is still being progressed by the national council supported by the Office for Women.

Senator BOYCE—So it is not actually a plan yet; it is an intention—is that the case?

Ms Stodulka—The commitment to progress respectful relationship education targeting young people is very much a commitment. Sitting within that, for example, is funding to White Ribbon Day Foundation of Australia which is expanding its ambassadors out to rural and remote areas into schools. We see that as a very important first step in preparing the ground for more comprehensive programs to go in.

Senator BOYCE—You mentioned material going into schools in February. Is that is planned or will it be planned?

Ms Stodulka—It is planned and significant work has been undertaken. We are in the process at the moment of identifying best practice and promising practice that we can actually test. There has been significant research around what best practice primary prevention education in sexual assault and domestic violence looks like. There has certainly been excellent work being undertaken by NASASV, the peak body for sexual assault, and VicHealth has also done some excellent work which has just come to fruition around respectful relationships programs. We are trying not to reinvent the wheel but build on very complementary work that is happening at the same time.

Senator BOYCE—Not reinventing the wheel is a very good idea.

Ms Stodulka—Yes, absolutely.

Senator BOYCE—Which brings me perhaps to my next point. There was quite a lot of criticism by the Labor Party of the Howard government's 'Violence against Women—Australia says NO' advertising campaign. Has this campaign been scrapped?

Ms Beauchamp—The campaign is not going ahead in the form that was done under the previous government.

Senator BOYCE—So when did the campaign in its previous form stop?

Ms Beauchamp—It did cease in caretaker period.

Senator BOYCE—So it stopped in caretaker period and it has not begun again. What has replaced it?

Ms Beauchamp—In terms of the communication strategy around domestic violence, that is being picked up in the development of the national plan.

Senator BOYCE—So there has been nothing since November last year?

Ms Beauchamp—There has not been any media campaign.

Senator BOYCE—That would seem to be a rather unusual way of dealing with violence and attempts to stop it—to do nothing for 12 months.

Ms Beauchamp—It was the media campaign that was suspended during the caretaker period. There are other communication activities and services available to support women, through the helplines and the like.

Senator BOYCE—We have just seen \$20 million devoted to an obesity media campaign on the basis that media campaigns are a very important component to changing behaviour and attitudes, so to have a 12-month hiatus—well it will be longer by the time it finishes, won't it?

Ms Beauchamp—The communications campaign or the communications that are required to support women experiencing domestic violence will be considered as part of the development of the national plan. Once we get the evidence base together and a plan for reducing violence then we will look at and provide advice to government on what is the best way of communicating what is required under that strategy.

Senator BOYCE—I realise, Ms Beauchamp, that you cannot really answer the question, but it strikes me as bizarre that you would have a 12-month vacuum in the area.

Senator Stephens—Senator Boyce, can I make the observation that this kind of behavioural change is incredibly complex and difficult—

Senator BOYCE—Absolutely.

Senator Stephens—and there has not been the supporting evidence that that kind of media campaign that directly speaks the message is actually the most effective way. There are other things that are equally or more effective in changing behaviours. A good example is what we have just seen in the NAPCAN advertisement *Children see, Children do*, the idea about the way in which responsible behaviour needs to be mirrored right across society.

Senator BOYCE—Yes, it is a very complex area, as you said, but nothing—

Senator Stephens—So there are other things happening other than continuation of that campaign.

Senator BOYCE—Yes. Nevertheless, I reserve my right to be somewhat amazed at that vacuum existing for well over 12 months. I want to go on to the Labor government's promises about strengthening and improving the Sex Discrimination Act and the powers of the commissioner to protect women. Have the changes been made to the Sex Discrimination Act?

Ms Moyle—There is currently a review of the Sex Discrimination Act that will report in November. That is the responsibility of the Attorney-General's portfolio.

Senator BOYCE—So there will be a report in mid-November to the Attorney-General about the Sex Discrimination Act?

Ms Moyle—It is a parliamentary committee.

Senator BOYCE—If there were to be changes to the powers of the commissioner, that is where we would expect to find that material—is that correct?

Ms Moyle—We cannot, of course, foreshadow the outcome of the inquiry but certainly that would be an opportunity. There is another opportunity, which is the review of the human rights legislation more broadly, also the responsibility of the Attorney-General's Department.

Senator BOYCE—Going on from that to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, I think there were submissions in January and then again in June. I must admit I get a bit confused about which stage is which with these, but where are we at with that?

Ms Moyle—This is Australia's report to the committee?

Senator BOYCE—Australia's intention to comply—

Ms Moyle—Accede to the optional protocol?

Senator BOYCE—Yes.

Ms Moyle—There are two processes currently in play. As you know, Australia is a party to the convention and it needs to report every four years to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Australia is currently finalising its sixth and seventh combined report to go to the committee and that will be with the committee as soon as it can be, certainly in the next couple of months at the latest.

Senator BOYCE—Within the month?

Ms Moyle—Within a couple of months at the latest. In addition, an election commitment was made around Australia's intention to accede to the optional protocol to CEDAW which is a complaints and reporting procedure. That process has gone through the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, and that committee has just recently reported. So that report is now with the government and I understand that the government will make its decision whether to accede on the basis of that.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you. The other one I need—I am doing a tick list here, as you can see—is on strengthening the Family Law Act 1975 to better protect women from violence, which was another promise made. What has happened there?

Ms Stodulka—Certainly there is work occurring within Attorney-General's under its Pathways Project. That is where the particular focus of that commitment lies. Also though, within the context of the national plan, there was an election commitment to work to strengthen and harmonise domestic violence and sexual assault laws nationally, and obviously the Family Law Act is relevant to that. I think I mentioned earlier that we have assistance from the Australian Government Solicitor, who is currently doing an analysis of the laws in the different jurisdictions, particularly to look for impediments to or opportunities in those laws for improving the experiences of women.

Senator BOYCE—Okay. Can I find somewhere material such as a public submission from the Office for Women into what should happen about the Family Law Act or what changes should be made?

Ms Stodulka—No, Senator. My understanding is the Pathways Project run by Attorney-General's is particularly focused on the new approach to family law that was introduced by

the previous government and looking at interactions between legislation in jurisdictions regarding violence against women and impacts around principles like shared access to care.

Senator BOYCE—Okay, thank you. I just want to go on to the Women’s Leadership and Development Program. There was about \$2.1 million worth of grants that were to go out for this. My interest is just in how these have been assessed against the leadership priority. We had the Maternity Coalition receiving \$46,800 for a project that was titled Strengthening women’s ownership of childbirth: organisational development of the Maternity Coalition. Can you tell me how that met the criteria of building leadership and what the actual project was?

Ms Moyle—We will have to take that on notice in relation to those grants, Senator, I am sorry.

Ms Beauchamp—We will try and get back to you today.

Senator BOYCE—Okay, I have some others I was similarly interested in. The Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia received \$99,000 for an organisational development program. Again, what was the leadership capacity building aspect of that grant? The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom received \$100,00 for ‘facilitating the preparation and participation of NGOs in the development of Australia’s national action plan on UN Security Resolution 1325’. My question there is the same. The last one related to the Girl Guides receiving \$85,250 for a project called Young Women—Taking the Lead. I am presuming this may have been somewhat related to their centenary celebrations, which I understand are next year.

Ms Moyle—Senator, there was a process in place for assessing the grants and I must say that the Women’s Leadership and Development Program takes a very broad view of leadership and it includes empowering women more generally and promoting equality. So there is a range of projects that were funded under that grant process. As I say, we will get back to you with identification of the process for assessing those grants.

Senator BOYCE—So it is not actually about building leadership itself, it may go back a step or two to look at the building blocks to consider taking on leadership—is that was you are saying?

Ms Moyle—That is right.

Senator BOYCE—Okay. I do have a few more questions, Chair. Shall I just go on?

CHAIR—Yes, keep going, Senator Boyce.

Senator BOYCE—At last estimates we were told about the telephone hotline for domestic violence in its current format being extended through until November 2008 and then a new model of service delivery would be given. What has happened here? Do we still have the same hotline for domestic violence?

Ms Moyle—We do have the same hotline for domestic violence.

Senator BOYCE—Will it cease next month?

Ms Moyle—No, it will not cease next month. Given the work of the national plan and the national council, and there are such synergies with the notion of a helpline, the council has asked that it be closely involved in the development of a model to replace the national

helpline that is currently in place. So there has been work to engage with the national council on this and therefore the current contract with Lifeline Australia will be extended to allow that to happen.

Senator BOYCE—Until when, sorry?

Ms Moyle—At this stage it has not been extended. It will be extended to allow the engagement to happen, so certainly to early next year.

Senator BOYCE—I presume the view would be that there should always be an operational hotline.

Ms Moyle—Exactly, Senator.

Senator BOYCE—Is that the intention? One other area which I have been following with some interest and which Senator Stephens will probably be able to help me with is social inclusion. How has the office been interacting with the Social Inclusion Unit, which I note is located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet?

Ms Beauchamp—The department has been supporting a lot of the work for the Social Inclusion Unit through Senator Stephens. The Office for Women provides ongoing input into the process of providing that. There is another area within my area of responsibility that is taking those processes forward, and we meet regularly.

Senator BOYCE—That is the mechanism by which you consult at the moment, by regular meetings?

Ms Beauchamp—The department puts forward proposals and advice to Senator Stephens and the Social Inclusion Unit.

Senator BOYCE—When you say the department, you mean FaHCSIA?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes; and involved in the development of that advice and input, consultation occurs with the Office for Women.

Senator BOYCE—I suppose I am just trying to get some sense of what the interaction looks like, what levels of people attend those meetings et cetera.

Ms Beauchamp—The government has identified the priorities around those groups to be addressed through Social Inclusion. Of course, each of those groups involves a proportion of women. We just provide ongoing policy advice and input into the processes. It is not a formal—

Senator BOYCE—So there is almost like an impact statement approach that you would look at anything that came through? Who is talking to who? Are Social Inclusion looking at what you are doing or are you looking at what they are doing?

Ms Beauchamp—I guess when you look at the social inclusion priorities, most of the target groups fall within our portfolio.

Senator BOYCE—Absolutely.

Ms Beauchamp—Of course we are taking a leadership and an active role in the development of initiatives and proposals under the social inclusion agenda. Women are automatically considered as part of that process.

Dr Harmer—Also, as Ms Beauchamp said, she is the most senior person in the department, at deputy secretary level, liaising with the unit in PM&C. Reporting to her are the Families Group, the disabilities group and the Office for Women, so it actually comes together with her. She is a very appropriate liaison point between FaHCSIA and the Social Inclusion Unit.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you.

CHAIR—Senator Furner.

Senator FURNER—Can I take you to women in the workforce, please. Would you be able to provide me with the contemporary figures on the amount of women in the workforce?

Ms Beauchamp—Not off the top of my head, but you might be able to, Sally.

Ms Moyle—I could, Senator. Are you thinking in terms of women's participation rate in the workforce?

Senator FURNER—That is correct.

Ms Moyle—I believe it is 58 per cent but I will need to check that.

Senator FURNER—That sounds about right. With maternity leave, what arrangements are either in place or being proposed for women in the workforce to access maternity leave so women can balance work and family life?

Ms Moyle—And you are asking for?

Senator FURNER—What sort of entitlements are being considered with respect to maternity leave for working women?

Ms Beauchamp—The Productivity Commission has provided a draft report on paid maternity leave. At the moment, government is considering the draft report but will not consider proposals in this regard until the Productivity Commission delivers a final report early next year. The Office for Women will be involved in development and advice around any paid maternity leave scheme that the government might be predisposed to. That is just an ongoing policy input process that will be coordinated across government in terms of the government's response to the Productivity Commission.

Senator Stephens—Senator Furner, just in relation to that, the Productivity Commission's draft report is still out for public submissions and those submissions do not close until mid-November. So the government is encouraging people interested in this issue to actually respond to the draft report.

Senator CAROL BROWN—Could you update us on how the department, if they are at all, are assisting with consultations that are being held around the country? Are they involved in doing public hearings?

Ms Beauchamp—The Productivity Commission manages those consultation processes.

Senator CAROL BROWN—So this department has no involvement?

Ms Beauchamp—We do not assist in any of the logistics. We have provided input into the work of the Productivity Commission.

Ms Moyle—However, Senator, the Office for Women has funded, through our national secretariats, a round of paid maternity leave consultations for women through the non-government sector. That will feed in directly to the Productivity Commission's inquiry but it is not part of the Productivity Commission's consultation process directly.

Dr Harmer—They are holding consultations on their draft report. It is appropriate that they do it because they have got to finalise it, and they have got to finalise it in relation to the submissions that have come in and the consultations they have et cetera.

Senator CAROL BROWN—So there is a further round of consultations that are taking place that you are funding, essentially?

Ms Moyle—No. The Productivity Commission is running a set of consultations to assist to ensure that the voices of women are heard through this process. The Office for Women has funded, through our national secretariats, a round of consultations for women and that will feed directly into the Productivity Commission's process. We are not working with the Productivity Commission.

Dr Harmer—We are ensuring women have a voice in the response back to the Productivity Commission.

Senator CAROL BROWN—I understand that. The consultations that are funded by the Office for Women will be going through every state and territory around Australia?

Ms Moyle—I do not think they are going to every state and territory, but they are going to many. I can give you the full list very soon.

Senator CAROL BROWN—Thank you.

Senator FURNER—One last question with respect to protections of women in the workforce and access to maternity leave. Are there any plans to enhance protection, whether it be on discrimination or unfair dismissals, for women that may be seeking to take maternity leave or women that are returning from maternity leave back into the workforce?

Ms Moyle—We have the Sex Discrimination Act in place that does prevent discrimination against parents returning from parental leave on the basis of their family responsibilities to the extent that they are dismissed from employment. Women can also claim indirect discrimination if they suffer any other detriment that can be attributed to their family responsibilities. Also, of course, the work that is being done by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations around the national employment standards is also addressing the terms and conditions of employment.

Senator FURNER—Can you just explain a bit more about that, because I do understand there is an enhanced industrial relations policy that might provide greater protections for women in that area, or is that better addressed—

Ms Moyle—It is a matter for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, but there are, as you may be aware, a set of 10 national employment standards that underpin all employment relationships.

Senator Stephens—Under those standards, Senator, the basic parental leave entitlement will include 12 months unpaid leave for each parent of the child and the right of one parent to

request an additional 12 months unpaid leave, with the total not exceeding 24 months to be shared between both parents. That standard comes into effect on 1 January 2010.

Ms Moyle—Could I just confirm that the women's workforce participation rate is 58 per cent.

Senator FURNER—Just another question on percentage rates: would you know what percentage of women do not currently receive paid maternity leave?

Ms Moyle—It is a difficult figure to come by, unfortunately. We do have some figures that come from the portfolio agency of FaHCSIA, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, but that data relates to organisations with 100-plus employee. There are a range of other data available but I would have to get back to you on the most definitive answer for that.

Senator Stephens—Senator Furner, the ABS's forms of employment survey, which was November last year, shows that female employees are more likely than males to have access to paid parental leave entitlements: 45.4 per cent of female employees had access to paid maternity leave entitlements in 2007, which was actually a decrease from 46.9 per cent in 2006; 39 per cent of men had access to paid paternity leave entitlements in 2007, a slight increase; and 21.3 per cent of employees did not know if they were entitled to paid maternity or paternity leave.

Senator FURNER—So it has actually decreased since those stats were available?

Senator Stephens—Slightly.

Senator FURNER—Any reasons why that may have been the case?

Senator Stephens—Not that we are aware of at the moment, but of great interest.

Senator FURNER—Thank you.

Senator BOYCE—Could I ask a follow-up question there about equal opportunity. Can you speak on behalf of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency?

Ms Beauchamp—No. I am not sure if they were invited to attend.

Dr Harmer—They are available to be invited but I do not think they—

Senator BOYCE—Perhaps I could ask my question and then you could tell me what might happen about that. In terms of the very good work they do around employer of choice, I was somewhat surprised to discover that one of the new prerequisites they have put into their criteria for organisations to be considered an employer of choice is that they must have a minimum of six weeks paid leave after 12 months of service available to women. Whilst I support that as a good idea, it is not currently a requirement, so I am very surprised that it would be considered as a prerequisite. On what basis would that decision to have put that prerequisite in have been made?

Dr Harmer—We shall take that as a question on notice to the organisation and try and get you an answer to that.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you.

CHAIR—Senator Adams.

Senator ADAMS—I would like to ask some questions about support for rural women from the office and also whether, from the recent conference which was held in Canberra, there were any recommendations from that group of women?

Ms Moyle—Yes, Senator. Earlier this year, as part of the election commitment to develop a rural women's network, a rural women's summit was held. Emerging from that was a communique, which is available publicly, and a summit report is currently close to finalisation which does include recommendations as well.

Senator ADAMS—The main recommendations?

Ms Moyle—I have not got recommendations from the communique at this stage, but there were a number of findings and significant messages including that the talent of rural women must be utilised for the sake of Australia's future, that women from all backgrounds will work with government for better policies and that Australia requires immediate action on water. Those were the kinds of recommendations that emerged from that summit in the communique.

Senator ADAMS—On water, was anything specifically targeted towards women who have been suffering through the drought, and their roles? There was a very good article in the *Australian* today on that, on how women are having to move off the properties to go and get other employment to try and keep the families going.

Ms Moyle—That is right. It is addressed in the report and that will be available very soon. We can provide you with a copy of the communique, if you would like.

Senator ADAMS—That would good. I have just had a look on the website and cannot find it.

Senator Stephens—Senator Adams, just on that point, can I say that the report that was released today by Minister Burke about the social impact of the drought—

Senator ADAMS—I was there; it is good.

Senator Stephens—is a stunningly important work, I think, for regional Australia.

Senator ADAMS—I have got a copy of it. I was at the breakfast this morning. As far as that conference goes, will those people be meeting again? Is there anything in the future for them to have another conference to come together?

Ms Moyle—I am not certain that those particular members of the summit will come together as a group. What is planned is that there be a rural women's network, and that will be considered by whole-of-government partners now as a result that summit. But there is also within our four national women's secretariats a rural women's secretariat, so there is conversation at the moment as to whether that will become a rural women's network or whether further action is needed. So there will be a rural women's network and there already is a secretariat that relates to rural women within our four women's secretariats.

Senator ADAMS—That is good. The 2020 Summit: were any of the recommendations that came out of that related to rural women? Was there anything out of that particular group?

Ms Moyle—I cannot tell you for certain that there were not recommendations about rural women, but I am not aware of them. We will check and get back to you.

Senator ADAMS—Would you check it and just take that on notice.

Dr Harmer—We will take that on notice.

Senator ADAMS—I just want to keep up with that. I have had a look and I could not see anything there but I am sure that at that stage the people who were attending the summit would have certainly raised issues. That is about it, thank you.

CHAIR—There are no further questions on that output. Thank you, Senator Stephens. Senator McLucas will come to the table for output 4.1, Housing support.

[12.17 pm]

Senator PAYNE—Dr Harmer, I have asked some questions in this area before, as you know. I want to start with the National Rental Affordability Scheme, now that that is making progress. Can you tell us how many applications were received by your department during round one?

Dr Harmer—Yes, we can.

Ms Winzar—Senator, in the first round we had 69 applications from private and not-for-profit applicants.

Senator PAYNE—Was that in line with expectations, Ms Winzar?

Ms Winzar—It was certainly consistent with our early expectations and, given the economic climate, I think it was certainly encouraging.

Senator PAYNE—Just remind me when the closure date was on those applications again.

Ms Winzar—On 4 September.

Senator PAYNE—Of those 69, how many of those initial applications in round 1 were compliant with the requirements of the department?

Mr Jagers—We have not completed the final assessment process for NRAS.

Senator PAYNE—Are you part-way through?

Mr Jagers—We are; we are quite close to doing the first assessment process but we have not completed it.

Senator PAYNE—Can you give me some indication of the proportion of compliant applications at this point? Are we high, are we low, or are we somewhere in between?

Mr Jagers—I think the standard of the applications was reasonably good. Certainly as it was the first round of applications, we feel it was reasonably good.

Senator PAYNE—If you are in the process of doing the assessment, can you come back to us on notice with the number of applications of the 69 that were compliant?

Dr Harmer—Yes, we can.

Senator PAYNE—Thanks, Mr Harmer. Can you then tell me, of the 69, what is the total number of dwellings that are associated with those applications?

Mr Jagers—In the 69 application, there were 343 projects identified and 13,404 properties or dwellings identified in those projects.

Senator PAYNE—And in the process of doing the breakdown, can you tell the committee how many of the applications received in this round were for projects in metropolitan areas and how many in regional areas?

Mr Jagers—Senator, I do not have a breakdown of regional versus metropolitan areas.

Senator PAYNE—Is that something you can get for us?

Mr Jagers—It is. I have got a breakdown by state but not—

Senator PAYNE—I will come to that. If you can come back to the committee in relation to the breakdown between metro and regional—

Dr Harmer—Just to clarify, you want metropolitan area versus the rest of the state, basically?

Senator PAYNE—Yes.

Dr Harmer—We will see what we can do on that.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. I would appreciate that. Then, Mr Harmer, associated with that response, perhaps the number of dwellings in each of those divisions as well? So of your 13,404—

Dr Harmer—If we can do the first one, we should be able to do the second one.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. I think then you said you could do state by state. Why do not you, Mr Jagers, assist us with that information and then I might come to cities per se?

Mr Jagers—Certainly. In New South Wales there were applications for 49 projects with 4,899 incentives.

Senator PAYNE—That means dwellings?

Mr Jagers—Dwellings, yes. In Victoria, 142 projects with 2,979 dwellings; in Queensland, 64 projects with 3,252 dwellings; in South Australia, 14 projects with 402 dwellings; in Western Australia, 21 projects with 458 dwellings; in Tasmania, 35 projects with 848 dwellings; in the Northern Territory, two projects with 100 dwellings; and in the ACT, four projects totalling 56 dwellings.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you very much for that. Can you then break it down any further to indicate to us in the metropolitan areas, so the Sydney statistical division, for example, and then Melbourne—I do not expect you to have this here—Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and greater Hobart; how it breaks down between the inner, middle and outer ring suburbs?

Mr Jagers—Yes, Senator. We can take that on notice.

Senator PAYNE—Okay. I do not imagine you would have the information with you, do you?

Mr Jagers—I do not have it with me, no.

Senator PAYNE—Okay. I thought I would ask, just to see, I know how well prepared you are, Mr Jagers. I would appreciate that on notice. In the breakdown that you have been doing of the applications, have you determined what proportion of the applications are those which

would be eligible for the direct cash grants versus those which would be eligible for the tax offset and then how many dwellings fall into each category?

Mr Jagers—Senator, I do not have figures on that yet. That will depend on the final decisions around the applications themselves. I can say that it was looking like around half the applications were made by the not-for-profit sector.

Senator PAYNE—Okay. That means half, I assume, were received from commercial entities?

Mr Jagers—Yes, Senator.

Senator PAYNE—In the commercial side of the spectrum, do you have any analysis about how many of those involved the participation of a superannuation fund or another institutional investor as an equity participant?

Mr Jagers—I do not have that figure.

Senator PAYNE—Is that something you would be breaking down?

Mr Jagers—It is something we could provide, yes.

Senator PAYNE—If you could take that on notice, that would be helpful.

Mr Jagers—A number of the applications obviously had quite a number of joint venture partners. Some of those may have been from different sectors but we have not done any analysis within each of the projects and the consortiums, what the make-up of each of those was at this stage.

Senator PAYNE—If you could take that on notice, it would be helpful. When you look at the forward estimates for the NRAS, the bulk of the funding is in the tax offsets end of business, as it were. Looking at what you have so far, do you expect that that estimate is going to need revision?

Mr Jagers—There was a sliding scale over the first four years so that in the first year we were expecting about 50 per cent of the incentives to be for tax credits and 50 per cent to be cash payments. That decreases to 10 per cent in the fourth year so that 10 per cent would be cash payments in the fourth year onwards and 90 per cent tax credits. It is a bit early to say whether that trend is going to be problematic from this first round.

Senator PAYNE—I might ask that again; we will talk about that again after the second round perhaps.

Mr Jagers—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—Okay. Last night I was talking to Treasury—in a relatively calm environment at the time—and the Australian Taxation Office about some of the issues around the charitable tax status of the not-for-profit organisations who may be engaged in applications under the NRAS. I wonder if you can give the committee any advice about—and I know Senator Ludlam was interested in this as well—the status of those organisations and whether you have an expectation that their involvement may compromise that tax status?

Mr Jagers—I guess Treasury and the ATO are best placed to answer questions about whether particular organisations would be putting at risk their charitable tax status. We do

know that the community housing industry find that to be a problem, an issue. There have been some discussions between the ATO, Treasury and the charitable housing sector.

Senator PAYNE—Are you involved in those discussions?

Mr Jagers—We have been involved in those discussions. The way that the scheme is designed is that charitable housing providers can apply for incentives and can participate in the scheme without risking their charitable status. However, one issue that has been raised is that, if they participate fully in the scheme in terms of having tenants at higher income levels than those that might be otherwise considered to be in poverty, they put themselves at some risk. It is that issue that we have been having some discussions with the sector about because we are obviously keen for the sector to be involved in the scheme.

Senator PAYNE—So as you are doing your analysis and then these applications in round 1 proceed to assessment and, I guess, the yea or nay, the tick or the cross, how are you going to factor those questions in and will you be doing that in consultation with the ATO?

Mr Jagers—Once the assessment round is completed, we will be talking to all of the successful providers. Because the legislation is yet to be passed, we will be giving all of those organisations an opportunity to have a look at their application again and see if there is any further information they need to consider before entering into the scheme.

Senator PAYNE—Is the implication of that that you might give them an opportunity to change their arrangements that they have in the joint venture? What is the implication of that?

Mr Jagers—Organisations that have applied for incentives under the scheme did so based on the existing legislation, so we are not expecting people to have been unaware of their status as a charitable organisation and how that might be impacted. But it is an opportunity. Because the application process started prior to the legislation being completed, we want to make sure that organisations had an opportunity to see what the final state of the legislation was before entering into the scheme. There will be an opportunity to discuss the particular circumstances that they are in with the department.

Dr Harmer—For example, I do not think it is likely that all of the applications will have been very specific about the income levels of the tenants being proposed for the dwellings, and so that is a factor. Then obviously when we make available to them information, they may want to adjust it to make sure they remain eligible.

Senator PAYNE—That is a consideration that they can take into account.

Dr Harmer—Without compromising their status.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you very much for that. In relation to the first round of applications, how many of those are proposals that have already received planning and building approval? And what is the total number of dwellings that is represented by those applications?

Mr Jagers—I do not have that information.

Senator PAYNE—Is that something you can get for us on notice? Ms Winzar is nodding.

Ms Winzar—We will take it on notice. We will see what we can do, bearing in mind that we are still in the process of doing the assessments.

Senator PAYNE—I understand that. When do you expect that to be concluded?

Dr Harmer—We will make available to you information that comes from our analysis. Given how busy these guys are, I will not want to divert their energy too much into things that they would not do as a normal part of their assessment. So we will answer your questions on notice from the work that we are doing but, if there are some that we would not normally have got that bit of information from our analysis, I will have to make a judgement as to how long it takes to get it.

Senator PAYNE—Well, Mr Harmer, this is the Senate estimates process and we do, across a range of eight committees in the Senate, ask questions and need answers that do not necessarily relate to the work that will coincidentally or by matter of course be done by departments, and sometimes it does take some extra information. I do not want to divert the officers, I understand that, but I do not think any of the questions I have asked so far are unreasonable.

Dr Harmer—I am not sure about that, Senator. But—

Senator PAYNE—Do you think I am unreasonable, Mr Harmer?

Dr Harmer—No; I am not sure that the ones you have asked require an unreasonable amount of extra work because I do not know. However, it is always up to the secretary of the department in allocation of resources—it has been for some time—where we make judgements. You will see in our record that FaHCSIA has been very good at providing support.

Senator PAYNE—And very helpful to me indeed since I have been asking questions in this area, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—Indeed, and we will continue to do it, but there is a consideration, which I am just pointing out, that, if it is a significant additional burden on something we would not normally do, I will have to make a judgement and we will let you know.

Senator PAYNE—Well, we will deal with it then if it becomes a problem. Thank you very much.

Dr Harmer—Thank you.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, as always on that issue—and we know it is a common response we have—as early as we can get that determination the better, so that the senator knows the process.

Dr Harmer—I am not saying this because there is anything in Senator Payne's questions. I think that for most of them the data she wants is probably going to be available from our analysis, but I was just making a general point.

CHAIR—Senator Payne, do you have many more questions on this particular issue?

Senator PAYNE—About six, but they may be taken on notice.

CHAIR—I am just wondering whether we should break now or—

Senator PAYNE—It would take me five minutes to run through them quickly.

CHAIR—Senator Ludlam, do you have questions on the same issue?

Senator LUDLAM—I do have a couple, yes.

CHAIR—On the basis that we will have a number of questions on the same issue, we will break now. Yes, Senator Boyce?

Senator BOYCE—I have a brief statement to make regarding the community consultations in Strathpine on the GP superclinic.

CHAIR—We will put that on record now. We will break after Senator Boyce makes her statement and come back at 1.30 pm. Senator Boyce.

Senator BOYCE—There was some discussion about the facts relating to who invited whom where for the community consultations around the Strathpine GP superclinic last evening. I would just like to put on the record that Senator McLucas was correct in saying that Minister Roxon did speak by phone to the member for Dickson, Peter Dutton. She did this on the morning of 6 October to advise him that she was attending the forum at Strathpine that evening. Mr Dutton was not able to come along to the meeting that night because he had another commitment. Thank you.

Senator McLucas—Thank you, Senator Boyce.

CHAIR—Thank you, Senator Boyce. We will come back to this same questioning at 1.30 pm.

Proceedings suspended from 12.33 pm to 1.31 pm

CHAIR—We are in the middle of questioning on the issues around housing and Senator Payne was in midstream when we called a break.

Senator PAYNE—We were just discussing what information you might be able to get for us and what information you might not. It is all good. Thank you, and I do appreciate that. As I have said, I have been very grateful for the department's assistance when I have been asking these questions. On the last occasion I discussed with you, I think, Dr Harmer, how the numbers for the NRAS were divined, as it were. I think the answer was that basically they were the policy numbers that were put forward by the then opposition at the election and that you had not done further modelling after that. Has that situation changed? Have you done any modelling in terms of what you are seeing come in now and what your expectations for rounds 2 and 3 are?

Ms Ham—In terms of the numbers that we are currently working to, they were election commitment numbers. In terms of the current numbers, we have taken what has come in for round 1 as an indication that there is support for the scheme. We are likely to undertake some econometrics to inform us in relation to the expansion of the program. We will take those in round 3, which is March of next year. We want to do some research in advance of that to look at the take-up.

Senator PAYNE—Ms Ham, when do you envisage commencing that research?

Ms Ham—I think we will be commencing that research prior to the end of 2008 so that we have that information well in advance of the third call.

Dr Harmer—In a way, the work we are doing in evaluating the current round will be an input. That is a very important element of the information about likely future numbers et cetera.

Senator PAYNE—Is the material that might be produced in that process something that would be available to the committee?

Dr Harmer—If you were to ask us at the next Senate estimates, given that we have mentioned that we are doing it, what our analysis shows and what we have available, we will provide.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you very much. I appreciate that, Dr Harmer. This might be information that you need to come back to committee with, but in terms of the first round, which is currently being analysed, how many of those applications related to proposals that have already commenced construction? Can you tell us how many lots are attached to that set of applications?

Ms Ham—We are currently in the assessment process for round 1 so it is difficult to provide that information today, but we would be able to take that on notice and provide that fairly shortly after the announcement of the likely outcome.

Senator PAYNE—I was looking at the draft guidelines and the eligibility for tenants side of things. Can you tell me if you did any analysis in terms of the award rates of pay, for example, of key workers, who are some of the people who are most challenged by the housing environment as it currently stands—that is, key workers in occupations such as police, firefighters, ambulance officers, teachers, child-care officers and so on? You know what the list is. Did you do any analysis of their award rates of pay and how they might fit into the spectrum that you are looking at in terms of eligible tenants? If you did do that, is that broken down by state or by capital city and rural versus metropolitan?

Ms Ham—Certainly at the time that we were finalising the tenant eligibility and the cut-off rates for continuing eligibility we did seek some information from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations about award rates for key workers. I do not have that information with me today, but certainly that gave us a state-by-state breakdown for the starting pay rates for those particular areas. We certainly looked at police officers, child-care workers and teachers.

Senator PAYNE—How did that compare against the eligibility criteria which had been established for the scheme?

Ms Ham—When we looked at that information across the states and territories, in a large part it did fit within the eligibility criteria, particularly when we took account of the eligibility requirements for families.

Senator PAYNE—Can anyone give me an assessment of what the annual cost of administering the NRAS is going to be in the out years?

Ms Ham—Over the four-year period we are looking at \$6.4 million to administer the scheme. We are looking to spend \$1.4 million in 2008-09, \$1.6 million in 2009-10, \$1.7 million in 2010-11 and the same for the fourth year.

Senator PAYNE—You may not have done this assessment yet—and if you have not then I will ask you to take it on notice—but of this first round of applications can you indicate to the committee how many of the applications provide between 20 and 100 dwellings and how many provide for more than 100?

Ms Ham—I do not have that information today so I will take that on notice.

Dr Harmer—We will certainly be able to give that to you.

Senator PAYNE—As far as round 2 is concerned, can you tell us whether that is still expected to open on 25 October—at the end of this week?

Ms Ham—As a result of receiving more applications in round 1 than anticipated, we provided information to say that we were going to take slightly longer with the assessment for round 1. So we anticipate that round 2 will be advertised on 10 November.

Senator PAYNE—The mandatory requirements weighted criteria material talks about ensuring that the consortium has demonstrated capacity and experience and that a proposition is financially viable as well. What methods are you going to use as a department to evaluate those two factors?

Ms Ham—For the first round we contracted with KPMG to undertake the proposal's viability. That covered criterion 5.

Senator PAYNE—So they are going to do it—KPMG?

Ms Ham—Yes, they have done that. They also looked at aspects of criterion 4, because that was also looking at the financial capacity of the organisation or the consortium.

Senator PAYNE—So that is being done outside the department?

Ms Ham—They were contracted, so they worked as part of our assessment team.

Senator PAYNE—And the advice was given back to you on that? I think you said before, when we were talking about questions and the information that I was seeking, that your officers were very busy in the process—and I understand that, particularly as we are talking about 343 projects and 13,404 dwellings in this round. Does that mean that you have had a need to recruit extra officers into the department? Have you also had a need to recruit officers who have a particular commercial experience in housing development to properly assess these applications?

Dr Harmer—We have certainly recruited additional officers into the department. I will let Ms Winzar or Mr Jagers talk about the particular skill mix. Given the significance of this program and that it is a little bit out of what we would normally do in the housing area—particularly in housing in FaHCSIA—we would be looking for people with more commercial and financial skills. They are the sorts of people we have been looking to recruit. I am assuming that we have some of those people.

Ms Ham—As part of the KPMG contract they also provided us with advice around the best approach to assess selection criterion 3 in terms of accessibility and sustainability.

Senator PAYNE—Finally on NRAS, I know there is an encouragement to propose developments with properties that are more accessible to people who are ageing or living with disabilities in the criteria and the requirements. They obviously have extra costs associated

with their construction and extra requirements in terms of features in some ways. Is it the department's view that the \$8,000 incentive is adequate to ensure there will be sufficient affordable rental dwellings provided for that section of the community?

Ms Winzar—We will use the experience of this first round particularly to make an assessment about the sort of response we have had from consortia for, I suppose, universally accessible or differently abled buildings.

Senator PAYNE—It is 20 per cent in this round, is it?

Ms Winzar—That is what we are aiming for, roughly. If we get that, we will be doing well. The issue about cost of construction, though, I think is a little moot. I know in some cases, yes, the costs of changing an existing building to accommodate people with disabilities can be quite high, but if we are talking about new construction and you are building it into the design right from the word go, I think it is perhaps a different story.

Senator PAYNE—Sure. Thank you very much for that. As I said, on the NRAS that concludes my questions. I am sure other senators have questions and then I have other areas that I want to go to.

Senator LUDLAM—I just have a couple of more questions to ask along the line of where Senator Payne was heading. Can you just remind me—I believe you covered this before—of the rough make-up of not-for-profit or community housing organisations who have applied under round 1 as compared to commercial developers?

Mr Jagers—I think I said it was approximately 50 per cent. I think those figures are 44 per cent commercial and 56 per cent not-for-profit organisations. I checked that at the break.

Senator LUDLAM—Great. So it is obviously a fairly important part of the government's strategy to invite community housing and not-for-profits to be part of the scheme. So it is good that that proportion is so high. Have any of the community housing groups expressed to you directly their concerns about recent comments of the ATO around the charitable status issue that Senator Payne raised with you before?

Mr Jagers—We have been involved in some discussions with not-for-profit housing providers and charitable housing providers and also been in discussions that involve the ATO and Treasury and the department with representatives of that sector. So, yes, they have expressed their concerns.

Senator LUDLAM—And what do you see as being the most likely resolution, because I understand that, particularly for the community housing providers, they have gone into bids for round 1 on the understanding that their charitable status would not be threatened. New information has arisen and that presumably is putting some of these proposals under threat.

Ms Winzar—As Dr Harmer indicated before, it would be open to the not-for-profit organisations to take tenants with lower incomes rather than higher up the income scale, which seems to be one of the things which is raising some queries around this issue of charitable status. So part of the response will be in the hands of the community housing organisations or not-for-profit providers.

Senator LUDLAM—But it was not really the intention of the scheme that the community housing providers should only be able to take on tenants at the lower end of the income spectrum, was it?

Ms Winzar—No, that is correct.

Senator LUDLAM—So that is not really a remedy as such. I put it to you that it would be more desirable for the original intent of the scheme to prevail.

Ms Winzar—It will similarly be one of the options that is open to the not-for-profit organisations, I think, if they are concerned about losing their charitable status.

Senator LUDLAM—I have information that the largest community housing provider in WA has threatened to pull out of the scheme altogether if the issue around charitable status is not clarified by the tax office or by a process of amendment to the bill. I am just trying to remember. It sounded from your initial breakdown as though there was a reasonable take-up in Western Australia and this is the largest community housing provider. So it is not an issue that is at the margins for them. So are you saying that was a statement, not a question? I might leave that one there. I realise that we do not have legislation or regulations yet, but I believe it was the intention of the minister that, with the housing that was built under this scheme, it was part of your process to look at energy efficiency, water efficiency and location issues—access to public transport—as part of a broader affordability agenda. Can you comment on how you are assessing those factors?

Ms Ham—Yes. As I said before, KPMG has been contracted to assist the department in the assessment process and they brought, as part of that contract, some specialist expertise to provide advice around how best to assess the sustainability and accessibility criterion as part of the selection criteria. Certainly, we had advice so that we were able to then provide guidance to the assessors that we employed in the assessment process and we looked at what the current state and territory governments have in place in terms of existing building codes in that regard.

Senator LUDLAM—Just staying with energy for the moment, how are you benchmarking energy efficiency performance of the proposals that have been put on the table?

Ms Ham—Without having the detail, I think we were using the existing benchmark that is currently within the Victorian jurisdiction. I would have to come back to you on the exact benchmark tool that is being used.

Senator LUDLAM—Okay. I would appreciate that, because I suppose there is a risk, purely from an affordability perspective, that we are trying to get people into houses—there is really a severe demand at the moment and people are going to be interested in getting places built as rapidly as they can—and that we risk stranding people in energy-inefficient and water-inefficient housing, and that is clearly not ideal. I wonder whether the benchmarks that either you or your consultants are engaging in in these proposals are going to leave us with housing that is in the middle of band, or are we going to be looking at really energy-efficient and water-efficient residences being built? How are we ensuring that the best places are being built?

Ms Winzar—The assessment in this case—in round 1 at least—is a relative one. So we would be weighting the more energy-efficient housing, even if it were not optimally energy efficient, if that makes sense. So the main driver of this measure is to increase housing supply and, yes, certainly one of those considerations will be the lifetime cost of housing and its efficiency overall. But that is not a do-or-die measure, if I can put it in that sense. We will benchmark all of the proposals against a set of criteria and it will be simply one factor that we will take into account.

Senator LUDLAM—Relative to each other. And I presume water is going to work the same way—water efficiency and appliances and so on?

Ms Winzar—I do not know about water, but we will take that on notice and check it for you.

Dr Harmer—I expect that water will be in the same category. As Ms Winzar said, all of these things are important and they will be part of the assessment. But at the moment, given the gap between the demand and the supply of affordable housing in Australia, getting houses on the ground will be very important also. So hopefully we will get houses on the ground which are long-term efficient and efficient in water and energy. Hopefully we will not be having any that are not, but it is going to be important to get affordable houses on the ground.

Senator LUDLAM—I am interested in how you have transmitted that information to the people putting the bids in at least for round 1.

Dr Harmer—The proposals?

Senator LUDLAM—The proposals. I am not asking you to comment on the draft bill, because that process is afoot, but the draft legislation that we have seen mentions energy and water efficiency only tangentially. It is not central. There is nothing mandatory in there, which is a concern of ours. It does not take any longer to build energy- and water-efficient housing. I am just concerned, I suppose, that it is potentially just going to get lost in the rush.

Dr Harmer—I do not believe it will be lost in the rush, because it is an element of our assessment criteria and presumably we will publicise that as an element for the applications coming in. So we will take it seriously.

Senator LUDLAM—They are publicised. I was just surprised not to see it in the draft legislation.

Dr Harmer—I think it is there.

Senator LUDLAM—Is it there? There is a word? There is no indication of how you or your consultants are expected to benchmark performance in that regard. So I would appreciate anything that you could provide to us on notice as to how that work is being done. In a similar vein, location issues are really important as far as transport costs and access to services for people on low- and medium-incomes. How are you benchmarking proposals in that regard?

Ms Ham—Again, we provided more detailed information in the draft guidelines that were available at the time people were making application. Certainly, we were looking at the proximity to transport and we developed a tool for our assessors to be able to benchmark that so that we could provide some information to you on that.

Senator LUDLAM—Are you able to provide us any information—I am not asking you to hand over that whole model—on what its parameters are and how it operates? I imagine that would be quite a sophisticated piece of work to be able to accurately compare different properties.

Ms Ham—That is correct. We can look at the information that we can release to you, given that it is part of our assessment tool that we used internally for our assessment processes.

Senator LUDLAM—Without compromising those processes, I would appreciate some idea—I am aware of what information is being provided to essential components—of how you are evaluating those factors which in some cases are probably quite hard to monetarise or compare with each other.

Dr Harmer—Sure. We will try to get you some information. Senator, you would appreciate that, to the extent that we are hugely oversubscribed, the emphasis we will be able to give to those sorts of issues in sorting out the better ones will be high. Where we get only marginally above the sorts of numbers of houses in any particular round that we are looking to generate, I guess you would have to say that they will not be as significant. If we get, as we hope, in round 2 and round 3 large numbers of applications, we will be sorting them out according to those sorts of issues and we will be applying that quite vigorously. We will give you an indication of the sorts of things that KPMG and ourselves are doing—how we are doing it.

Senator LUDLAM—In terms of round 1, would you consider, given the numbers of properties that have been proposed so far, that you are undersubscribed or oversubscribed compared with where you were hoping to be?

Dr Harmer—We are oversubscribed in the initial round. What we do not know yet, I do not think, is whether we are oversubscribed for eligible bids that come in.

Senator LUDLAM—I understand.

Dr Harmer—We are still working through that.

Senator LUDLAM—I will leave it there.

Dr Harmer—I have an answer to Senator Adams's question about Centrelink and the time it takes to assess pensions. Can I read into *Hansard* what we have from Centrelink? Centrelink advises that it aims to have 80 per cent of age pension new claims created within 28 days of lodgement. As you recall, this morning Mr Hartland mentioned that the date of effect will be the date they lodged if they are eligible. They have done better than that. They have got 82 per cent within 28 days. Some age pension claims can be delayed beyond 28 days. Common reasons include where real estate held by the claimant must be valued prior to granting the pension, where there are delays in receiving information from claimants and where complex financial arrangements—for example, trusts, companies or self-managed super funds—are involved. They are the sorts of issues taken into account. The benchmark performance indicator is 28 days. They achieve it more than 80 per cent of the time. The times they do not are often the result of further checking of financial arrangements.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, the point was that the eligibility of the payment would be determined on the date of claim if they are granted a pension.

Dr Harmer—Yes, indeed.

CHAIR—Thank you, Dr Harmer. Senator Payne has questions on another issue.

Senator PAYNE—Yes, I was going to pursue some questions on the Housing Affordability Fund. Am I still in the right area?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. I think the first round of the HAF, to use another of the acronyms from your department, closed on 15 October; is that correct?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—Can you tell the committee how many expressions of interest were received at that date?

Ms Ham—We have received 91 applications or expressions of interest, and they cover applications from all jurisdictions.

Senator PAYNE—Thanks for that, Ms Ham. In terms of the jurisdictions, can you tell us how many of those first-round applications were received from local government authorities in each of the states and territories?

Ms Ham—I do not have that level of detail. I just have the raw figure of how many applications have been received.

Dr Harmer—We would be able to give that to you as part of our analysis.

Senator PAYNE—Do you have the figure per state?

Ms Ham—I do have a state breakdown.

Senator PAYNE—Could you break that down for us and then I would appreciate the other detail as well. Thanks, Dr Harmer.

Ms Ham—We received two from the ACT, 19 from New South Wales, one from the Northern Territory, 16 from Queensland, 23 from South Australia, five from Tasmania, 15 from Victoria and 10 from Western Australia.

Senator PAYNE—When you come back to the committee with the breakdown, Ms Ham, can you break it down for me from local government authorities and then from each of the state and territory governments so that we get an understanding of where the level of application is? Thank you. That would be helpful. Then can you also tell us in that process how many of those 91 applications were partnership applications from the private sector in association with either local government or state or territory government?

Ms Ham—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. Have you done any analysis to enable you to tell us what the main types of proposals are that are in this round of applications?

Ms Ham—The application round only closed a week ago. The assessment process has only just got underway, so I could not provide that level of detail. But we can come back to you.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. When some of us were engaged in the Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability we developed some familiarity with the work of the

Development Assessment Forum, DAF, and we talked about that in some context. How does the operation of the HAF differ from the operation of the DAF? I really wish I did not have to say that. How do they differ and where is the key differential that you would identify in terms of the work of your department and the expenditure of government funds?

Mr Jagers—I guess the key interaction is on electronic development assessment processes that we are funding through the Housing Affordability Fund. So the DAF outlined model steps for development assessment, and one of those is around electronic development assessments. So the Housing Affordability Fund contains within it a \$30 million allocation for electronic development assessment to be rolled out. We have been working hard this financial year to reach agreements with states and territories around electronic development assessment in their jurisdictions and also working with local government associations.

Senator PAYNE—The electronic development assessment process was a project of the DAF, though, wasn't it?

Mr Jagers—That is right.

Senator PAYNE—Is that continuing or is that in hiatus given what you are doing?

Mr Jagers—There are linkages between the DAF and the electronic development assessment process. There is a steering committee for the DAF that was working on electronic development assessments and we have been working with that forum.

Senator PAYNE—Dr Harmer, it is my understanding that there is no requirement for legislation to support the introduction and operation of the Housing Affordability Fund. Is that correct?

Ms Winzar—That is correct.

Senator PAYNE—What premise is that based on? There is an appropriation but no legislation; is that correct?

Ms Winzar—Yes. Essentially, I suppose, they are grants to facilitate—

Senator PAYNE—They are grants.

Ms Winzar—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—In the previous discussion on the NRAS, Senator Ludlam was talking about locations and areas of focus for the NRAS. But, in relation to this fund, has the department done any analysis of geographic locations which should be receiving priority for the application of HAF funding based on whether it is undersupply or affordability issues and that sort of thing?

Ms Winzar—We have had a bit of a look at where the supply shortages are. It does not really help us particularly much because there are so many regions across Australia at the moment that are experiencing that problem.

Senator PAYNE—Sure.

Ms Winzar—One of the main elements of the Housing Affordability Fund assessments is the involvement of the state and territory governments. I understand that we have already sent

all of the electronic copies of the applications that we received to those governments so that they can do an assessment against some of the mandatory criteria in the process.

Senator PAYNE—So they would be applications from local government which you are sending back to state and territory governments?

Ms Winzar—Yes, that is correct.

Senator PAYNE—You would not send their own back to them?

Ms Winzar—We would. Probably we would, because we need them to have some view about the relative merits of all of those as well.

Senator PAYNE—You would kind of hope they had included that really.

Ms Winzar—You kind of would, yes.

Senator PAYNE—So it is not so much a formal analysis as a process of, I guess, asking the state and territory governments for information?

Dr Harmer—It is really getting the state and territory governments to ensure that the proposals which come, for example, directly from local government will not conflict with broad state planning. We cannot go very far down the track in funding a proposal if at the end of the day a particular local government proposal will run foul of the state plan.

Senator PAYNE—This is called the Housing Affordability Fund—hopefully for good reason. How is the program intended to ensure that whatever cost savings are created by the grants that you deliver as a Commonwealth department to the applicants are actually passed on to the consumers ultimately in terms of housing affordability?

Mr Jagers—In terms of the criteria for assessing applications, the key criteria is value for money. In assessing value for money, we are assessing whether the value of the Commonwealth government grant or contribution ends up being passed on to home purchasers at the end. Applicants have had to outline their strategy for making sure that happens. So if an applicant says that they will pass on a full, say, \$10,000 per dwelling subsequent to what the Commonwealth provides, they need to demonstrate how they are going to do that. So we have developed an assessment tool by using a consultancy, Urbis, to develop the assessment tool. As I said, the key to that is the value for money aspect. But in assessing value for money, different proposals will have, I guess, different risks associated with them in terms of whether they will be able to pass those savings on to homebuyers. We have engaged KPMG to help us with a risk assessment of the applications.

Senator PAYNE—So this is a \$512 million fund over five years. How much is allocated to the first round?

Mr Jagers—There is \$50 million allocated this financial year, but a part of that will be the electronic development assessment.

Senator PAYNE—If a project that is the subject of an application has already been approved for construction or is under construction, can it still qualify for a grant under the scheme?

Ms Winzar—I will check this and get back to you if it differs, but my understanding is yes, providing that using the HAF would generate some savings which would then be passed on to the homeowners.

Senator PAYNE—Given that you are running this fund over five years, what sort of performance measures have you established to evaluate it from round to round and year to year, whichever measure are you looking at?

Mr Jaggars—We will be evaluating the program after each round; so looking at the applications that were received and tracking them. So I guess each round there will be a review to ensure that the program is on track.

Dr Harmer—The key success will be the extent to which the granting of the money leads to lower housing costs for the purchaser. The other factor which certainly is in our mind is whether the grant leads to a systemic change in terms of the way local government operates, the planning regulations and some of the things that lead to increased costs of housing. We would certainly be looking to give emphasis and priority to those proposals which will lead to systemic change as opposed to one-off change in a particular area. So they are the sorts of things we are looking at. We have been putting a lot of effort in the early part into just getting it up and getting the guidelines. But, as Mr Jaggars said, we will be putting some effort into evaluating it from the first round. We will be looking at just how well applicants have managed to convince us that they will be passing on the savings to home purchasers. We will be having a look at the extent to which the changes being made for a particular parcel are able to be translated to other areas, whether they are systemic changes et cetera. So they are the sorts of things that we will be looking at.

Senator PAYNE—It seems to me, Dr Harmer, that this is going to be very hard to measure in the current economic climate.

Dr Harmer—Yes, it is.

Senator PAYNE—I should have asked this at the beginning when I asked about the number of applications, but was 91 in the ballpark of your expectation? Were you expecting fewer or greater numbers?

Ms Ham—We were anticipating somewhere between 50 and 100 applications, so it is at the upper end of what we were expecting.

Senator PAYNE—So, Dr Harmer, would you use the word ‘swamped’ again here?

Dr Harmer—I think if it is at the upper end of our expectations, swamped would probably be overstating it. But we have certainly at the higher end of expectation. But as for NRAS, we have not yet evaluated them. We do not know yet how many of those 91 are truly compliant and fit. So I think it would be too early to be doing too much celebration, but the early signs are good.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you very much. That is Housing Affordability Fund questions for me, but I have questions in other areas.

CHAIR—I cannot see Senator Ludlam, so I think you can move on to the next point. If he comes back, he can follow up on that process. So just move through, Senator Payne.

Senator PAYNE—Dr Harmer, can we move on please to the National Affordable Housing Agreement. Am I in the right area still?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator PAYNE—Can you update us please on the progress towards completion of the National Affordable Housing Agreement, which I understand to be replacing the current CSHA?

Ms Winzar—We are progressing well on the same timetable that was outlined to you in respect of the disability agreement earlier on. We are meeting quite regularly via the COAG housing working group with our state and territory counterparts and we have a number of working groups that meet in between time to discuss the performance framework, the wording of the agreement, the areas of emphasis, the potential for reform, the measures and so on.

Senator PAYNE—So do you expect that to be completed prior to the expiration of the current CSHA on 31 December?

Ms Winzar—That is certainly our objective, yes.

Dr Harmer—There is a housing working group in fact tomorrow which is making further progress in, hopefully, finalising the documentation that will need to go to COAG on 17 November.

Senator PAYNE—Has the department received any advice from Treasury about revising the Commonwealth's commitment to the NAHA as a result of the impact on the budget of the global financial crisis and of the government's recently announced stimulus package?

Dr Harmer—Not that I am aware of, but we would not expect that either because, as we indicated in relation to the disability agreement, the funding for these agreements is going to be negotiated by treasuries to Treasury. So we are setting up the framework—the objectives, the outcomes, the roles and responsibilities, the performance indicators, the areas for reform and the framework for the operation but the funding which attaches to it will be negotiated by treasuries to Treasury. So I would expect that those broader considerations around funding availability et cetera will be taken into account in those discussions.

Senator PAYNE—Although I assume, Dr Harmer, if they were envisaging a significant change in the numbers as a result of global financial circumstances and as a result of spending in other areas, which has been significant, they would at least need to tell your department that you might need to review your focus on roles and responsibilities and areas for reform if you were not going to have the money to do it.

Dr Harmer—They are part of the working group. The central departments are around the table with us. Both the Prime Minister's department and the Treasury are with us as we negotiate. So they are constantly monitoring and keeping us informed about those sorts of things. So they have been involved in the set up.

Senator PAYNE—To take you back to your statement about areas of reform, has the department identified any particular key changes that need to be made to the existing CSHA as you move to the NAHA?

Ms Winzar—The National Affordable Housing Agreement actually goes a fair bit beyond the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. It includes, for example, as one of its outcome areas the efficiency of the overall housing market. So we are looking at those things like land development and planning dimensions as well as just the provision of social housing through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement.

Senator PAYNE—Would that be the key area of difference you would identify?

Ms Winzar—We have got altogether five outcomes and we are looking at certainly the efficiency of the housing market. We are also looking at the affordability of home purchase. We are looking at affordability of rental accommodation—both private rental and social housing. Homelessness also gets folded into this new National Affordable Housing Agreement. So what is currently appropriated under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program will be rolled into the National Affordable Housing Agreement as well.

Senator PAYNE—The whole SAAP?

Ms Winzar—Yes, and then the fifth area is Indigenous housing, particularly in remote Australia.

Senator PAYNE—So all of Indigenous housing goes into the NAHA?

Ms Winzar—Yes, through the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program, which is also currently part of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement that features, but also what is now the Australian Remote Indigenous Accommodation Program, ARIA.

Senator PAYNE—In that process of the working group and the contemplation of changes, roles and responsibilities that you talked about, Dr Harmer, is it envisaged that grants to the states that are made under the NAHA would be SPPs or untied grants?

Dr Harmer—The National Affordable Housing Agreement will be an SPP. It will be one of the five or six SPPs that survive from the current 90.

Senator PAYNE—In terms of what the states are going to have to contribute in this process, can the department advise what level of matched payments will be required from the states—what the expectation is?

Dr Harmer—Under the revised COAG arrangements and the revised SPPs, there will not be a specific matching requirement from the states, but it is anticipated that the clarification of roles and responsibilities and the allocation of responsibility in that area will determine what the Commonwealth and the states will be putting into the agreement.

Senator PAYNE—As the negotiations and the working party and so on have progressed, is your department in the position of making recommendations to COAG as well?

Dr Harmer—We are one of the parties creating the framework which will go to COAG. Others include, as I said before, the Prime Minister's department, the Treasury and, from each state and territory, central departments and housing departments.

Senator PAYNE—Is there any sort of information that you can give the committee about the nature of the recommendations that the department has been making?

Dr Harmer—It would be at this stage advice to government, and until COAG makes a decision it is basically advice to government.

Senator PAYNE—I understand. There has been a bit of discussion, particularly in recent times, about the role of community housing organisations. I think I discussed that with you and your officers before as well. As the NAHA is put together, is it envisaged there will be a provision for direct payments from the Commonwealth to community housing organisations?

Dr Harmer—We certainly have not got to the point of that specificity in relation to community housing organisations, but certainly an area of reform that has been discussed is how community housing organisations can play a more important role in social housing. So that is an issue. I will go that far to say that it is an issue that is being discussed. Local government has been at the table at the housing working group meetings, and the one tomorrow will have a representative from local government at the table. The community housing organisations have not been at the table, but we have been keeping, through separate consultation mechanisms, those organisations informed. I was at a seminar in Canberra last week where there were a number of people from community housing organisations talking about this and informing them about where we were up to.

Senator PAYNE—Could I ask a further question about Commonwealth rent assistance in this context and whether the department has formed a view on extending the eligibility for CRA to public housing tenants?

Dr Harmer—We certainly have not formed a final view, but it is one of the issues that has been in the mix as we have talked about possible options and opportunities for the reform of the housing system. But it is not something that has been agreed or finalised. It is one of the many issues that we have been looking at.

Senator PAYNE—On the funding basis of the NAHA, is it envisaged that it will separate capital funding from ongoing operational funding? How will that be approached?

Dr Harmer—It is too early to say. That will be a matter for the funding negotiations between the treasuries rather than something that we would settle.

Senator PAYNE—I go back finally to the NAHA and to one question about community housing again. It seems to me that they do an exceptional job for the communities that they support and the housing that they provide. If they end up with additional responsibilities out of this process, has the department looked at policies or programs that might assist them in boosting their capacity to manage any additional responsibilities?

Ms Winzar—I think we covered a little this at perhaps the last estimates hearing. We have a small amount of activity around the National Rental Affordability Scheme implementation which is designed to help community housing organisations boost their capability. It is a pretty big challenge, because if we are looking at expanding the overall capacity of community housing organisations, in some cases we are asking them to significantly increase their annual turnover from perhaps \$1 million a year in rental income to perhaps \$5 million or perhaps even \$25 million. So we recognise that there is quite a large opportunity for community housing organisations but, equally, quite a large challenge.

The other thing that is worth noting is that under the auspices of Commonwealth-state housing ministers there has been some work on setting up a national regulatory framework for community housing organisations to get some consistency across jurisdictions and particularly to make it easier for those organisations that wish to operate in more than one

state, and there is a handful of those larger organisations which have work going on in multiple jurisdictions. That sort of activity, I think, is an important first step towards enabling the community housing organisations to grow into something much larger than they are now.

Senator PAYNE—It will be interesting to see how that plays out. Thank you. That does me for the NAHA at least.

CHAIR—We will move to homelessness.

Senator LUDLAM—I am just wondering whether you can give us a bit of an update as to when that white paper is anticipated for release.

Ms Winzar—Again, this is one of those issues to some degree that is a little bit hooked up with the COAG process and we are consulting with our state and territory counterparts on that. We are hoping that after the next COAG meeting we will be in a position to progress the finalisation and the release of the white paper.

Senator LUDLAM—That is November sometime?

Ms Winzar—Yes.

Senator LUDLAM—Can you advise us what the particular factors were arising for its delay?

Ms Winzar—There were a few, actually. We did get an awful lot of submissions. We had something like 600 written submissions and we had around about a dozen very well attended public consultation processes around the states and territories, including regional areas. So pulling all of that information together has taken a while. The consultation across a range of Commonwealth agencies through an interdepartmental committee has thrown up some other good ideas and, as I have mentioned, homelessness is one of the issues that is being addressed in the National Affordable Housing Agreement context discussions with the states and territories as well.

Senator LUDLAM—Can you describe the role that COAG plays?

Ms Winzar—The relevance of COAG is that the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program will be rolled into the new National Affordable Housing Agreement as a schedule to the intergovernmental agreement around these Commonwealth-state reforms of funding and, associated with that, homelessness as an outcome is one of the things that is being explicitly picked up in the National Affordable Housing Agreement.

Senator LUDLAM—Can you tell me whether in the white paper it is anticipated to recognise and ensure accommodation as a human right. Is that kind of language being used?

Dr Harmer—We should not comment in advance of finalising the white paper. We should not speculate on what might be in it. I do not think that would be terribly helpful.

Senator LUDLAM—Is there anything you are able to tell me without prejudicing the negotiations that are afoot about what people can expect? There has been a great deal of consultation which has obviously been very well attended and subscribed to. But are you able to provide any information, given that we are delayed on where we thought we would be at this stage?

Ms Winzar—There were a lot of strong themes that came through from the written submissions and the public consultation processes. I do not think it would be any surprise to say that a couple of very strong areas of focus there were that we needed to do much more on prevention and early intervention around homelessness, not just in homelessness specific services but across the whole of the service system. That was a very strong theme. The other resounding message that came through was that while for some an episode of homelessness is just that, a temporary episode, for others it can be the start of something that compromises their life outcomes for the rest of their life potentially, and we need to do much more on making sure that if people do find themselves particularly sleeping rough or in a crisis accommodation centre more needs to be done to help them get back on their feet. Not surprisingly, I think the white paper should echo those two themes quite strongly.

Senator LUDLAM—Was the idea of housing as a human right an undercurrent in the submissions that were put to you?

Ms Winzar—I do not recall any submissions that particularly raised housing as a human right, but I certainly know that there were a number of submissions that called to account the issue of human rights in how homeless people themselves experienced services and were treated.

Senator LUDLAM—This might be a slight change of tack, I suppose, but it has been put to us in our discussions with agencies providing services to homeless people that there is an issue in that children accompanying adults are not treated as clients in their own right, and that is putting quite a degree of stress on the agencies. Children who are presenting are almost statistically invisible in terms of the workload on the agency. I am wondering whether that is an issue that you have considered.

Ms Winzar—Yes, it is, Senator. It is quite an important issue. For the purposes of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, only effectively adults or children who are not accompanied by adults are counted as clients. So kids who come along with a homeless parent, for example, do not get captured statistically. That is a problem on a couple of levels. One is that we do not have as good a view as we would like about those kids. That is particularly important in a care and protection context. Secondly, from a service provider's perspective, they are being asked to provide a range of services to a group of clients that for all intents and purposes are not captured in the recording of activity of the service. So, yes, it is a problem.

Senator LUDLAM—So you are aware of that. I am wondering whether there is the intention to recognise that degree of service provision in any future funding increase.

Dr Harmer—Again, Senator, we are being asked to speculate on something that we probably should not at this stage.

Senator LUDLAM—I have gone over the line again, haven't I? That is fine. I will leave it there on the white paper. Thank you.

Senator PAYNE—There was an announcement relatively recently—I think it was earlier this month—that on an average day over 350 people are turned away from seeking assistance, largely through the SAAP environment. This was a media release from the Australian Institute

of Health and Welfare. Has the department considered that in the context of the development of the white paper? Do you have any comment to make on that?

Ms Winzar—I do have a number of comments to make on that. One of the vexatious issues in terms of some of the SAAP data is that it is not always of the quality that you might want.

Senator PAYNE—What do you mean by that?

Ms Winzar—In this particular instance that report was produced from only 60 per cent of SAAP services reporting who they had turned away over I think either a one-week or a two-week survey period. We would like much better information about demand throughout the whole year, not just one week, and we would really like the services that did not bother putting in a return to tell us what their situation was, whether they turned people away or whether they did not. Having said that, we do have some other issues with the data in terms of what it did tell us about who was turned away. While only about 360 or 370 people each night were turned away—and I say ‘only’ because that is only three per cent of those who are accommodated each night in a SAAP service—

Senator PAYNE—I appreciate that.

Ms Winzar—But it is still very important for us because roughly half of the adults seeking accommodation were turned away during that reporting period and two out of every three kids who came with their parents or by themselves were turned away as well. We really need a much better picture of who is turned away and from which services and where so that we can make a better assessment about whether the distribution of services and the types of services on offer are appropriate to meet the demand that is being expressed out there.

Senator PAYNE—Let me try to get a better handle on where your criticism—and I take it constructively—is directed. Is it directed at the research methods of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in this context? Is it directed at the services who did not respond to the research efforts of the institute or how would you characterise that?

Ms Winzar—I do not have any problems with the research methods per se because one can only do what one can with the data one gets. But the services are not necessarily linked up all online. It is not a matter of capturing a by-product of their administrative effort. In some cases they are filling in paper based forms and sending them in.

Senator PAYNE—And they run on the smell of an oily rag.

Ms Winzar—They run on the smell of an oily rag, and this is an overhead for 40 per cent of them who either did not see there was a need to tell us or did not have time to tell us or whatever. It makes it very hard to get a complete picture about the overall mismatch between supply and demand for SAAP services.

Senator PAYNE—Is that a role you are contemplating the department might take up to get a more accurate picture through your contacts with the services themselves? You do not look very enthusiastic about that proposition, Ms Winzar.

Ms Winzar—Yes. I am not particularly enthusiastic about that proposition. I think there are some easier ways to do it. We are talking with our state and territory counterparts about trying to redevelop some of the existing SAAP data collections to get a much better picture.

We have also been talking with some of the key SAAP providers about what internal arrangements they might have for running their business which might provide a better model. I think there is a lot of room for improvement.

Senator PAYNE—What is the current allocation for the SAAP this financial year?

Ms Winzar—I think it is about \$189.5 million from the Commonwealth, which is then matched dollar for dollar.

Senator PAYNE—How does that compare with the previous year?

Dr Harmer—We probably have those figures with us. We will try to get it for you. It is of the order that Ms Winzar was talking about and the previous year would have been a similar figure.

Senator PAYNE—I thought that might be the case but I just wanted to check that. With previous programs like Reconnect, is that one which the government is continuing?

Ms Winzar—Reconnect is one of those Commonwealth programs which is also potentially pulled into the National Affordable Housing Agreement considerations.

Senator PAYNE—But it is currently funded?

Ms Winzar—It is currently funded.

Senator PAYNE—To how much?

Ms Winzar—It is around \$20-odd million a year.

Mr Jagers—\$23.6 million.

Senator PAYNE—If it is pulled into the NAHA, as you said may be contemplated, Ms Winzar, would it be continued in its current format? When they did the *Counting the homeless* report in 2006 and found that there had been some decrease in youth homelessness between the 2001 and 2006 period of around 21 per cent, it looked like those sorts of early intervention programs were making a difference.

Dr Harmer—Certainly a lot of the providers believe that the early intervention programs do make a difference. There is some evidence that that is the case, as you say.

Senator PAYNE—We would be interested to pursue what sort of other early intervention programs may be contemplated within the NAHA as those discussions progress. Madam Chair, I do not have any more questions on homelessness but I have two other sets of questions, one relatively brief on housing and one slightly longer but not very long, I promise.

CHAIR—We have lost Senator Ludlam again. You go ahead, Senator Payne. That means that, with the possible exception of Senator Ludlam we have finished housing.

Senator PAYNE—Just on the first home owners grant and the first home owners boost, I think we are calling that aspect of the stimulus package, can you advise whether the department was consulted on the formulation of that announcement in terms of the increase for existing dwellings from \$7,000 to \$14,000?

Dr Harmer—As you would be aware, it is a program run from Treasury rather than Housing. But we were consulted during that week.

Senator PAYNE—Are you able to provide the committee with any information about the department's response?

Dr Harmer—Unfortunately, I am not able to do that. It was in the form of policy advice to government.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. Can I ask, though, what impact the department assesses that that increase will have on affordability of housing, particularly in the private rental sector?

Dr Harmer—I am not sure whether we have completed analysis of such an item.

Senator PAYNE—Is such an analysis underway?

Dr Harmer—I have to turn to Ms Winzar, but it would be something that we would normally look at.

Ms Winzar—We have, but an analysis is not yet under way. We have been talking about ways that we could do that analysis, and we have been talking to our colleagues in Treasury about this as well. So some of the factors which are not really clear to us at the moment are: how much of the choice of first home buyers will go to new construction as opposed to second-hand dwellings and, equally, where those people come from—whether they are already in rental or whether they are rent free with mum and dad, for example. That might make a difference to the overall question.

Dr Harmer—And we need to know a little bit more about the practice before we could make some conclusions.

Senator PAYNE—'Practice' meaning?

Dr Harmer—About the applicants for the first home owners grant in the first six months in terms of where they are coming from, whether they are buying new or existing et cetera.

Senator PAYNE—And whether it ends up capitalised into housing costs would be an issue.

Ms Winzar—That is right. There seems to be quite a divergent set of views on this, and I was reading through the last couple of months worth of relevant press clips on housing and house prices and affordability and construction levels last night. Prior to this announcement some of the projections were that the housing market was not going to pick up until the second half of next year. Some more optimistic critics were saying that they thought perhaps a recovery in house prices might be as soon as within the next six months. So against that already quite divided set of views around housing supply and affordability, the impact of the first home owners boost I think we will need to assess fairly carefully.

Dr Harmer—It will almost certainly bring forward purchases and therefore will keep industry activity at a higher level than it would otherwise have been. That is almost certainly going to be a result.

Senator PAYNE—I hope so.

Dr Harmer—That is certainly one of the results that the government is looking for.

Senator PAYNE—I understand that. In those remarks you mentioned what level of take-up there will be in the new housing sector—so those who wish to move towards the \$21,000

grant, because it is a very significant contribution. That of course relates directly back, in my humble opinion, to the work of the HAF in terms of supply issues in particular. Can you give me an assessment of whether you think these initiatives—which, in the main, as we have seen the legislative initiatives going through the lower House, the coalition has acknowledged and supported thus far—are going to keep pace with each other? If you need to open up a significant amount of land supply for starters and you are trying to do that through the HAF and at the same time you are giving a boost—a very significant boost—to newly constructed homes through the first home owners boost, how confident are you of matching the pace of those initiatives?

Ms Winzar—Senator, I do not know that we have got any sense yet that the supply of land will be an impediment to the take-up of—

Senator PAYNE—But it is currently an impediment, Ms Winzar, in some places at least.

Ms Winzar—Yes, but it is not being released onto the market. Perhaps that is a better way to put it.

Senator PAYNE—Let me choose Karratha as an example.

Ms Winzar—Yes, in some locations there will be a clear lack of land. In others we are aware that developers have got to the point where they have land with approval. It is able to be released, but the state of the market has meant that they have not brought it forward to the market. This may be the stimulus where they say, ‘Whacko, we’ll do that.’ It may not.

Senator PAYNE—Is that something you will be keeping on eye on, though—the pace of the initiatives? The government has a range of initiatives—demand and supply.

Dr Harmer—It certainly is.

Senator PAYNE—I am just interested in how they are slotting together and that they are keeping pace with each other.

Dr Harmer—There are a couple of things about this stimulus that has come through the boost. We have a Housing Affordability Fund which is at least out there and generating—

Senator PAYNE—Yes, I acknowledge that.

Dr Harmer—We have also government policies around land release and we have got for the first time in ages a Housing Supply Council.

Senator PAYNE—I am coming to that.

Dr Harmer—It is set up to monitor and manage and recommend to government some of these things about balance between supply and demand, availability of resources including land et cetera. So the mechanisms that provide a pretty good framework for this new boost are certainly in place, but it is early days.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. That concludes my questions on the first home owners grant at least, Madam Chair. I have some questions on the National Housing Supply Council.

CHAIR—Do that and then Senator Ludlam has a couple still back on housing, but we will finish yours first and then we will go back to Senator Ludlam because I understand that the officers are the same.

Senator PAYNE—To take you up, Dr Harmer, on your reference to the National Housing Supply Council, can you tell us how many times it has met since its formation in May?

Ms Wall—We have had four meetings.

Senator PAYNE—Ms Wall, can you give us some idea of the proposed meeting schedule for the council for the rest of the 2008-09 financial year?

Ms Wall—The plan is that we would have probably monthly meetings until the end of this calendar year and then probably go back to quarterly after that.

Dr Harmer—This is the establishment phase of the council.

Ms Wall—And getting out our first report.

Dr Harmer—Yes. The first report, which is due—

Ms Wall—Early 2009.

Senator PAYNE—The first report of which?

Dr Harmer—Of the Housing Supply Council.

Senator PAYNE—So that will be the report that is going to be called *State of supply*. Is that right?

Ms Wall—I am not sure we have quite got the name for it yet, but—

Senator PAYNE—I think I have seen that mentioned in dispatches.

Dr Harmer—That is certainly the sort of issue that will be covered.

Senator PAYNE—What was the timing on that again?

Ms Wall—It will be early 2009.

Senator PAYNE—Does the council meet face to face? What is the usual format of meetings?

Ms Wall—Yes. Those four meetings have been face-to-face meetings and there are email exchanges between meetings.

Senator PAYNE—In Canberra?

Ms Wall—The meetings have been around Australia.

Senator PAYNE—Can you tell us where?

Ms Wall—The first one was Melbourne. The second one was—sorry, I will have to confirm them. I have been to all of them, but I have been to a lot of meetings.

Senator PAYNE—It is Tuesday so it must be Melbourne; is that it?

Ms Winzar—Senator, I know there has been one in Sydney and I know there has been one in Brisbane as well.

Senator PAYNE—And I am guessing there may have been one in Canberra.

Ms Wall—The next one is Adelaide.

Dr Harmer—Senator, I suspect we are pretty close. There is probably one meeting we need to confirm, so it is Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney. The question is whether we have had a meeting in Canberra, and I suspect we have.

Senator PAYNE—So that you do not think it is completely obtuse, my question goes to whether that enables the council to get local feedback, as it were, in the locations in which they meet.

Dr Harmer—That is one of the reasons we are moving—

Senator PAYNE—I am not just interested in their travel plans.

Dr Harmer—No.

Ms Winzar—Senator, as part of those meetings there is engagement with some of the local industry players and/or some of the senior bureaucrats who have an interest in this area, too.

Senator PAYNE—Thank you. For the budget allocation to the NHSC in the 2008-09 budget, which I think is around \$900,000 or something like that, what proportion of that is going to be taken up with administration and what proportion with the travel arrangements and the fees that council members receive?

Ms Winzar—I can give you some information. In 2008-09 the overall budget for the supply council is about \$2.07 million.

Senator PAYNE—I was undercutting them there.

Ms Winzar—And, of that, around \$78,000 is earmarked for administration, which would cover things like the travel costs, the meetings, the interviews, the production of reports and so on. Equally, around \$1.1 million is for secretariat support and so on related to the council.

Senator PAYNE—What size is the secretariat?

Ms Winzar—I might ask Ms Wall to chase that up. While she does that, we reserved around \$870,000 to commission research, to support the work of the council, from demographers, statisticians, economists and planners. Some of those pieces of work are already underway and will feed into that first report.

Senator PAYNE—I have a couple of other questions about the relationship between the National Housing Supply Council and the work of Infrastructure Australia. Is there an existing relationship there or is it one that the council, given it has been going since May, is in the process of establishing? Is the council participating in Infrastructure Australia's national audit of infrastructure needs?

Ms Winzar—We have a number of points of contact with the department of infrastructure—I cannot remember its exact title—it covers both the Major Cities Unit and Infrastructure Australia responsibilities and so on. While there has been no direct engagement, as far as I am aware, between Infrastructure Australia and the supply council, because they are both travelling in parallel, there has been a fair amount of communication via the Commonwealth departments around areas of common interest, including urban planning and development.

One of the things we are certainly aware is coming down the pipe is the creation of the Major Cities Unit. They must just about have finished recruitment of their key staff. Once that

is in place, we would see that as being a very important place for some ongoing discussion with the supply council.

Senator PAYNE—So far the supply council has not made any submissions to Infrastructure Australia in terms of their work?

Ms Winzar—No.

Senator PAYNE—Have there been any meetings, formal or informal, between members of the council and Infrastructure Australia or between the council chair and the IA chair?

Ms Wall—Not in a formal sense, but we have had presentations to the National Housing Supply Council meetings given by representatives of, for example, the Urban Development Institute of Australia. So we are covering off on some of those issues.

Senator PAYNE—I think that is an issue which, given the policy formulation across government from the infrastructure perspective and the housing affordability perspective, is worth pursuing.

Dr Harmer—I think it is quite likely that the council will decide that it is a very important link. It is in the establishment phase at the moment but, given the significance of Infrastructure Australia and the link between their work and that of the Housing Supply Council, I think it is quite likely that in the future there will be more formal linkage.

Senator PAYNE—We will pursue that. Madam Chair, can I thank you and the committee and particularly the officers and Dr Harmer very much for their assistance. That concludes my questions on housing.

CHAIR—We will see you tomorrow, Senator Payne.

Senator PAYNE—You will indeed.

Senator LUDLAM—I have a couple of questions on a program called A Place to Call Home. Is that a continuing program that you could speak about off the top of your head? Can you tell us how many dwellings have so far been announced for construction under that program?

Ms Winzar—Could you repeat that. There is a lot of paper shuffling on this end of the table.

Senator LUDLAM—I am after some estimate of how many dwellings have been announced for construction under that program.

Ms Winzar—Under A Place to Call Home?

Senator LUDLAM—Yes.

Ms Winzar—We have been engaging with each state. My understanding—and Mr Jagers might like to correct me on this—is that that has been announced in three states. Victoria has announced their A Place to Call Home funds. I think it was roughly a 100- to 120-bed common ground style accommodation facility and another 68 dwellings across the state. Tasmania announced a 40-bed common ground type facility. The South Australian proposal that was announced was a 40-bed foyer model for young homeless people in Adelaide. They were also proposing a 40-bed common ground type facility in Port Augusta.

Senator LUDLAM—That is South Australia. So the rest of the states have not yet made formal announcements under that scheme?

Ms Winzar—They have not made their announcements yet. We have been talking to them about their proposals, but they are not ready to finalise them yet.

Senator LUDLAM—I believe the target was 600 properties initially?

Ms Winzar—That is correct.

Senator LUDLAM—Do you feel we are on track for that?

Ms Winzar—I do not have any doubt that we will make that.

Senator LUDLAM—I am wondering, because I am not hugely familiar with how that program works, what current processes are there in place at the moment to ensure that properties in that program are available to women and children escaping domestic violence situations.

Ms Winzar—That is one of the priority groups for A Place to Call Home.

Senator LUDLAM—It is.

Ms Winzar—Not necessarily simply those families with children escaping domestic violence but families with children who are homeless for all sorts of reasons. When we get the proposals in from the states about where they see the need is and how they think they will deliver this program, the focus on women and children is a particularly important one. For example, in South Australia our discussions around their common ground model were around how many single parents particularly they would be accommodating through that process.

Senator LUDLAM—Are there certain priority cohorts that you are targeting assistance to?

Ms Winzar—A Place to Call Home was primarily focused on homeless families with the objective of either avoiding those people finding themselves in crisis accommodation services or, if they do, enabling them to move out as quickly as possible into something much longer term.

Senator LUDLAM—This is a program that is stated to continue? Is it in the mix with the white paper process?

Ms Winzar—We have five years worth of funding at \$150 million and the Commonwealth's contribution is a capital contribution. The states are asked to match that funding, but they do so in a number of ways and most of them are coming through with some component of recurrent funding to provide support for families in these new dwellings.

Senator LUDLAM—Thank you for your help. That is all I have.

CHAIR—My understanding is that Senator Siewert had some questions on youth homelessness. Senator Hanson-Young has put her questions on notice. We are trying to find Senator Siewert. We should take a break anyway because we should be changing our ministerial responsibility. Senator McLucas was here for housing support. Do we need to contact Senator Evans?

Senator McLucas—I have done that.

CHAIR—We will take a short break while we wait for the minister. It could well be that we have finished youth homelessness but we may not have, so do not run away. Then we will go back to disabilities.

Proceedings suspended from 2.50 pm to 3.01 pm

CHAIR—We are resuming on 2.2, People with disabilities.

Senator SIEWERT—There have been some discussions, and I think we have talked about this before, about the adopt-a-pollie scheme that we have in Western Australia. I understand that the parliamentary secretary, Mr Shorten, is very interested in it. I am wondering whether you have been considering it and whether it has been factored into any program for you this year.

Ms Davies—We have had discussions with the parliamentary secretary about that scheme. It is still being contemplated and it could be that it might be considered, for example, under the National Disability Strategy.

Senator SIEWERT—So it will be considered as part of that strategy rather than as something separate; is that right?

Ms Davies—It could be.

Senator SIEWERT—I want to talk about special disability trusts and I think Senator Boyce might want to talk about that also, so Senator Bernardi might want to ask his questions first on disabilities.

Senator BERNARDI—I do have a number of things. I am aware that the National Companion Card Scheme is due to receive funding in the next budget year I think, in 2009-10, but in the June estimates the department indicated that the development of the scheme is underway. Since those June estimates, have any meetings taken place about the national companion card scheme?

Ms Davies—There is a Commonwealth-state working group looking at that. They have made considerable progress. At the 3 September disability ministers meeting that we discussed before, the ministers endorsed a national framework and implementation timetable for the scheme.

Senator BERNARDI—What was the timetable that they endorsed?

Ms Davies—I will ask my colleague, Ms Bruce.

Senator BERNARDI—Ms Bruce, welcome to the table.

Ms Bruce—The timetable is to agree to a national framework by December this year and to have undertaken a number of aspects by May 2009, including consultation with key stakeholders, development of a national affiliate strategy, a communications framework and detailed implementation plans for those jurisdictions that do not currently have a companion card scheme in place.

Senator BERNARDI—So that is the framework. Ms Bruce, you mentioned last time that there were complex intellectual property issues around the Companion Card Scheme.

Ms Bruce—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—Have these issues specifically been resolved as yet?

Ms Bruce—They have. The complexity was because the scheme was originally designed in Victoria, and you might recall that the Victorian government held the intellectual property arrangements for that. It has now been agreed amongst the working group members that Victoria will continue to hold the intellectual property arrangements for the scheme and will license jurisdictions.

Senator BERNARDI—Given that you are expecting to have the national framework agreed to by May 2009, when do you expect the scheme will be implemented? There is budget funding for it in the next financial year, but would you look at starting it on 1 July?

Ms Bruce—I guess the Commonwealth's role is really as a facilitator. There are schemes that exist in four jurisdictions, and we are working with the remaining four jurisdictions which are currently progressing implementation in their states and territories. So the national framework is really around retaining a consistent approach across all jurisdictions.

Senator BERNARDI—So what is the involvement, then, of the department? Is it just as a facilitator? That is the word that you used.

Ms Bruce—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—So what work is the department actually doing on it?

Ms Bruce—The department is working with all jurisdictions. I chair a working group and we have been meeting and corresponding regularly just to establish the framework and to agree on the way we are going to take implementation forward.

Senator BERNARDI—So what is the funding in 2009-10 for?

Ms Davies—I guess we cannot really talk about budget funding.

Senator BERNARDI—But it has been announced that you are to receive funding in 2009-10.

Ms Davies—I could elaborate if you like on what the Commonwealth's role is in the scheme.

Senator BERNARDI—Please do.

Ms Davies—The Commonwealth and the states are working together but we do have different roles. The Commonwealth is looking at a national communication framework to encourage wider participation and affiliation by integrating marketing and promotions across the country and to potentially streamline marketing. We are looking at things like a national website. As Ms Bruce said, we have developed national guidelines and we are looking at a national affiliate strategy to support recruitment of government and commercial affiliates to provide a relationship management model for maintaining their involvement in the scheme.

Senator BERNARDI—So apart from that last one, which is to recruit affiliates, it is more or less a marketing campaign?

Ms Davies—No. It is that, but also the reason we are doing it nationally is that our role is leadership so it would not matter particularly what state you were in; you could cross borders

and still be able to access the scheme in the same way. That is another dimension of the leadership role.

Senator BERNARDI—So what is the department expected to provide to government?

Ms Davies—As I have said, we have already presented the framework to disabilities ministers. I think we indicated that we would get back to them with the broader outlines of our relative responsibilities.

Senator BERNARDI—I just go back to it: in June Dr Harmer said, ‘When we have finished the work, we will put proposals to government and they will consider it.’ I just took it—and I could be incorrect—that you were going to put a proposal to the federal government.

Ms Davies—Both.

Senator BERNARDI—So have you put a proposal to the federal government yet?

Ms Davies—Our minister took the framework to the last disabilities ministers meetings.

Senator BERNARDI—So you presented it for them to adopt?

Ms Davies—Yes.

Dr Harmer—We provided advice to our minister.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, you provided advice to your minister—and I will not ask you to go to what you actually said there—and she has then taken it to the other ministers in the states.

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. The framework has been agreed. Does that mean negotiations are at an end, then, as to the structure of it, or not?

Ms Davies—I think there is still quite a bit of work to do.

Ms Bruce—The terms of the structure have been agreed. It is now about moving on to the next phase.

Ms Beauchamp—I think we need to work through the implementation to try to tie it all together now, because some of the states and territories are at various stages of implementation and we need to ensure there is that national consistency. So what I think might happen during the next stage is that there would be agreement to an implementation plan.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. In the best-case scenario, it would start on 1 July 2009, would it?

Ms Beauchamp—Because there are so many players, we have to make sure that the guidelines are done, that states and territories are ready for implementation, that we have consistency in the card. So tying together the eight jurisdictions and coming up with that implementation plan will depend on their capacity as well as the Commonwealth’s capacity.

Senator BERNARDI—It is like keeping 1,000 frogs in a wheelbarrow really, isn’t it? It is a bit tough.

Ms Beauchamp—Not really. I think we have got—

Senator BERNARDI—So it is not tough?

Ms Beauchamp—Well, I think—

Dr Harmer—It is tough, but there are not 1,000 frogs.

Ms Beauchamp—I think we have got through the first stages in terms of getting agreement through the disabilities ministers.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. So when would there be a reasonable expectation that this could be achieved?

Dr Harmer—It would depend on government funding of it and whether it is in the budget et cetera, so we cannot really say. We are progressing it so that it could be started next year.

Ms Bruce—We are certainly continuing to progress it, but the other aspect is that the four jurisdictions that currently do not have companion card schemes are all working towards implementation within their jurisdictions which is a key platform of achieving a companion card scheme across Australia.

Senator BERNARDI—I have no further questions on the Companion Card Scheme.

CHAIR—Does anyone else have any questions on the Companion Card? If not, you can move to the next one, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—I move to the Disability Investment Group. In answer to question on notice No. 160 at the June 2008 estimates, it was stated that the Disability Investment Group expects to meet monthly until December 2008. Can you tell me whether it has met monthly?

Ms Davies—Since June, yes. They met on 24 June, 24 July, 13 August, 19 August, 21 August, 21 September and 14 October. Some of those were teleconferences.

Senator BERNARDI—Where did the physical meetings actually take place?

Ms Davies—They have been held in Sydney.

Senator BERNARDI—Are you able to advise me what progress the group has made in identifying opportunities to increase private sector involvement and investment?

Ms Davies—I think the group has made considerable progress in a number of their priority areas. They are looking at issues like national insurance and private-public housing partnerships. They are looking at savings and insurance vehicles, research and employment. Those are the main ones, I think.

Senator BERNARDI—Is there anything tangible about the progress that you can tell—any announcements?

Ms Davies—The group will report to the parliamentary secretary by the end of this year.

Senator BERNARDI—Right. 'By the end of the year' means 31 December. Is there a date that the report is expected to be provided by?

Ms Davies—I think the group is well progressed and they expect to report in December.

Senator BERNARDI—In December.

Ms Davies—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—There is a meeting scheduled for 16 December.

Ms Davies—It is probably an indication that soon after that the report will be provided.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure. I will not hold my breath in November or anything like that. I would have thought December.

Senator BOYCE—I just have one question. I am assuming that the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy is actually within DEEWR next door. It is on their outcomes list.

Ms Davies—It is a joint strategy.

Senator BOYCE—That is where I was heading. I am presuming that the Disability Investment Group has been involved in the development of the strategy and, if so, how?

Ms Davies—The Disability Investment Group has had a look at employment and it has produced a report, which we have discussed with DEEWR. So they have, in effect, had input.

Senator BOYCE—Into the strategy.

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—When would be an appropriate time to ask about the strategy? And should I do it in this room or the next one? That is the other question that I have got.

Ms Davies—I would say the next one.

Senator BOYCE—They might make the same recommendation next door, though.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, if the question that Senator Boyce has about the strategy really is for Education and Employment—

Ms Davies—I think primarily it would be, yes.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—It was similar to the sorts of questions that Senator Bernardi was just asking in terms of where the strategy is at and what is going on. I might ask them next door. Thank you.

Senator BERNARDI—The Disability Conference Funding Program was announced on 19 August. There was \$320,000 allocated to help people with disabilities to attend 27 conferences throughout Australia. Can you provide a list of all the conferences that received funding as part of this announcement?

Ms Davies—Yes, we can.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. I just ask you to table that, along with the amount of funding each of them received.

Ms Bedford—I do not have the amount of funding, but I have the list with me.

Senator BERNARDI—Will you be able to provide the funding on notice?

Ms Davies—We can probably bring that back later, if that is okay.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, I would welcome it. I just want to get it on the record, that is all. I do not have any further exploratory questions on it; it is just a fact-finding mission.

Ms Beauchamp—We have a straight list.

Senator BERNARDI—That would be great. If you can give me the list and then get me the numbers after, that would be good. I am not sure if I have anything more for Ms Bedford. I want to talk about the \$100 million for supported accommodation.

Ms Bedford—I had better stay then.

Senator BERNARDI—You had better stay. Has the \$100 million been received by the state and territory governments?

Ms Bedford—Yes, the bilaterals with the states and territories were signed before the end of the last financial year.

Senator BERNARDI—Do you have the allocations?

Ms Bedford—For the states and territories?

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Ms Bedford—For the \$100 million?

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Ms Bedford—In millions: 33.68 for New South Wales, 24.58 for Victoria, 18.31 for Queensland, 9.81 for Western Australia, 8.09 for South Australia, 2.63 for Tasmania, 1.69 for ACT, 1.21 for the Northern Territory.

Senator BERNARDI—That is fine. So that is consistent with the estimates that you gave us in June?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—The estimate at estimates in June?

Ms Bedford—The figures are the same, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—The next one is the inquiry into the special disability trusts.

Ms Bedford—That is not mine.

Senator BERNARDI—It is probably one for the minister.

Ms Beauchamp—Senator Boyce asked about the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy. Mr Shorten and Mr O'Connor are working very closely together on it. Our involvement is working very closely with the department—DEEWR—in terms of developing some advice to put to government. The stage that it is at, which I am sure DEEWR would be able to respond to, is that it is currently being developed and that advice is yet to be put to government in terms of the outcomes of the consultation process.

Senator BOYCE—The submissions were closed the end of June or something.

Ms Beauchamp—That is correct.

Senator BOYCE—So do we have any further information on when we might see a draft strategy, for instance, that might be released?

Ms Beauchamp—Not at this stage. That will be a decision for government.

Senator BOYCE—Okay.

Senator BERNARDI—I have a simple question which may not fall into the department's bailiwick, but I will address it to you, Minister. The inquiry into the special disability trusts: when can we expect the government's response to the committee's recommendations?

Senator Chris Evans—I think one of the officers might be able to help.

Ms Beauchamp—It has only just been furnished in the last week or so.

Senator SIEWERT—A week ago?

Ms Beauchamp—A week or so. We are currently considering those recommendations and the government will be providing advice shortly.

Senator BERNARDI—Shortly? That is encouraging.

Senator SIEWERT—There is an issue there that I would like to raise, if I may.

CHAIR—You do have experience, Senator Bernardi, in waiting for responses from Senate recommendations.

Senator SIEWERT—Sometimes it can be years.

Senator Chris Evans—I certainly will not be taking any commentary from the former Howard government members on that front.

Senator BERNARDI—This is about your government.

Senator Chris Evans—It is about wanting to bring a partisan note into it. I am happy to show you the record, Senator Bernardi. You will find it is very efficient in that regard.

Senator SIEWERT—Have you finished, you lot?

Senator Chris Evans—Just marking the ground.

Senator SIEWERT—Does that mean that the department is going to be moving on it before the investment group has reported?

Ms Davies—The parliamentary secretary did ask the Disability Investment Group to have a look at it. I cannot pre-empt the government's decision, but I imagine it could be possible that they wait, since it is a matter of weeks, until the DIG report.

Senator SIEWERT—I am a bit concerned that we get a delay again. That is why I was particularly pleased to hear that it was hopefully very shortly that we will be getting a response.

Dr Harmer—When we say that we try to give you what we think will happen, but of course we can never pre-empt a government decision.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I appreciate that. You will be very aware, as will the rest of the department, that a lot of families are very keen to get these changes made.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Certainly the feedback I have had just in the weeks since it has been released is that there is very strong community support for the recommendations that are contained in the report.

Ms Beauchamp—Just to add to that, the other area the department is looking at is not just this report in isolation but also the Better Support for Carers inquiry and also if there are any implications for Dr Harmer's review around pensions, too. So we need to make sure that our response considers everything else that is coming up in those.

Senator SIEWERT—I am pretty certain they have not reported yet—the parliamentary committee on carers. In fact, it is not going to report until nearer the end of the year.

Ms Beauchamp—That is correct.

Senator SIEWERT—And the Harmer report is not out until February.

Ms Beauchamp—End of February.

Senator SIEWERT—So when you say 'very shortly', now I am starting to think that very shortly is February at least.

Ms Davies—There are the specific recommendations of the Senate inquiry, but the issue of future planning for, say, older children with disabilities is a broader issue than just the special disability trust. So the future planning issue is touched on in a number of areas.

Senator SIEWERT—I appreciate that. I realise the recommendations for changes to the disability trust need to fit into a bigger picture, but they are also quite explicit about what needs to be done in terms of specific legislative amendments.

Ms Beauchamp—When we are providing advice to government, if there are any legislative or budgetary considerations of course they need to be picked up in the context of budget considerations as well.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I appreciate what you are saying. I am not necessarily supporting any lengthy delays in the changes, but I do appreciate what you are saying, or I understand where you are coming from.

Senator BERNARDI—There was one question I forgot to ask about the \$100 million for bilateral agreements for disability accommodation. When were they signed? You said it was in the last financial year, but I just want a date.

Dr Harmer—Can you repeat the question and Ms Bedford will return to the table.

Senator BERNARDI—It was just about the date. You mentioned that the bilaterals were signed before the end of the financial year. I am just interested in the date that they were signed.

Ms Bedford—I can get you that date.

Senator BERNARDI—That will be fine.

Ms Bedford—They were signed before the end of the financial year but they would have been signed over a range of days because different state ministers would have signed them.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay, so it was not just a big signing. If you could get me the relevant dates, I would appreciate that. That would be good.

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—I have a question that overlaps disabilities and carers. It is the final one for disabilities and maybe the first one for carers.

CHAIR—We have a couple of questions on mental health.

Senator BERNARDI—So you do not want me to go to that now?

CHAIR—Senator Boyce, do you have another question on disabilities?

Senator BOYCE—Yes, it is a very general question on disabilities.

CHAIR—Senator Bernardi, we will hold your question and come back to you and that might be the carry into the next bit. I call Senator Boyce.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you. My question relates to unmet need in the disability area and the comments made by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare earlier in estimates that the current statistics we have obviously very much underrepresent the scale of the issues. They said that in the 2009 ABS survey there will be a larger sample size but that in fact we will not be looking at fixing this by improving criteria for the survey until the 2012 ABS survey. Could you tell me what involvement the department did or did not have in that issue? What are you doing in the interim to try to get a handle on what unmet need really looks like?

Ms Bedford—We are working closely with AIHW and the ABS and states and territories to improve data. I will start with the ABS survey, which is the one that you brought up. For the enhancement to the survey of disability and carers, disabilities ministers had agreed to put additional funding into that survey to provide better data.

Senator BOYCE—Are you talking about the 2009 survey?

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—How much funding is being put into that?

Ms Bedford—It is \$3.25 million that will go into that survey.

Senator BOYCE—That is extra funding?

Ms Bedford—That is extra funding.

Ms Beauchamp—That is to double the sample size.

Senator BOYCE—Yes.

Ms Davies—But in total across jurisdictions it is \$6.5 million.

Ms Bedford—That \$6.5 million includes funding that health and ageing ministers have agreed to put in as they want to enhance the data as well. So disabilities ministers have agreed on \$3.25 million, and further funding has been put in by health and ageing ministers.

Senator BOYCE—Okay.

Ms Bedford—The enhancement is really the current focus of effort under the national priority to better measure unmet demand and unmet need. We have a proposal from the Australian Bureau of Statistics that disability officials around the country are looking at, and AIHW are included in those discussions. There are options to improve the quality of the survey and possibly create more reports that will provide additional information. We will need

to go back to the Australian Bureau of Statistics towards the end of this month, which will lead into some enhanced products around the April to December 2009 survey.

Senator BOYCE—What do you mean by ‘enhanced products’?

Ms Bedford—I just mentioned improving the data quality and a number of reports.

Senator BOYCE—Is that part of the survey or separate?

Ms Bedford—As part of the survey, so it is leading into that 2009 survey.

Senator BOYCE—I am not a statistician so I am not quite sure how to phrase this question. What level of improvement in the reliability of the figures do you anticipate getting from doubling the sample size in 2009?

Ms Bedford—Increasing the sample size will provide more information but it will also increase the validity of the data. A greater number of people will be surveyed, so therefore we can drill down further into the data to seek information from that data.

Senator BOYCE—But we still will not be at an optimum level?

Ms Bedford—No.

Dr Harmer—Essentially, what it does is it allows statistically significant conclusions about subgroups of disability. The bigger the sample size, the more statistically significant conclusions you can draw about subgroups. That is one of the main benefits of expanding the survey.

Senator BOYCE—I guess where I am trying to get to is that we will have an improvement in the validity for 2009 but is there any way you can characterise what that improvement will be?

Ms Bedford—That is part of the discussions with the ABS about what we buy with that \$3.25 million and what Health and Ageing buy with their additional funding. We are still working with ABS and people like the AIHW to make sure we get the best information for that funding.

Dr Harmer—I think the answer to your question is that we are not precisely sure yet because we do not have the final framing of the questions. We ought to be able to answer that question. We will probably be able to do it but we will need to get advice from ABS or AIHW because what you ask is actually a technical question about the validity of the survey and they will be able to provide that answer to us once we have settled on the design.

Senator BOYCE—Would I be able to express my hope that you can answer that question on notice?

Dr Harmer—Yes, indeed. We will take it. We will flag it so that next time we are here we will come prepared to answer that question.

Senator BOYCE—That would be excellent because one of the issues is that almost every—well, every—disability organisation in Australia will tell you that people do not bother telling anyone at a government level they have an unmet need because they know it is a pointless exercise—the need is not going to be met. I am interested in when we can finally get

underneath to those people who for maybe decades have simply existed outside the system as people who required help.

Ms Beauchamp—Can I also add to that. It is a priority area under the new agreement as well to work with the states and territories. In addition, whilst we are looking at improving the validity and focusing on a better measurement of need, I think there has also been significant investment by the government to address existing unmet need through the \$1.9 billion package, including the \$100 million around supported accommodation.

I think the areas that the ABS have identified where we do need to collect better information relate to labour force, social inclusion and carer data. You are right: there are inconsistencies across the states and territories on what need is—whether it is waiting lists or an actual measurement of demand and need. They are a couple of different things. So having that consistency across the states and territories is an outcome that we are seeking under the new agreement as well.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you. That sounds encouraging.

Senator BERNARDI—This is kind of my bridging question.

Senator BOYCE—I am sorry.

Senator BERNARDI—No, that is fine. I am glad you have done it but there are two things that I did not pick up on in the answers and I may have missed one of them. Did you say what the sample size of the new survey will be?

Ms Beauchamp—I did not say what the sample size would be. I said it was a doubling of the existing sample size. I am not sure.

Senator BERNARDI—I can calculate it if you can tell me the existing sample size. I am good at multiplying by two and dividing by two; we have established that.

Senator Chris Evans—That is a brave statement, Senator! We might test you. After four days of estimates, I would not necessarily back you in on that.

Ms Bedford—I am sorry, but I do not have that with me.

Senator BERNARDI—I would be interested to know if you could tell me at some point.

Dr Harmer—We should be able to get you that quite easily.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Also, the ABS website states that it is going to commence in 2009, and that has been confirmed. Do you know when this survey is going to commence?

Ms Bedford—The survey goes from April to December.

Senator BERNARDI—April to December?

Ms Bedford—Yes. There are a number of options, including increasing the sample size. So we are still under discussions about—

Senator BERNARDI—Sorry, but did we not establish that it was going to double.

Ms Bedford—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes, that is one element.

Ms Bedford—So funding will be used in the first instance to cover the cost of an increased sample size by 18,000, with the remaining funds used to progress other identified improvement initiatives.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, it was not with regard to the quantum of money. So it has gone from 18,000 to 36,000?

Ms Bedford—I will check that to make sure that it is right so I do not mislead you.

Senator BERNARDI—That is great; thank you.

Senator FURNER—I take you to the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program. The program has been in existence, as I understand, for a short period of time. Can you explain the status of the rollout on the program?

Ms Brain—To date we have had two rounds of the program. Currently we have 76 sites in operation and we are managing the largest rollout, phase 3 of the program. That is due for announcement in November and this round actually has 79 sites at a total of about \$71 million over a two-year period.

Senator FURNER—What is the extent of those sites? Are they a combination of regional and some additional sites in capital cities?

Ms Brain—Yes, there is a mix of those. Would you like me to run through them on a state-by-state basis?

Senator FURNER—Yes, please; that would be good.

CHAIR—If you could commence with Queensland, Ms Brain. A Queensland senator is asking the question.

Ms Brain—In the ACT there is one metro; in New South Wales there are 10 metro and 17 nonmetro; in the Northern Territory there are none, but there are already four sites there; in Queensland there are nine metro and seven nonmetro; in South Australia there are four metro and three nonmetro; in Tasmania there are two metro; in Victoria there are 13 metro and four nonmetro; and in WA there are eight metro and one nonmetro.

Senator FURNER—How do you evaluate someone wanting to or needing to get into the program? What is the process? Can you take me through how that happens?

Mr Lewis—The process is via an eligibility screening tool, which is a tool that was developed last year and is a bit of a breakthrough in terms of having a nationally consistent approach to people accessing this service. It was developed with advice from the college of psychiatry, medical practitioners in psychology and so on. We had an advisory group which spent considerable time putting that together. We also tested it for some time. I think in previous estimates sessions we have talked at some length about how well received it has been. In fact, the post-hoc testing of whether the tool validly assesses people with a severe functional impact of a mental illness has been quite strong. When we have gone back to check, we have found that their diagnosis has been there in the past and may not currently be present or they may not be aware, or, alternatively, that when they refer it to diagnosis the diagnosis is very quickly forthcoming. So the tool is quite a complex document. We could provide it to you if you would like to see it in its current form. It is used by all of the sites.

Senator FURNER—Is there any illness you consider might be missed? We have heard recently as a committee about borderline personality disorder, how it is difficult at times to diagnose that and the stigma attached to that illness in society.

Mr Lewis—The program has as its target group those who are severely functionally affected by a severe mental illness. So, as a consequence, people with borderline personality disorder or some more prevalent but less severe illness may not be in the target group in the first pass. In that sense, if they are mildly impacted and have what is termed a disorder which is of high prevalence but low impact or low severity, they would not necessarily be eligible for the first pass of this program.

Senator FURNER—Thank you.

Senator BILYK—I understand there have been a few staff changes in your section and that you have actually picked up some different areas of responsibility with regard to autism and gambling—is that right? Can someone expand or fill me in on how that is working and what is happening there?

Mr Lewis—The group has four branches, and one is the mental health branch, which Carol Brain heads. The other one is the autism spectrum disorder branch, which you heard from a bit earlier, from Vicki Brown. We have another branch, the Community Support branch, which has within it a range of programs which include work around the national compact, gambling, volunteering, broadband for seniors and so on. There is quite a complex and large range of responsibilities in that area. It is headed by Jill Farrelly. There is another branch called disaster recovery which deals with national disasters. That deals with the Australian government disaster recovery payment and involves a secretariat for the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Committee, amongst a range of national disaster recovery committees and bodies linking with A-Gs and other departments that deal with disasters and national crisis events.

Senator BILYK—It is a very broad group of responsibilities, isn't it?

Mr Lewis—It is.

Dr Harmer—We are a very capable division, Senator.

Senator BILYK—I do not doubt that for one moment, actually. I am just amazed. It is good to see all of that interest and work being done in the area, so I thank you for all of your efforts once again. It is greatly appreciated by us.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I think that ends disabilities. We will now move to carers.

Dr Harmer—As we transition from disability to carers, I have an answer to a question that Senator Bernardi asked earlier today about the expenditure items for the International Day of People with Disability national disability awards which I can provide to the secretariat. It is one of the answers that we agreed to take on notice and try to provide today.

CHAIR—Thank you. We are now moving on to carers.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I am aware that you may tell me that this is a Centrelink question, but I still want to ask it regardless because it does cross over into FaHCSIA. As I

understand it, when a person being cared for goes into hospital there are 63 days before the carer stops getting the payment. Do I have a correct understanding of the process?

Ms Pearson—My understanding is that that is correct.

Senator SIEWERT—Are those days consecutive? Do they have to be consecutive or is it 63 days over the year?

Ms Pearson—I do not believe it is consecutive. I believe it is throughout the year.

Ms Davies—We might check on that and get back to you.

Senator SIEWERT—Are there guidelines around that? Is it just automatic or do they check the personal circumstances of the carer? I am aware of a particular case—this is one case I am highlighting for you but I have had other people tell me similar stories—where the person doing the caring is actually in the hospital with the person receiving the care more often than not. If not overnight, they are certainly there during the day. They are travelling. They are meeting that person's needs. I am just wondering whether that is taken into account or whether it is automatic.

Ms Davies—We will get back to you on that one as well.

Senator SIEWERT—Can you tell me when that policy started?

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I presume it is 63 days per calendar year.

Ms Pearson—I will confirm that for you.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be very much appreciated.

Senator BERNARDI—I have a couple of questions with regard to this area. The child disability assistance payment is a \$1,000 annual payment made to the carer of a child with a disability under 16 years of age. When do recipients of this payment actually receive the money?

Ms Pearson—The payment is automatic.

Senator BERNARDI—Do they all receive it at the same time every year—in July or August of every year?

Ms Davies—This would be the first July payment because it started in October last year.

Senator BERNARDI—So it is paid in July?

Ms Davies—I am pretty sure it is, but I will make sure.

Ms Pearson—I will confirm that for you.

Senator BERNARDI—How is the payment made? Is it put into their bank account? Do you send cheques out or is it given to service providers?

Ms Pearson—My understanding is that it goes through the Centrelink system into their nominated account. That is how they pay it.

Senator BERNARDI—And it goes directly to the carer?

Ms Davies—To the carer of each child.

Senator BERNARDI—I make the presumption—I hope I am correct—that there are no limits on what the carer could spend that money on because you would have no effective control over it.

Ms Davies—That is correct.

Senator BERNARDI—I am just a little confused because there is an estimate that 139,249 payments will be made. The portfolio budget statement has an estimate of 139,249 for ‘number of children in respect of whom the child disability assistance payment is made’. Yet in the annual report it says the actual is 135,907. Am I right that you are expecting some 4,000 additional payments to be made this year?

Ms Davies—I will quickly find that.

Senator BERNARDI—The FaHCSIA annual report reference is on page 165. You have an estimate and an actual.

Ms Beauchamp—The explanation for that variance in the annual report is that there is a slightly higher than forecast growth in the number of children being cared for by carer allowance clients.

Senator BERNARDI—I understand that, but then there is the estimate in the 2008-09 portfolio budget statement that 139,000 payments will be made. Am I correct in saying you are expecting around 4,000 additional payments? Is that a correct interpretation?

Ms Davies—I would have to confirm that, but, between May and the publication of this, I think that is correct. Can we come back to you on that one?

Senator BERNARDI—You can. I make, then, the presumption that the budget for this would be based on the estimated number of children times \$1,000, so it would be some \$139 million. I am seeking to make sure I understand it—that is all. Are you looking for the portfolio budget statement reference?

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—It is on page 77.

Ms Davies—The 139,249 figure is the 2008-09 target and the actual figure was 135,907 in 2007-08. They are different years.

Senator BERNARDI—I know. That was my question. Is my interpretation correct that you are expecting an additional 4,000 or so payments this year?

Ms Davies—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—I wanted to make sure I understood it. I did not mean to cause such a flurry of activity, actually. I have nothing further on the child disability assistance payment for carers. Is it appropriate to address questions with regard to the House of Representatives better support for carers inquiry to the department or to the minister—is it appropriate in this forum at all?

CHAIR—It is an existing inquiry. You do not question the terms of the inquiry.

Senator BERNARDI—It was not about the terms of the inquiry but about the conduct.

CHAIR—If there is an issue—

Senator BERNARDI—You will let me. I would rather err on the side of caution.

CHAIR—Very wise.

Senator BERNARDI—I am a conservative after all.

Senator Chris Evans—That is certainly true.

Senator BERNARDI—I am proud of it. I will briefly go to young carers. The issues faced by Australian carers have been highlighted this week because of course it is Carers Week. I have some questions on young carers and specifically very young carers and the programs that are available to address the issues that they face. I understand there is a Young Carers Respite and Information Services Program. Is it correct that that is the main federal government program that addresses the needs of young carers?

Ms Davies—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—You also have the Young Carers website?

Ms Davies—That is right.

Senator BERNARDI—And a young carers forum that occurs every two years. It was established by Kay Patterson when she was the minister. I am very pleased to see it is continuing. Are there any other federal government programs that cater specifically to young carers? There are different definitions of young carers. Some define them as under 18 and some as under 25. I am happy to listen to information about any other programs.

Ms Bruce—They are the aspects that FaHCSIA looks after.

Senator BERNARDI—Those three?

Ms Davies—As well as where that young person may be able to get a carer payment or carer allowance.

Senator BERNARDI—In June the government announced \$7 million over the next year for respite information services through the Young Carers Respite and Information Services Program. How is the figure of \$7 million arrived at?

Ms Bruce—The \$7.6 million is broken up into two distinct components. There is, as you pointed out, the respite services, which are delivered through the national network of 55 Commonwealth respite and Carelink centres, and then there is information, advice and referral, which is delivered by Carers Australia and its network of state associations. The break-up of the funding between those components is that \$0.5 million is allocated to the information, advice and referral services and the remainder, just over \$7 million, to the respite services.

Senator BERNARDI—Is this money delivered to Carers Australia as well as part of that? Does any money go to Carers Australia?

Ms Bruce—There is funding to Carers Australia. The \$7 million for the respite is delivered through the Commonwealth Carelink respite centres, so the funding goes to them.

Senator BERNARDI—Has the funding been delivered yet?

Ms Bruce—The funding is ongoing. It is an ongoing program.

Senator BERNARDI—So they just draw against it whenever they need it, or have you sent the money out to them already?

Ms Bruce—Actually, I am not 100 per cent sure. I will have to check whether it is a regular payment or it is client-demand driven.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure. You said it is an ongoing program, the \$7 million. I thought there was only a single—I do not have it in front of me—allocation in the budget papers.

Ms Bruce—No, it is ongoing. We can check.

Dr Harmer—It is in the forward estimates, I think.

Senator BERNARDI—I am sure one of my staff will be checking busily now as we are watching.

Dr Harmer—Indeed. We seem to believe it is in the forward estimates, which means it is ongoing.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay, and that could well be an error on my part. In June the government announced \$190,000 in funding to assist Carers Australia in holding the 2008 Young Carers Forum. Was this figure of \$190,000 chosen or was it requested by Carers Australia?

Ms Davies—From memory, it was requested by Carers Australia.

Ms Bruce—I think it was negotiated with the department.

Ms Davies—It was probably based on their previous experience as well.

Senator BERNARDI—Fair enough. Were there any qualifications as to exactly what the money would be spent on in giving it to Carers Australia—any particular aspect of their program?

Ms Bruce—Yes, we have a funding agreement signed by the department and Carers Australia for the forums specifically and that would detail the break-up of the various components of that funding.

Senator BERNARDI—Are you able to get a copy of those various details?

Ms Bruce—Yes, we can get—

Ms Davies—Not of the funding—

Dr Harmer—We will need to check that. I am not sure that we can provide you with the funding agreement between the department and a funded body without their agreement.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. You will make your best endeavours.

Senator Chris Evans—I think maybe it is best that we take on notice to provide what information they can provide to give you an idea of their funding.

Senator BERNARDI—That is what we want to know.

Dr Harmer—I think we might provide you with a summary of what we fund.

Senator Chris Evans—Is it air fares, organisation, or whatever?

Senator BERNARDI—Exactly. I am also interested in what percentage of the total costs of the conference is being funded by the federal government.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator BERNARDI—If it is 50 per cent, 80 per cent—

Dr Harmer—We can try to give you that as well.

Senator BERNARDI—That would be good; thank you. Do you have a specific budget for the operation of the Young Carers website?

Ms Bruce—I would have to take that on notice, too.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay, and I would be interested in the costs of running the website.

Ms Bruce—The ongoing costs?

Senator BERNARDI—The ongoing costs. My question then is: does the department maintain the website?

Ms Bruce—No, Carers Australia maintains the Young Carers website.

Senator BERNARDI—So the department would provide funds for Carers Australia to maintain it?

Ms Bruce—That is just what I need to double-check—the actual arrangements and the level of funding.

Senator BERNARDI—If you could do that, I would appreciate it; thanks very much. There was a matter that arose a couple of weeks ago about a very young carer. I have to say I was quite alarmed to read about the very young carers. This is about a young girl named Jazzi Pybus from Queensland, who was told she was not allowed to attend the 2008 Young Carers Forum because she was too young. The concern for me arises from the fact that this is meant to be a forum for carers and young carers. She was unable to attend, even though she was not asking for subsidies or anything outside of the ordinary except to have her voice heard there. Why are there criteria outside of being a young carer to attend?

Ms Davies—The forum is funding 32 young people aged 15 to 25 to attend. My understanding is that that age range was chosen because as well as attending the forum they would be attending a leadership course so that they could go back to their communities and work with other young carers. As we have just been discussing, there is a website for this forum. So all young carers around Australia are able to have a way of contributing or inputting.

Senator BERNARDI—I understand that the website was still looking for registrations for the forum earlier this week and yet they turned young Jazzi away because they were not equipped to handle or deal with a 10-year-old. My concern is that there is a group of very, very young carers out there—and I will ask about what programs are available to them. But it is quite a legitimate claim. They want to go along and have their views heard and they are not allowed to attend a government funded conference.

Ms Davies—I do not think it is that they are not allowed; it is that there are only 32 young people actually physically attending.

Dr Harmer—I do not think it was the department—

Senator BERNARDI—No, it was not the department.

Dr Harmer—who selected the young people who can attend.

Senator BERNARDI—I know.

Dr Harmer—I assume that it was Carers Australia.

Ms Davies—It was.

Dr Harmer—The reason, obviously, some of these conferences have an age limit specifically is, as Ms Davies indicated, that it rolls on to something different for an age group of 15 to 25, or whatever. It is no doubt quite sad that a 10-year-old who wanted to go could not go, but that decision was not made by the department.

Senator BERNARDI—I know it was not, but \$190,000 of taxpayers' funds and ongoing money has gone into this conference, and one person in particular who is doing an extraordinary job and who has sought to go is unable to go. What will interest the department and interest me—and it might interest some others—is what the government is doing to provide services outside the ordinary services for the very, very young carers, the eight-, 10-, and 12-year-olds who are doing adult jobs.

Ms Bruce—Obviously very young carers are eligible for the Young Carers Respite and Information Services Program, which we spoke about just a minute ago. There is a primary school kit that is being developed specifically to assist young carers still in primary school. There has also been a kit developed for secondary school students. As we have mentioned, there is a carers website and there is some material being developed to assist schoolteachers to identify and support young carers.

Senator BERNARDI—Something that I do not know the answer to is: are very, very young carers eligible for a carers allowance, or a carers payment?

Ms Davies—As at June 2008, there were 306 under-18s on a carers payment and 589 on carers allowance.

Senator BERNARDI—We regard them as young carers and they are legally children, but I think there is a big difference between, say, a 16- or a 17-year-old and a 10-year-old, frankly. I just want to know, if you are 10 and you are looking after your parents and trying to attend school, do you get some money from the government to assist in that?

Dr Harmer—We will have to take that on notice.

Ms Davies—There is no age limit.

Senator BERNARDI—There is no age limit.

Dr Harmer—I do not think so.

Senator BERNARDI—I would be interested in knowing the number of very, very young carers.

Dr Harmer—If we can get a breakdown of age for carer allowance and carer payment recipients we will provide it to you so you can assess it. We understand that Carers Australia has been in touch with the 10-year-old you spoke about earlier.

Senator BERNARDI—Jazzi.

Ms Bruce—And they offered to tell her story at the forum.

Dr Harmer—So they have—

Ms Davies—Yes. So they may have done the right thing.

Ms Pearson—Senator, just to assist you, there is no age limit but, where a person under the age of 18 applies, a Centrelink social worker gets involved with the application and the assessment of that application.

Senator BERNARDI—I think you hit on a problem for a lot of people. A lot of people do not apply and seek help because they live in fear that maybe their parents are going to be assessed as not competent and they may be taken away.

Senator SIEWERT—The kids may not know.

Senator BERNARDI—Or the kids do not know. They are too busy going to school and looking after everything else.

Senator SIEWERT—Senator Bernardi, I am going to be very careful to not go into another Senate inquiry, but this came up at the school requirements inquiry. A point was raised that young carers are actually missing a lot of school because of their caring obligations. I suspect they are getting picked up as truants when in fact they are at home looking after their parents or their siblings or whoever they happen to be caring for. It has actually been brought up as a very significant issue in terms of school attendance. That might be the first time that they come to the system's attention, I suspect. I do not have any evidence; it is anecdotal.

Senator Chris Evans—I think it also relies on other agencies and schools obviously that come in contact with either the person being cared for or the carer—those sorts of networks—to bring attention to it. No doubt there is a communication issue for the child in particular, but we do rely on other agencies or others who come into contact with them to refer them to services et cetera. You will never get a perfect penetration of information into a household like that. A 10-year-old, for instance, may not understand how to access those sorts of services. I am sure the various state agencies and other services refer them. The link with the school, as you say, is really important, I think. One of the really sad things about young carers is that their education suffers and therefore their future life chances suffer in addition to the burden they are carrying at the time.

Senator SIEWERT—I think Senator Bernardi is right. My experience is—and I know a particular case—that they actively avoid the authorities because they do not want to draw attention to themselves. So they are actually very good at avoiding authorities.

Ms Pearson—Senator, can I go back to your previous question about the 63 days in hospital. It is not consecutive; it is in a calendar year. Yes, them being in hospital is taken into account. We do not do any checking. There is an obligation to let us know or to let Centrelink know that the carer is in hospital. So it is up to them to notify us. Yes, it is taken into account.

We think it started around July 1998, but I would like to take that date on notice and confirm it for you.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could. Can you also tell me—and I realise I may now be crossing over into Centrelink territory—how many people have had their payments reduced as a consequence of reaching the 63 days? Do they lose payment for those 63 days or above that? Do you see what I am getting at?

Ms Pearson—Yes. I will find out for you. Just to confirm, Senator Bernardi, July each year is when the payment occurs into the normal bank account. The money is really for support, aids and respite but we have no control over how that money can be spent.

Ms Davies—Can I just add to that. As part of the government's response in the May budget this year to the child carer payment review, the 63-day limit will be removed and is going to be replaced by a policy of unlimited hospitalisation managed by a 12-week review mechanism to overcome the difficulties that we have experienced in that.

Senator SIEWERT—When was that going to happen, because I was actually speaking to someone 10 days ago for whom this is still an issue?

Ms Davies—Along with the other parts of that measure, it is July next year.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for that.

Senator BERNARDI—Anyone can apply for the carers payment or carers allowance under the age of 18. But at what age does a social worker get involved?

Ms Pearson—There is a policy that for anyone under the age of 18 who makes an application a social worker would become involved.

Senator BERNARDI—Under 18 or 16?

Ms Pearson—Under 18.

Senator BERNARDI—That is different from the advice that has been received from Centrelink.

Ms Pearson—My understanding is 18. You are considered a child up to the age of 18.

Dr Harmer—Will we check that. It would obviously be either 18 or 16.

Senator BERNARDI—Has the department, at the behest of governments of either persuasion, undertaken an audit of very young carers and very, very young carers?

Dr Harmer—I am not aware that this department has. Whether Centrelink has I do not know. When you say 'an audit', what do you mean?

Senator Chris Evans—Are you trying to work out how many there are, basically?

Senator BERNARDI—I am trying to find out how many there are and whether their needs, quite frankly, are being met, because there are some serious concerns.

Dr Harmer—I think we would be confident that Centrelink would have the number of under-18 carers on either carer payment or carer allowance.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, that would be reasonably easy to get. There is anecdotal evidence to say that a number of them are not applying for it or are not aware that they are

eligible for these sorts of things out of fear of being removed or whatever their circumstances are.

Ms Davies—That is a fair point, Senator. One of the drivers of the \$7.6 million program is to help those young carers at risk of leaving school early access the national network of Commonwealth carer respite centres. Also, the forum has four themes and the first important theme is around the importance of helping young carers finish school. I think it is fair to say that governments are aware of the issue and are trying to address it.

Senator BERNARDI—I am not having a crack at the government. But to me there is a problem here that people are slipping through the cracks. They are doing a mighty job, and we have to make sure that they are supported in that job and that their fear is alleviated and things of that nature. I raise it not because I have the solution—I do not have the solution—but I think something has to be done about it. I think the department and the government should think about what more they can do to establish who is slipping through the cracks and how we can help.

Senator SIEWERT—I want to follow up on that.

Senator BERNARDI—Ms Emerson has the answers.

Ms Emerson—I just wanted to draw your attention to two pieces of research that are underway or nearly complete. One is a piece which we hope shines a little more light on this issue of young carers and some of the unexplored or unknown aspects of caring and the costs that are associated with that. It is a project called Young Carers (Costs, Impacts on Welfare). It is research that is being conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. A final report has been submitted and that is not yet published. Shortly we will have some more information publicly available that will talk about the experiences and circumstances of young carers. They have done a number of qualitative and quite in-depth interviews with a wide range of young carers and got some incredible insight. That should come out soon and be quite useful and informative.

There is another piece of work that is being done by the Youth Bureau—which is now in DEEWR but we had some previous association with—and that is Young Carers: Their Characteristics and Geographical Distribution. That is a research project again being conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre. This was a project endorsed through the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme and ministerial council. It will be estimating the social and demographic characteristics of young carers and assess whether there are any significant trends over time in their numbers and characteristics and give a sense of that geographical spread of where they are located. We will hopefully be making some recommendations on how better to identify young carers.

Senator BERNARDI—Thanks.

Senator SIEWERT—Can I follow up on the issues around schooling. You said that as part of the forum there was a stream on that. What particular programs are in place that can assist with accessing assistance if you have been missing schooling and those types of things?

Ms Davies—Partly the scheme that Ms Bruce was talking about is intended to assist with that as a resource both by having the centres and by having the information and the other

things associated with it. A lot of what you are raising is partly the responsibility of DEEWR, so I could easily check that and get back to you.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be really appreciated. Certainly I am getting more and more inquiries. I am not saying that necessarily reflects an increase in the number of young carers, or whether it is just that people are becoming more aware of trying to contact us to talk about it.

Ms Emerson—Certainly, that issue is a driver behind the development of the high school resource for teachers, because it was seen that teachers are often the people who are most likely to potentially be able to identify young carers but they may be missing some obvious signs, assuming other reasons for a lack of attendance or poor results. So the work that Carers Australia is doing is contributing very much to trying to educate teachers to pick it up.

Senator SIEWERT—When is the second piece of research you were talking about becoming available?

Ms Emerson—I have not got a date on that but I will try to find out for you.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you.

Senator BERNARDI—There is nothing further for me, Chair.

CHAIR—Does anyone else have questions on the carers area?

Dr Harmer—I have some more data for Senator Bernardi: the organisations funded from the 2008-09 National Disability Conference Funding Program, organisation, conference title, amounts.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you.

CHAIR—We have now finished output 2.3.

[4.13 pm]

CHAIR—The schedule goes on to output 4.2, Supporting financial management. I call Senator Scullion.

Senator SCULLION—Minister, whilst I understand that we have embargoed most of the Indigenous questions for tomorrow, I would like to touch on in a more general sense, if I could, some of the administration arrangements that link, for example, family payments and children at risk with attendance in a more general sense.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, can I just—

Senator SCULLION—No, I am saying that—

Senator Chris Evans—I just want to make the point very clear because we double-checked with the chair and we had an agreement about those things because we do not have the officers available. I am happy to help you as far as I can, but that will not take you very far, I suspect, in terms of any detail.

Senator SCULLION—The reason I prefaced it with that is that I do not want you to leap up and say, 'We are doing that tomorrow.' I acknowledge that.

Senator Chris Evans—I am just making it clear that my capacity to give you any detail will be—

Senator SCULLION—I have no intention to go into any detail on that; it is more in a general sense.

Senator Chris Evans—I am just warning you that I will not be all that helpful. It will not be deliberate; it will just be knowledge based.

Senator SCULLION—Indeed. I understand that the secretary would often have a deal of general knowledge on that general area. Dr Harmer, I am keen to explore the notion that has been in the public arena that links child attendance and those sorts of issues with family payments more generally. That is why I did not want to leap up and say, ‘This is only about the quarantining of payments.’ I understood that you were conducting some welfare quarantining trials. Can you tell me how broad they are in terms of some of the demographics you may be looking at?

Dr Harmer—We are. The people who are managing that issue will actually be in the families section, 3.1, which is due for later today.

Senator SCULLION—Okay.

Dr Harmer—Very generally, as you would be aware, income quarantining at the moment is going on as part of the Cape York welfare trials in the Coen and Mossman Gorge areas, Aurukun and one other in the cape. That is a particular model of income quarantining around the established Family Responsibilities Commission, which the Queensland government has established and we have funded. There is of course the compulsory income quarantining which is part of the Northern Territory emergency response which is ongoing. We have two trials that I am aware of on school attendance—one in Western Australia and one in the Northern Territory—where we, the Commonwealth, have offered the states an additional lever through income quarantining of their welfare payments to try to improve school attendance in some locations. That is probably at the end of my knowledge, but Ms Beauchamp might be able to take it further.

Ms Beauchamp—Just to clarify what Dr Harmer was saying: yes, there are some trials going on, and Cannington is one of the sites in Western Australia along with the Kimberleys. In terms of the school enrolment and attendance measure, DEEWR has lead responsibility for that and that is not necessarily subject to income quarantining. There are other arrangements we are putting in place to manage the school enrolment and attendance measures, both in the Northern Territory and in Cannington.

Senator SCULLION—I know the minister would have a much better understanding of this because he is from Western Australia, but I am assuming that Cannington is a slightly different demographic which is why it has been selected for the nature of that trial. Is that correct?

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator Chris Evans—It is not outer but it is a suburban area—

Senator SIEWERT—South of Perth.

Senator Chris Evans—Yes, but not right on the fringe—middle class, working middle class, sort of.

Senator SIEWERT—It has a high proportion of Nyungar residents.

Dr Harmer—The area in Western Australia was selected by the Western Australian government.

Ms Beauchamp—That is correct, with advice.

Dr Harmer—We worked with them in selecting the site.

Senator SCULLION—You may want to immediately take this on notice, but if I ask questions about how those trials are going and how I might find that out, you are telling me that I should wait until 3.1?

Ms Beauchamp—It is very early days in Western Australia because of the caretaker arrangements and concluding bilaterals with the Western Australian government. So it is only in the early stages of finalising the agreements with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—Could I just jump in here. There are two trials in Cannington. There is the trial over school attendance and there is the trial over child protection. So is the question you just answered specifically for the school requirements or for both?

Ms Beauchamp—It is for both.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. Sorry, Senator Scullion. I have a series of questions about this, too, so I am jumping in as I see it appropriate.

Senator SCULLION—That is fine.

Ms Beauchamp—They will be picked up in 3.1, as Dr Harmer said.

Dr Harmer—We will have the people here who can answer the questions, but as we were saying it will be difficult to go too far about, for example, how successful they are given they are in the very early stages of being established.

Senator Chris Evans—I think we are better off either doing output 3.1 now or moving through, otherwise we will do this twice.

Senator SIEWERT—I have a question about that, though. Part of the trial is about financial management, so I want to know that if I ask a question about that in 3.1 the people will still be here to answer the question.

Senator Chris Evans—Why don't we do all of that under 3.1 and we will have the officers for both at the table.

Ms Beauchamp—We will keep the officers from financial management here.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I want to know.

Dr Harmer—We are in your hands. I understand from Ms Beauchamp that we can go straight to 3.1 now.

Senator SIEWERT—So the officers are here?

Ms Beauchamp—Can we just wait for the officers to come?

Senator SIEWERT—Does that mean we have all the other senators for that section?

CHAIR—I have no problem if the committee wishes to do 3.1. Dr Harmer, my understanding is that the majority of the rest of the questions we have for this group are under 3.1. We have already heard that a couple of the questions we thought were in financial management are in fact in 3.1. I think the best use of the time would be if we move straight into that and knock over as much of that as we possibly can, if you have got your officers here.

Dr Harmer—I am happy to do that. Can we just clarify whether there are likely to be any questions that do fit squarely in 4.2, Supporting financial management?

CHAIR—Does anyone have anything that is clearly only for 4.2, or will it be 4.2 linked to families so we will need to have them both here?

Senator Chris Evans—Can I ask whether there is anything in 4.3 and 4.4?

CHAIR—We have a couple of questions in both of them but not a great deal.

Senator Chris Evans—I just wondered if you wanted to skip through that and then do 3.1.

CHAIR—I think we will move straight into 3.1 and start moving through that because it is the largest one. I will contact one other senator who wants to be part of 3.1 and let him know that. If you have the appropriate officers for that, we will go back to Senator Scullion and we can start these questions.

Ms Beauchamp—While the other officers are coming for 3.1, I want to answer Senator Bernardi's question around signing the agreements with the states and territories in relation to the \$100 million supported accommodation program. Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the ACT signed on 19 June; South Australia signed on 23 June; New South Wales signed on 24 June; Queensland signed on 26 June. Who have I missed?

Senator BERNARDI—Victoria?

Ms Beauchamp—That was 19 June.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. Thank you.

Dr Harmer—I have questions we took on notice relating to the National Disability Strategy regional and remote communities consultations, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and some information on the National Disability Strategy which we can table.

Senator SCULLION—Madam Chair, I have another couple of questions. They are all very 3.1 and 4.2ish, but I just wondered if perhaps you can give me some advice. I would like to ask some questions on the BasicsCard program that is not in context with the intervention—

CHAIR—That is a general process.

Dr Harmer—Senator, your questions on the BasicsCard that are not to do with the intervention would be directed to the Department of Human Services and Centrelink.

Senator SCULLION—They have been.

Dr Harmer—So questions that are related to the intervention we will have a go at, but questions that are outside that would be to the Department of Human Services.

CHAIR—And there is no policy input in that, Dr Harmer?

Senator SCULLION—I am not wanting an answer, but I was going to ask whether or not the BasicsCard has actually been developed in a way that you felt may allow its use in other demographics. That was really the question.

Ms Beauchamp—Can I clarify what you mean by ‘other demographics’?

Senator SCULLION—Outside of the prescribed areas of the intervention. It could be, for example, at Cannington. In terms of the technology that the BasicsCard provides us, would that be able to be used in other—

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—Great. I was not sure what output that was in, but since you have answered the question that is fine.

Dr Harmer—We can answer that.

Senator SCULLION—The other area that I thought was in 4.2 was financial and debt management assistance—that is, what services are available, how they are accessed such as direct approach or referral from the perspective—

Dr Harmer—That is 4.2.

Senator SCULLION—So perhaps whilst we are waiting, I will just finish 4.2. Is that okay?

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you.

CHAIR—We will do those elements. I know the Families people are moving in, but we can keep going back and get those questions done.

Senator SCULLION—We can come back to the FIMS and those other things in a second.

CHAIR—Go for it, Senator Scullion.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you for the BasicsCard answer. In terms of financial debt management assistance, as we have all acknowledged, the preface to most statements is ‘in these tough economic times’. That must have been very much a focus of the department. What services are available in terms of your financial debt management assistance?

Ms Farrelly—If I could answer your question generally first. Our department administers the financial management program. That appropriation is \$49.1 million and it provides funding to work with the third sector and other relevant stakeholders to deliver universal and targeted financial management services to individuals and families. Just to give you an indication of what is made up within that program, there is Commonwealth financial counselling worth \$5.1 million, money management services worth \$6.8 million, emergency relief worth \$36.2 million, the National Information Centre on Retirement Investments worth \$0.5 million, and problem gambling worth another half a million.

In this budget there was an additional increase to financial management services which you may have heard about. So there is an additional \$20 million over four years and that is made up of two components, each of which are \$2.5 million per year. The first is an increase in financial counselling services for Commonwealth financial counselling and the second component is to provide easy-to-understand financial management information which relates to mortgages, credit cards, hire-purchase and so on. As far as implementing financial counselling, in recent weeks the minister has announced that there has been an expansion of the capacity of the 41 financial counselling services to increase their ability to provide financial counselling services to people who are experiencing problems with their finances.

Senator SCULLION—Can you provide me with a scope in a general sense about how people access these? Is it done by referral from some mortgagee agent, from the banks or from the police, or do people walk in off the street? Does the department require Centrelink, for example, to keep records of that nature? Do we have a bit of an idea about that demographic?

Ms Farrelly—The services work in an integrated way, so you may go into an emergency relief service and may get a referral then to financial counselling or vice versa. You may go to Centrelink and get a referral for financial counselling assistance. We ask our providers to keep data about where people come from. When we seek data from providers in the emergency relief area for instance, there are a large number of volunteers. So any extra data we get people to keep potentially increases the amount that they need to do in terms of red tape, so we are very conscious of not imposing too much in terms of record keeping for our service providers.

Senator SCULLION—I understand that, Ms Farrelly. Obviously having a clear idea of the number of people coming through the door may give you a clear idea of the level of requirement.

Ms Farrelly—Yes, and we do keep statistics.

Senator SCULLION—So would there be more general statistics?

Ms Farrelly—Yes, sure.

Senator SCULLION—Would you be able to provide me on notice or now with the numbers of people who are both referred and who come in off the street?

Dr Harmer—The two sources of referral are primarily from our emergency relief providers and from Centrelink into our financial advising function. I would think we would have some statistics. We ought to be able to get some statistics from both of those.

Senator SCULLION—Perhaps I will take that on notice. Dr Harmer, maybe you would be able to help me. To do these sorts of things in government, you said that there was an extra \$20 million in the budget and I see some of that is particularly for referral and counselling services. I am making an assumption—perhaps wrong, and the minister will jump down my throat if I am wrong—that you may not have been aware of the financial crisis at that time.

Senator Chris Evans—If they were, I wish they had told me.

Dr Harmer—I think it is a reasonable assumption.

Senator SCULLION—Indeed. I would hate to be accused of verballing the minister. So what is the system? There is clearly a change in the financial environment that will clearly bring more people who are requiring all of the products that you have. Clearly you have budgeted for a certain amount at a time before I would recognise; they may not have seen the financial tsunami coming down on us. So what are you doing to deal with what may be a new and so far unthought of need for financial counselling and, in fact, for all of the services that you have mentioned?

Dr Harmer—It is probably fairly early days yet in terms of a likely tsunami of people coming through the door, but it is probably starting.

Senator SCULLION—The financial one is upon us.

Dr Harmer—Indeed. But in terms of people getting around to discovering that they need financial advice or turning up at our Centrelink office or at an emergency relief provider, I think it is still relatively early days. We would be looking to monitor that, certainly, and give government advice about it. People who are in severe difficulty—particularly, for example, those who are becoming unemployed—will pretty quickly show up at Centrelink offices and be first of all looking for unemployment benefit or a Newstart allowance. Part of that consideration will be whether they need financial advice et cetera, and we will be getting statistics and information from Centrelink. We are certainly aware of what is happening. In our areas of responsibility, we would stand ready to be providing advice. The government would expect us to be giving it advice about the changes that we are noticing in our business from the financial crisis.

Senator SCULLION—It is self-evident, but I will clarify just so I can make sure that you clearly understand the information that I require. We have been reactionary—and this is not a criticism. This financial situation is unknown. We know it is going to be something. The answer that you gave to my question seemed to indicate to me that we will wait to get some indicators of need through the doors. It would seem to me to be still reactionary at a time when that may not be the case. Are you able to get some modelling from Treasury about the sorts of needs, because if we get some modelling from Treasury clearly you would be able to more clearly model the sorts of responses that were appropriate in the community sense and what sorts of levels of budget you would need? Have you spoken to the Treasury about providing that sort of a model?

Senator Chris Evans—I want to answer first, Senator. I think it is fair to say that that sort of modelling in anticipation of the impact of the financial crisis which has come to a head in the last month is clearly not going to have been done. We had some warnings and we did make some provisions for it. But I think even now it would be fair to say that we are not sure what the impact will be on the Australian economy. I see some people are talking about 10 per cent unemployment and others are saying it will not impact us terribly much. Pay your money, take your chance with either option.

MYEFO will come out and give us a better idea. I suspect if they did MYEFO two months ago they might have a slightly different forecast than now. I think it is on the move. It would be unrealistic to think that we would have any good feel for the downstream impacts in the next little while. What is the case, though, is that—it is a bit like the deeming provisions for

age pensioners that will be kept under review—it is always competent for the department to come back to the government and say, ‘We have a lot more people coming in the door. There is a much greater need. We either want an allocation in the additional estimates or we want to be able to take some money from other services to meet the extra demand.’ The general answer is that as the demand picture becomes clearer then alterations will have to be made.

You have to be frank about this. Any forecast of the impact of, say, America going into recession on clients of FaHCSIA in Australia in the next month or two is pure guesswork. We hope it is not much of an impact, but that is one of those things you can only monitor and respond to. I am sure if departmental officials have concerns or have evidence that there is a lot of demand for a particular program then they will be make a submission to the minister about how we might respond. At this stage, unless they have much better economic expertise than I understood—

Mr Lewis—We will not claim that.

Senator SCULLION—I certainly meant no mischief by my question.

Dr Harmer—Within the department we have a group set up to monitor what we need to do within the department to respond to this. As the minister has indicated, we are already carefully watching what is happening to asset values for those who are likely to get pensions and benefits. We are looking at deposit rates being offered by the banks and financial institutions for deeming. There are a whole stack of things we are doing.

The minister is absolutely right: in terms of trying to model at this stage, I do not think there is sufficient clarity about the likely impact or numbers. The estimators around, the experts, who are predicting what will happen to the economy disagree about how long it will last, how deep it will be, whether we will go into recession, whether we will avoid it. That is a pretty hard environment in which to be doing too much.

Mr Lewis—Perhaps we could give you some examples. We have had some representations from the centre for counselling for retirement incomes, who look at older citizens who are having difficulty with reverse mortgaging and understanding some of that and how they might manage their funds. We also get feedback, to give you some comfort, from the emergency relief programs we run in terms of unmet demand. That is one of the key things that are part of their reporting arrangements to us.

In terms of forecasting, which is the question I think you are coming to, and being ahead of the demand, we are able to use some of that and what we hear from our colleagues who are much better at the long-term forecasting in the bigger sense to decide where we might position additional resources and where we might try new things. Last week there was announcement of 20 financial counselling positions. Ms Farrelly can talk to you a bit more about that. That is an example of how we have responded to that expected and growing demand. There are other activities that are in progress which we will be rolling out fairly soon which expand on those.

Ms Farrelly—In the Northern Territory, funding was provided to nine new providers to deliver a short-term response to the Northern Territory emergency response to income management. That is also happening in Western Australia. I think that will probably be covered more when you get into 1.3.

We do keep statistics of the number of people who come through the door. As Evan mentioned, we ask people from our Commonwealth financial counselling services in their six-monthly report if they can give us an indication of unmet need so we can monitor what demand is. That was part of the information that was used to help us work out which of the services required expansion and of what amount. As Evan mentioned, that was announced last week.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you for reminding me about the Northern Territory, Ms Farrelly. We have a process happening in the Northern Territory called the wet season. A lot of people are predicting what is going to happen but I can tell you now, Minister, that no-one is telling me it is going to get drier. I think it is a reasonable analogy with what I heard, as a layperson, about the United States and its impact on Australia. I do not think it is going to get better in the short term. I am not arguing the case—

Senator Chris Evans—I watch China rather than America.

Senator SCULLION—We appear to have been, according to most of the observers, taken by surprise completely. Much of the surprise has been the geometric rate of progression that this has gotten worse internationally. I am no expert on the connectivity between the economy and the need for community services, but I would assume they are parallel. When you have a geometric rate of progression in terms of an increase in the need for services then we are going to have to plan to have a geometric rate of increase in the provision of those services.

I do not think anyone in the room is going to argue the case that this is going to get not substantially worse but worse. Is it reasonable that you ask Treasury about this? I am not looking for a forecast about exactly what is going to happen. But clearly most of the departments that are delivering services that are going to ameliorate some of the pain that Australians are going to feel would have a bit of a feel for the future and have their finger on the pulse in terms of saying exactly what sort of service we need and what incremental access we need rather than acting when the tsunami is close and people getting washed in the door.

You can talk about a planning framework for this or some sort of process to be able to predict and implement the needs as they come on. As I have indicated, because of the geometric rate of that need those planning processes are going to be very sophisticated. Could you share with us how those plans are going?

Senator Chris Evans—Perhaps I can respond and we can see whether the departmental officers want to say anything in addition. As you said, things have moved fairly quickly. I am sure all departments are doing revisions and starting to look at what scenarios may develop without having the precision about the unemployment rate or economic growth rates et cetera.

I can only speak for my own department and what we are doing. Clearly, we are starting to look at what levers are available to us, what the impacts might be and what policy alternatives we have to deal with some of the issues that may emerge. That is preparatory work and advice to the minister about the various levers and what the impact might be.

I think it is fair to say, certainly from my own thinking, that we are waiting for MYEFO to give us a much clearer picture. That, too, will be a forecast in some sense. But MYEFO is going to be quite a key consideration. I know from my own work that I am very much looking at the levers, what we might be able to do and the policy options. I think MYEFO might be a

marker point where you say, 'Treasury tells us that the growth forecast has altered by this much or the unemployment forecast by that much.' That is when you can get a bit serious about those things. Inside each of the line departments you do not have that same sort of expertise.

Senator SCULLION—When would you expect that information?

Senator Chris Evans—MYEFO is due about the second week of November.

Dr Harmer—Mid-November.

Senator Chris Evans—It is not far away. So I think you can do the work in terms of looking at your policy levers and options, looking at potential impacts, but when you get down to it you are not going to plan yet on the impact. MYEFO will certainly be a major driver of responses inside government departments. I know from my point of view that that is the case. We are looking at what we can do, what will be impacted, what the flow-on effects will be. In terms of calculating what that might mean, I think most departments will rely on MYEFO as being the clearest indication of what the parameters will be.

Senator SCULLION—Any forecasting, Minister, as I am sure you are aware, relies on a reliability index—'I can rely on this for five per cent reliability, 100 per cent, 50 per cent'. That gives the user of the statistic some support for it. Outside the report and the information coming down in mid-November, there will not be any interim forecast—and I accept that is not far away; no drama there—but as you have indicated, the rate of change that is going to happen, if it does happen and has happened in other places, increases dramatically exponentially. Do you think it would be useful for the Treasury to provide forecasts—and obviously this question is directed to the minister—because the world seems to have swivelled in a month.

I acknowledge that mid-November may not seem too far away, and that is not a criticism, but if in a month's time you have an extra 100,000 people requiring some sort of service that may not have been forecast, do you think it would be useful to have frequency of forecasts from Treasury about this, even if they come up with some reliability index that can be used by the department, because different departments will obviously have a different focus on that information? Do you expect to be able to get more frequent pieces of information in that regard?

Senator Chris Evans—No, I do not think so. You have to be careful, too. If you responded to the daily movement in the share market, you would go mad. Every time I get up in the morning it says seven per cent up or six per cent down. Luckily, I do not have any shares, which I think is a very wise position for politicians, given the numbers who have come a cropper owning them. So I do not take a keen personal interest. You cannot respond to that and what impact it might have on Australia.

I think what you can say is that there is a very serious threat from the global financial crisis to the economies of the world. We think we are better placed than most. The government has taken some early action to try to, if you like, fireproof us to the extent possible, but no-one is pretending it will not impact on us—it will. I think all you can do at the moment is work on those strategies, look at your policy levers and your options—and the government has done a lot of that in the economic area. I know I am doing it in my area and I am sure FaHCSIA is

doing that as well. But if you are asking me if we have responded in a quantitative way to what has happened in the last few weeks or months—in fact, you can ask them yourself—we have not, but MYEFO will say to you, and that is why it is the mid-year economic financial—

Senator SCULLION—I do not know it either.

Senator Chris Evans—The Mid-Year Economic Fiscal Outlook, that is why we do that—so that governments can have a look mid-year and then adjust the settings. If you are asking me if we should do that every month, I do not think so. Programs are slow to turn around. You obviously have to have an eye as to what is happening, and I do not pretend that people are waiting in the sense of not preparing, but I think MYEFO will be critical to government decisions about programs and appropriate responses and the planning. Certainly, when we give that answer when we are asked by the opposition in parliament, it is because it is true. That is the time when you get the proper analysis and you say, ‘All right, we know what our levers are; we know generally how we can best respond. This is the forecast. We will adjust accordingly.’

Senator SCULLION—Thank you. Given that, if I can just go back to the previous responses from Dr Harmer on the frequency of the information that you had received back from Centrelink, either from your mortgage brokers or whoever the network is—and I know it is quite a wide network and you have acknowledged that—what would you think would be the current frequency of reporting from them in terms of the numbers at the moment?

Dr Harmer—I will take that on notice. I do not know, but we have very regular interaction with Centrelink. At a time like this we are well aware that we need to keep a close watch on what is happening with the numbers. We went through this this morning. We have been giving advice. The government has detailed modelling on what is going to happen. We rely on MYEFO and Treasury. We covered that this morning. I have been giving advice already. The government asked me for urgent early advice on pensions, for example, and \$4.8 billion will help pensioners and insulate them from some of the adverse effects and there is \$3.9 billion to families et cetera, which is a key client group of this department.

So there has been quite a lot of action already. We are looking at the data that is coming from Centrelink and from our people involved in financial counselling and from our emergency relief people and from within the department doing the sorts of things that Senator Evans talked about his department doing—checking within the various portfolio programs we have. We are the biggest spending department of all and we have a lot of programs—something like 80 programs. We are looking at what is happening to those 80 programs and the demand for them et cetera. We would fully expect the government to be asking us for information updates about what do we need to do and we will be looking to be as prepared as we can be when they do.

Senator SCULLION—Do you anticipate an increase in the frequency of the information that is coming from Centrelink? The motive behind my question is that, with anything that has a geometric rate of progression, you have to be standing on the corner—

Dr Harmer—I understand your question, and the answer is yes.

Senator Chris Evans—Centrelink will advise FaHCSIA regularly if the unemployment rate is going up while they have got more people coming in looking for unemployment

benefits. Those systems are quite sophisticated. So they will get early advice as to those things. As Dr Harmer pointed out, one of the reasons for the package announced is to provide some support for pensioners and families in the face of some of these things we are possibly confronting. For people in financially dire straits with kids, one of the things we are going to do in December is give them some direct financial assistance. But I think it is still the case that it is not clear yet. We have taken as much fireproofing action as we can and we are putting as much stimulus into the economy as we can. I am not as pessimistic as some, but I am a bit like you; I would not back myself terribly strongly with a lot of my hard-earned cash, either, because you do not know.

Senator SCULLION—Indeed. Given that the last time there was an injection—and I acknowledge that of the extra \$20 million that went in part of that was directly associated with the counselling services—was at the last budget, which had no recognition of the current circumstances, the announcement in mid-November, I think we would have to acknowledge that between the first decision to make the \$20 million contribution and mid-November circumstances are considerably worse and people will probably have a greater need of those. This is a long question. Could we expect some sort of announcement around that, since we have tied that quite reasonably into that we would not be making any decisions until we have a look at the proper levers? How soon after that, talking about counselling services? Clearly, I would have thought there would have been an appreciated need. Would there be some capacity around that to make some announcements or some decisions about increasing the safety net for people who might have been on the wrong side of this crisis?

Senator Chris Evans—Certainly, the government will take decisions that it thinks are necessary in terms of reprioritising or spending, or additional spending, if that is what is required and is the best response in all programs and in all portfolios. But as I say, those decisions will be made as appropriate. For some, we have tried to do that early and decisively to respond to the broader economic advice, but clearly the sort of thing you are talking about is a bit further down the track. If projections for unemployment were for it to rise sharply, clearly you would be looking at the safety net type of provisions and what services you are providing there. If the unemployment projection did not alter much then we would say that the policy setting would probably stay the same or similar. Those are considerations the department would look at and report to ministers. You would understand those processes. Those are the decisions you make as you see the impact. Certainly, people are preparing. People are looking at strategies. People are assessing policies levers. But the decisions of government on funding will be taken when it is much clearer as to where the needs will be and, hopefully, you are a bit gloomier than is warranted.

Senator SCULLION—I am not a gloomy person, Minister. I appreciate your answer in regard to a benchmark or a milestone in terms of unemployment. That would be a natural process. Thank you for that. Perhaps I should rephrase my question. There is an existing need for financial management counselling, and I and the wider community assume that that need has increased between the last budget and now—and certainly by mid-November. Someone who needs that counselling would not necessarily be unemployed. I appreciate your answer in relation to the trigger of unemployment. Again, I know you are not being mischievous but

there is a whole range of reasons for which this assistance would be required before you become unemployed.

I am still a little concerned that much has happened in terms of the environment in which people may wish to get financial advice in Australia today, yet we are effectively not doing anything more in terms of resources. I have heard Ms Farrelly speak about the extra 20 people budgeted for in June and the intervention aspects, and I recognise that. It just seems that the people who find themselves in circumstances where they will need financial management counselling may not be in the circumstances that we would normally associate with that—that is, being broke or unemployed.

Senator Chris Evans—The housing area is an obvious one, where people are under mortgage stress or something.

Mr Lewis—Senator, just to add to your earlier answer about the recent announcements, Minister Macklin put out a ministerial release on 3 October in which she advised that an additional \$10 million had been brought forward in this year's budget to fund 41 organisations to provide financial counselling. That is additional money that she clearly articulated in her press release.

Senator SCULLION—What date was that?

Mr Lewis—It was on 3 October. She forecast in her press release—and I will read from it—that, in addition to the 41 organisations receiving additional support, she would shortly be calling for applications and making, you would argue, some sort of announcement at some point for an additional 20 positions for financial counsellors this year. I suppose that answers your question in the sense of responsiveness within this period and the obvious interest in the increasing demand.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you for that, Mr Lewis. Do you have an idea of the timing around when those counsellors may be employed? Clearly they have indicated that the NGOs will be getting the additional money available. When does that announcement hit the ground?

Mr Lewis—The 41 are already in train. I have a list of where the providers are located, if that is of use to you.

Senator SCULLION—No, when you were talking about the 20 positions—

Mr Lewis—The minister will announce that fairly soon I expect, but that is up to her.

Senator SCULLION—So we expect that because it has been announced someone will be doing something.

Mr Lewis—The process for engagement has started.

Dr Harmer—Naturally, given the times we are in, it would be with some urgency.

Senator SCULLION—In these troubled financial times, indeed. Thank you very much. Mr Chairman, I think I have covered output 4.2.

CHAIR—Senator Boswell is waiting for families. We have the families people here.

Senator BOSWELL—I am ready to go.

CHAIR—I know you are, Senator Boswell. If you are okay with this process, Senator Scullion, because Senator Boswell has been waiting and we have the officers available for his questions, we will first move to his questions which I believe are to do with the family tax benefit.

Senator Chris Evans—Give 'Bozzie' a fair go.

CHAIR—Then we will return to your series of questions which seem to be on a wider scale, Senator Scullion.

[4.55 pm]

CHAIR—So we move to output 4.4. Good afternoon, gentlemen.

Senator BOSWELL—I refer to the planned changes to the adjustable taxation income definition that restricts eligibility for a range of assistance measures. We know from past answers that the inclusion of salary sacrifice superannuation contributions as adjusted taxable income is expected to lead to reduced benefits for around 74,000 families receiving family tax benefits and 18,800 families in receipt of child-care benefits from July 2009. The inclusion of the net investment losses in adjustable taxable income is expected to lead to reduced benefits for around 20,100, and 12,700 will lose all their family tax benefits A and B. Once families lose family tax benefit A, families cannot get the education tax rebate or the \$1,000 per child benefit from the economic stimulus package. Is that correct?

Mr Warburton—The economic strategy stimulus payment will not be affected by the budget measure to which you are referring because that payment is being made to people who are entitled to family tax benefit on 14 October this year, and that budget measure is not due to come in until 1 July 2009. In respect of the other point about the education tax rebate, that is linked to family tax benefit part A, and if somebody is not eligible for family tax benefit part A they may miss out on the education tax rebate. But that program is the responsibility of Treasury.

Senator BOSWELL—I get flicked around from one department to the other. Can you just help me—

Dr Harmer—Senator, we are not flicking you around. We are just telling you which department—

Senator BOSWELL—I know, but I do get flicked around. Would you be able to tell me how many people will miss out on the education tax rebate?

Mr Warburton—Senator, the previous estimate we gave you was that 12,700 people would lose access to family tax benefit. That was the estimate of how many would lose access to family tax benefit when salary sacrifice to superannuation is treated as income. So that would basically be the number who would lose access to the education tax rebate.

Senator BOSWELL—What is the cut-off point of joint household income to losing this education tax rebate?

Mr Warburton—It is linked to the cut-off point for the family tax benefit part A.

Senator BOSWELL—Yes. What is it?

Mr Warburton—There is no single cut-off point. There is an income test.

Senator BOSWELL—That is what I am asking. What is the income test?

Mr Warburton—The way we calculate family tax benefit is that we add up all the amounts to which you are entitled. So it is a function of the number of children you have, how old the children are, whether you are eligible to receive the large family supplement or the multiple birth allowance, and then the payment is tapered away according to the income test. So the cut-off point depends on the particular type of family that you have.

Senator BOSWELL—As a prototype, say you have three children under 14. What is the income trigger that would cut you out?

Mr Warburton—Three children under 13—\$122,263.

Senator BOSWELL—That is not a huge amount if it is two incomes. Given the government's economic stimulus package and the world financial crisis, would the government consider delaying or abandoning these income definition changes that will make it even more difficult for many families to keep their heads above water? I suppose that is directed to the minister.

Senator Chris Evans—As far as I know, there is no consideration being made. That is obviously a decision for government, but I am not aware of any consideration being made.

Senator BOSWELL—Other assistance measures that will be hit by the changes to the income tax definition include the Commonwealth seniors health card and payments to residential aged carers. Some 22,000 people will lose access to the seniors health care card from July 2009. This will deprive them of access to cheaper drugs, bulk-billing, the telephone allowance and the seniors concession allowance. Has the department considered delaying or abandoning the planned changes to income definition in order to save these people losing assistance that they will miss if it is taken from them in these hard times?

Dr Harmer—The answer to that question is no, Senator.

Senator BOSWELL—Could I direct the question also to the minister.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, the measures contained in the budget stand and will be implemented. The government, in addition in announcing the stimulus package, has provided measures to support those we thought needed support as part of that stimulus package. So, as you are aware, pensioners and those in receipt of the seniors health care card received the bonuses. So a whole number of people who previously had not received such bonuses received those, and that was again a targeted measure targeted to those we thought were most in need. Successive governments have taken decisions to ensure that income support payments are targeted to those most in need, that are not universal but are deliberately, as I say, targeted. So those budget measures we took to better target income support were taken as part of the last budget process and they remain in force. If there is any further consideration of changes in these areas, they will of course be taken by government. But as I indicated to you, I am not aware of any reconsideration of those matters. But if there is, as I say, they would not be discussed publicly before being taken. The direction of your question is: are they being reconsidered as a result of the changes in the global financial markets? I think the answer is no.

Senator BOSWELL—I again ask: around 17,000 individuals in receipt of pensions and allowance payments are estimated to have reduced benefits from July 2009. I would think, Minister, these people would probably be on the verge of a pension and self-retired. They would be the people who have probably been hit from the stock market. As a result of the changes to the taxable income definition, those people are going to lose benefits. Is the government really going to say to these 17,000 people in a time of world crisis and economic crisis, ‘We’re going to cut your benefits’?

Senator Chris Evans—No, Senator. What we are saying to them is that there are eligibility requirements for benefits and those who are eligible will receive them and those who are not will not. In terms of—

Senator BOSWELL—But you are going to cut the ones that have been getting the benefits.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, in the budget we announced a change in eligibility. That has been implemented. What you are suggesting is that we ought to reconsider that and—

Senator BOSWELL—Exactly.

Senator Chris Evans—I would advise you of the response. But in terms of the argument you make about people and their superannuation, as you well know, there are deeming provisions that provide for calculation of people’s assets—the officers can take you through it far better than I can—and if people’s assets are diminished as a result of these impacts, they may be entitled for the first time to access income support through a pension or they may have their rate of pension increased if their circumstances have changed. So those people will receive support if their circumstances worsen and they come into the areas where people are eligible for support. But I am sure the officers can take you through those impacts in more detail if you want them to.

Senator BOSWELL—No, but I thank you for that. Minister, it is a time of economic crisis. A lot of self-retired people who thought they were providing for their old age are now going to be forced on to the pension or part pension. I think you would agree with that. When are you going to tell these people—these 120,000 or whatever there are—that on 1 July 2009 they will lose benefits? I direct you to what happened in July this year when a lot of people from the charity organisations found that their wages were going to be cut and everyone got into a panic, including the government, and it called a press conference and then said, ‘We’re going to straighten it out.’ You must be able to remember that.

Senator Chris Evans—I also remember who is responsible for it, Senator Boswell.

Senator BOSWELL—No, I was not.

Senator Chris Evans—The Howard government. You have tried this on me a couple of times and I am not going to wear it.

Senator BOSWELL—You are the government now.

Senator Chris Evans—I know, and we have fixed up your mess.

Senator BOSWELL—You are the government. You cannot blame—

Senator Chris Evans—It was a decision of the previous government, Senator. I am happy to debate it.

Senator BOSWELL—You do not have to debate it. You won the election. That is game, set and match.

Senator Chris Evans—All right. So we fixed that problem. Now what do you want me to do?

Senator BOSWELL—When are you going to fix this one? The question is: when are you going to advise these people that they are going to lose benefits? They are going to lose their benefits on drug concessions, medical benefit concessions—

Senator Chris Evans—I will get the department to advise you what the communication strategy is for advising people of the change in eligibility requirements.

Senator BOSWELL—Thank you. Are they going to do it now?

Mr Warburton—Senator, just to clarify something you have said, these changes to income definitions do not affect pensioners.

Senator BOSWELL—No, they affect people with benefits and people will be forced on to—possibly—pensions. Tell me when you are going to communicate to these 100,000-odd people that they are going to lose benefits.

Senator Chris Evans—This is the seniors health card income test, is it?

Senator BOSWELL—It is all of those things that I nominated.

Mr Warburton—In respect of family tax benefit, the normal process would be that in March prior to the beginning of the financial year there is what is called the new financial year assessment process. In the course of that we write to people and, based on the data that we already have, tell them what we believe their estimated taxable income would be and we seek confirmation of that from them. We also advise them at that point in time of any changes that will be starting with the new financial year so that that can inform the estimate that they give Centrelink.

Senator BOSWELL—So all of the people that I have nominated in this statement will receive a letter on 1 March or—

Dr Harmer—They will receive a letter from Centrelink around March.

Mr Warburton—Yes, I am a little uncertain of the exact timing. It occurs sufficiently in advance of the financial year so that we can get the information out to customers and they can get a response back to us.

Senator BOSWELL—Can I just take you back to what you told me before. Was that three children under 13 or was it two children under 13?

Mr Warburton—Three children under 13.

Senator BOSWELL—A normal family is two. In terms of two children, what would that be?

Mr Warburton—I will just have to look it up.

Senator BOSWELL—What is the cut off—16?

Mr Warburton—For two children under 13, it would be \$111,082. That is the cut-out point in this current financial year. With the indexation arrangements that are in place, next year it would be higher. But we do not have that figure yet.

Senator BOSWELL—What is the maximum age of the child for these child benefits? Is it 16, 17, 18 or what?

Mr Warburton—Young people up to the age of 24 may attract family tax benefit for their parents, provided they are full-time students. Once you turn 21, for FTBA you are required to be a full-time student.

Senator BOSWELL—Thank you very much. Thanks, Minister.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator Boswell, are we going to do that again next sitting week? You and I have a routine going here on this one.

Senator BOSWELL—You should know your subject now.

Senator Chris Evans—I have learnt more about it as a result of your questions. You got the briefing I promised you?

Senator BOSWELL—Yes, I did.

Senator Chris Evans—So we have both learnt a bit, I think.

Senator BOSWELL—The people who work in advertising: when I gave you the heads-up on that, you learnt a bit on that too.

Senator Chris Evans—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you completed your questions now, Senator Boswell?

Senator BOSWELL—Yes.

CHAIR—My intention is to stay in the families portfolio and complete that as quickly as we can. I call Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—I have a couple of questions. They relate to some advice I received that the baby bonus was available to women who underwent terminations because they were classified as stillbirths. This was reported in the press. Initially, there was a statement from someone speaking on behalf of the minister that this was not possible. On the following day, there was an acknowledgement that it could be done and the loophole would be closed. When I asked Centrelink about this the other day, they were completely blank. They said they had received no advice in regard to this and that the forms that were available for download from Centrelink had not been changed at all. In fact the forms that were downloadable that day were dated 28 May, I think, so it had not been changed. I want to know what advice the minister has issued and what steps the department has taken to shut this down.

Mr Sandison—We are aware of the question and the answers that were made the previous evening, particularly about the form in question that you are asking about and the commitment that was made to have it changed. The process has been followed through, and a proposed change to the form has been put through the system. That has been agreed to between the department, as the policy-owning agency, and Centrelink. The minister, Minister

Macklin, has agreed to the change to the form. There was advice received about the change required to make sure that it was appropriate, and that was from health professionals and legal advice. Centrelink, which I think is where the answer ended up, are in the process of putting it through their system, of getting the approval from Minister Ludwig to that form going into the process.

Senator BERNARDI—None of the Centrelink people knew about it. I am sorry to interrupt you.

Mr Sandison—I am aware of the answer provided.

Senator BERNARDI—Which is consistent with what I am suggesting to you. Is that right?

Mr Sandison—I think some of the questions started with family tax benefit and moved into the form, so there might have been different people available at the table at the time. We have checked with them, we have talked to them, and the process is due for a release in January. It goes through on the IT system and, as you would imagine, Centrelink has major releases it has to do to meet the various requirements of new initiatives and budget measures. As far as we are aware, that is on track to follow the normal process of approval.

Senator BERNARDI—Hang on, can I just go to that. This is not a new initiative or a budget measure. This is putting what was described to me as a clarifying question or an additional box on a form to say that this is not a stillbirth, this is not another conditional payment, this is a voluntary termination, or something to that effect.

Mr Sandison—In regard to the term ‘delivery’ and the use of it.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Mr Warburton—That is correct. It is not related to a new budget initiative. It is quite expensive for Centrelink to replace its forms, so in the normal course of things, if there are changes to be made to forms, we do them either on the financial year cycle or at a point where there are other changes going through and forms need to be revised. So the first instance when that could occur on this occasion is 1 January 2009 because that is when the range of budget changes to the baby bonus are going through.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay.

Mr Warburton—That may explain in part as well why it is just in the system being processed with the form so not all Centrelink officials would have been aware of it the other evening. They are still in the process of revising those forms.

Senator BERNARDI—And becoming aware of it. Are you aware of how many baby bonus payments have been made to women undergoing—gosh, I do not even know how to describe it—‘social’ abortions?

Mr Warburton—We do not have any authority to collect that sort of information. We can only really collect the information that is required to assess eligibility for the payment. We can tell you the number of stillbirths that received a payment.

Senator BERNARDI—But some of those stillbirths would be legitimate payments. When I say ‘legitimate’, these are payments that you could justify. Whether you would like it or not,

you could make a justification for them. Is the minister suggesting, or have your instructions been, that you stop payments for all stillbirths?

Mr Sandison—No. Mr Warburton was saying that the exchange of data that provides the link to the original payments, under privacy arrangements, says whether the person is eligible or not in relation to FTB and the follow-through baby bonus payments and so forth. We do not get the information that distinguishes down to the level of what you called ‘social’ abortion.

Senator BERNARDI—So when this was raised, there had been no meaningful change. It has not been stopped, the payments have not been stopped and there has been no effort to record how many people are taking advantage of this system.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, they have told you about the process for the forms, but I think it might be important for the officers to take you through how applications have to be made because I think that makes it pretty clear that this is unlikely to be a large number. I am speculating.

Senator BERNARDI—But one is too many, as far as I am concerned.

Senator Chris Evans—I do not think we are debating abortion here; we are debating who is eligible for the payment of the baby bonus. I think if the officers take you through the steps, it will become clear to you that the chances of people making claims in that situation are not highly unlikely but there is quite a process. If they tell you the process, I think the sort of scope we are talking about will become clear.

Mr Warburton—Senator, in the case of a stillbirth, if either of the parents wish to seek to claim the baby bonus they have to complete what is called a bereavement payment claim form, or an FA008 claim form. That collects a range of information concerning all the payments that might be made in the case of bereavement. Attached to that form is a proof-of-birth certificate. It has to be completed by the doctor or the midwife, and they have to certify that it was a stillbirth with the criteria around a stillbirth that we are seeking to clarify, and then they submit the form to Medicare or Centrelink essentially.

Senator BERNARDI—I have the form actually here, and I understand that. But there are instances where—and this is the nub of the problem—women can have abortions and that satisfies the criteria for a stillbirth. That is the nub of the problem. The criteria regard the size of the foetus and the length of gestation. There was horrific evidence given on radio by one lady who rang in and said that she knows of someone who has done this three times to claim the baby bonus. It is an oversight and it is part of previous legislation, but I think it has to be fixed.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the officer has given you a description of the process which indicates that, firstly, people have to apply and, secondly, there is a fair deal of checking to establish this process before they can be eligible. So you do not get paid this by accident; it takes a fairly determined effort. I do not know about the suggestion you just made, but it takes a very serious effort to apply and meet those criteria. I think what the minister acknowledged is that there is a potential for a claim but that it was not tended to be allowed.

And while one would think the numbers would be very small, and the department has no capacity to establish that information, given the privacy concerns and what have you, the

minister has moved to absolutely rule out that possibility and that form will be implemented in the way that the officer described because of the cycle of these things. But I think it is important to understand the process, because I think it does make it clear that there are quite a few steps and a deliberate application required and evidence from a doctor or a midwife, which really does make it a reasonable level of protection against any abuse. But the possibility remains and the minister has acknowledged that and moved to fix it.

Senator BERNARDI—I accept that, but I will just say that the form says—and it has to be certified by a doctor or a midwife—that a stillborn child of weeks gestation or weight, either of those criteria. It is not your government's fault; it is a mistake clearly in the legislation. Whether it has been abused—as I said to you, I only have anecdotal evidence of one lady when she rang up a radio station and started crying on the talkback about it—it has to be fixed, and I am hopeful that it will be fixed. You are saying 1 January, but I would have liked to have seen it fixed.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the other thing to say is there is now an awareness of it, and I think you will find that would mean people were more aware of the potential, both in terms of medical practitioners and others, because of the publicity given to it. But the minister moved immediately, and certainly the delay in the change of form is just one of those administrative things. But I think there is a great deal more awareness of it and I would hope that would certainly help as well. But the minister has acknowledged the possibility and it will be fixed.

Senator BERNARDI—Okay. Can I just ask—and this was raised the other night as well—about the Maternity Immunisation Allowance. I understand under the existing rules of the Maternity Immunisation Allowance, until 1 January I think the Centrelink official—if you read the transcript, Mr Sandison—was correct. She was quoting from the rules establishing in 2009. Do you recall the transcript?

Mr Sandison—She made a statement that there will be two separate payments and one would be at approximately 18 months and one would be at four years or thereabouts. That is what will come in as the new process rather than a single payment as happens now.

Senator BERNARDI—The single payment is made at the birth of the child. Even in the case of a deceased child—a stillborn child—currently they can still receive the Maternity Immunisation Allowance; is that right?

Mr Sandison—It is linked to the eligibility and again with the FTB and the payments. Yes, an immunisation payment can be made.

Mr Warburton—If I could just clarify that a bit: if there is a stillborn child, it would be paid once a claim was assessed if a person was eligible. Otherwise, the Maternity Immunisation Allowance is not paid until between 18 and 24 months, when confirmation of immunisation has occurred in the normal course of events.

Senator BERNARDI—In the event that someone has a conscientious objection to immunisation—and there are a number of them; I have the figures somewhere—can they still get the immunisation allowance, even though they have not had their child immunised?

Mr Warburton—They can, but they are required to have consulted a doctor, essentially, and discussed the matter with them—the purpose of that being that it is informed consent.

Senator BERNARDI—Is it only—

Mr Warburton—A conscientious objection is an informed conscientious objection.

Senator BERNARDI—Is it only me who finds it unusual that we are paying people, whether they do something or not, for a specific act? Does that not strike you as—perhaps I should not ask your opinion—but it beggars belief that we want people to immunise their children and if they choose not to, or in fact in some cases if their child is deceased, they can still claim the immunisation allowance. That is extraordinary.

Dr Harmer—We will take that as a statement.

Senator BERNARDI—I do not know how you can take it any other way, actually, Dr Harmer. I hope the minister is taking note.

Dr Harmer—I am sure you are aware of this as well, that that situation has been in place for some 10 years.

Senator BERNARDI—I am, but this is the thing: when I raised this issue it was not about affording blame, and I made that very clear, but I got my hackles up when it was denied that it could occur when it could occur. That is the first thing. Then it was said that it was going to be fixed and there were steps in place—I understand it—but it has not been fixed yet. I think it needs to be fixed. But if it is not fixed, then I think we can start having to blame people for it. It might not be you, Dr Harmer; it will be Minister Evans the next time I will blame—just to let you know.

Senator Chris Evans—Given that it survived 10 years of the Howard government, you can rely on this government fixing it.

Senator BERNARDI—If you were not that diligent as to identify these flaws and loopholes in opposition, it is not my fault.

Senator Chris Evans—Have you ever watched *Yes, Minister*? This would not come as such a surprise to you if you watched the show. The hospital with no patients, I think, was the best—running like a well-oiled machine, apparently.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you.

Senator BOYCE—I suspect I may be told that I should have put this question under output group 2.3. I was just wanting to inquire what the department is currently working on in terms of assisting grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren, particularly given that some of them, and I have heard this anecdotally, have a lot of trouble getting access to any sorts of funding because children will sometimes threaten to take the smaller children—I had better start again—

Senator Chris Evans—We understand.

Dr Harmer—Yes, we understand.

Senator BOYCE—Parents who may have drug addiction problems or something will often threaten to take the children back into their own care rather than let the grandparents care for them. They do not allow them to continue to receive benefits.

Dr Harmer—Sure. And your question is: are we looking at this issue?

Senator BOYCE—Yes. What is the department currently working on in terms of the issue of grandparents?

Ms Smart—As part of the development of the National Child Protection Framework, we are going through intense targeted consultation, which includes with grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren. Issues around that are being considered as part of the development of the framework.

Senator BOYCE—When you say you have gone through consultation with grandparents, could you tell us a bit more about what you have done there?

Ms Smart—We have had consultations with state and territory governments as well as with non-government organisations, but we specifically pulled together a group of grandparents, foster carers—

Senator BOYCE—Real, living grandparents?

Ms Smart—Real people, grandparents, foster carers and kinship carers—so other relatives who are caring for children who are not their biological children. In that process we sought feedback from them around their issues in terms of both their ability to care for the children as well as the issues that they saw from the children's perspective.

Senator BOYCE—How many of those consultations did you undertake?

Ms Smart—We pulled together one specific group of people. We had about 15 or 20 people around a table.

Senator BOYCE—Where was that conducted?

Ms Smart—We brought them to Canberra for a day and a half. They were from all states and territories with the exception of WA and the Northern Territory. We worked with the Australian Foster Care Association of Australia and Grandparents Australia to identify people, including Indigenous carers, so that we had a cross-section and we spent a day and a half with them talking through their issues. From that, we are now working through the development of the National Child Protection Framework, and issues around grandparents caring for their children is part of that.

Senator BOYCE—What were the top three issues that the grandparents raised with you?

Ms Smart—The sorts of issues—I would not say 'top three', because—

Senator BOYCE—No, I was just trying to think of a way of not asking you to repeat the entire workshop.

Ms Smart—The sorts of issues they raised were around their access to non-financial support, so access to advice and information, people they could talk to in terms of issues that they confronted as grandparents caring for children as well as financial issues around access,

particularly for those who are in the workforce, issues around access to family tax benefit and childcare benefit.

Senator BOYCE—What happens with the material from those consultations?

Ms Smart—We are looking at that and working with the states and territories as well as representatives from the non-government sector in developing the national child protection framework, and that will be considered by all governments through COAG.

Senator BOYCE—And there will presumably be some suggestions for policy change made as a result of that?

Dr Harmer—It is quite likely. We cannot commit to that because it will not be us who decide.

Senator BOYCE—I realise that it will not be you who decides.

Dr Harmer—Governments will make decisions on that. We anticipate that they will make some decisions.

Senator BOYCE—So the way you feed this into the policymaking decision process, though, is through COAG?

Ms Smart—It is through the development of the framework and the negotiations that we go through with the states and territories.

Senator BOYCE—But the framework is a tool, really, isn't it?

Ms Smart—Yes, it is.

Ms Beauchamp—In terms of the current arrangements, where grandparents have been identified as the primary carer they already get access to FTB and child-care benefit.

Senator BOYCE—But there is still this concern that sometimes they may not be prepared to identify themselves.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Because of threats made by their own children.

Ms Smart—That is certainly an issue that was raised but it is one that we would always struggle to overcome.

Senator BOYCE—I realise that. We have talked several times during estimates about these areas where the law has very little power. It is about social policy and changing behaviours. Thank you.

CHAIR—Senator Scullion, do you want to go back to your questions that go into the families portfolio?

Senator SCULLION—Thank you, Madam Chair. I will go on with the ones that I got a bit mixed up and obviously in the wrong output. The secretary gave a brief response in terms of the BasicsCard. Again, it is a non-Indigenous community question. You told me that the card has in fact been designed in a way that if you wanted to provide it elsewhere that technology would be transferable. Have you done any planning to potentially expand this initiative?

Ms Beauchamp—The Australian government has a contract at the moment in relation to the BasicsCard, so any extension or application to broader groups of people will require a government decision.

Senator SCULLION—Again, my question was: what sort of planning is being done? Clearly we have learnt a lot and we are learning at the moment from its implementation as part of the intervention. I will talk about that more tomorrow. Given that you have made the investment in the technology—whether it was deliberate or just happened to be a good thing—what sort of planning is underway to look at how that may be implemented in other non-Indigenous demographics?

Mr Sandison—Noting the comment that we do not want to be passing the buck, the Department of Human Services have policy authority and run the BasicsCard as part of the service system. It is in their portfolio that the consideration of the BasicsCard and whatever other uses to which it might be put lies.

Senator SCULLION—You do not have any policy overview over the BasicsCard?

Dr Harmer—Not the technology associated with the BasicsCard. In terms of the use of it, we would have full policy responsibility.

Senator SCULLION—Perhaps I should rephrase my question, Dr Harmer.

Senator Chris Evans—Either that or you will be taking us through it at length tomorrow.

Senator SCULLION—I have no intention to do that here. Your first response was that the technology is okay, and I have simply moved on to the next question. What planning has been done to implement the BasicsCard in other non-Indigenous demographics? I accept the technological aspects.

Dr Harmer—If your question is, and I think it is, ‘Is the government thinking of extending income quarantining to other places?’ it is not a question I can answer. We are advising the government on a whole range of things including that. There have been no decisions on that beyond the income quarantining that is part of the Cape York income management trials, the Cannington and Kimberley trials around school attendance and the trial in the Northern Territory, and the Northern Territory emergency response. That is where we are at the moment. The technology is available or will be available to expand income quarantining into other communities or in other situations if the government so decides—not just yet, though, because there is some developmental work going on in terms of scalability. I do not think the card that has been developed for use in the Northern Territory is yet scaleable for more widespread use—for example, universally across Australia—for some sort of scheme. But the option will be open to government to do so.

Senator SIEWERT—Senator Scullion, is that not what is being used in Cannington?

Mr Sandison—Can I just clarify that the use of the BasicsCard will be linked to the child protection measure being trialled in Cannington and Kimberley. The school enrolments and attendance measure is running more as a separate issue without the income management.

Senator SIEWERT—I understand that. We clarified earlier that there are two trials going on in Cannington. I am talking about the child protection trial which is about income

quarantining, not about suspending payments. My question stands. What about Cannington? I understood that they were going to be using that in the Cannington trial.

Mr Matthews—The card that will be used for the child protection initiative in Cannington and Kimberley is the same card, through the same contract, that will be used in the Northern Territory and that will also be used in the Cape York trials.

Senator SIEWERT—What stores in Cannington is the card going to be able to be used in or are you going to be able to use it across the whole of the Perth metropolitan area, because people in Cannington shop in other places besides Cannington?

Mr Matthews—The more detailed information around which stores have been approved in the lead-up to the commencement of that initiative is probably for Centrelink, who are doing the implementation of it. But in broad principle there will be a range of merchants, subject to the merchant approval framework of where the card can be authorised, that will meet those requirements in Cannington and some of the more national chains such as Coles, Woolworths, Big W, Target et cetera who are interested in beyond the Cannington region. So it is merchants in and around the Cannington region who are interested in it, and some of the more national chains are looking to be able to use the card in stores beyond the Cannington area.

Senator SIEWERT—Has the government signed some sort of agreement with the bigger stores, the chains? Coles and Woolworths are the two obvious ones—and, I presume, IGA. Have you signed a contract with them to provide those services?

Mr Matthews—Again, the more detailed questions around who has been engaged and how are probably for Centrelink to answer which they can probably answer tomorrow. In general, to be able to accept the BasicsCard a merchant needs to apply to Centrelink and meet the criteria of the merchant approval process, and then once you do that you become approved to accept the BasicsCard. That process is in fact exactly the same for a small merchant or a large merchant or a multinational merchant. It is the same process for all of them.

Senator SIEWERT—Obviously the larger ones are best able to afford to put that technology in place.

Mr Matthews—The BasicsCard of itself does not require any additional technology for stores beyond the existing EFTPOS technology that they have. As long as they have that EFTPOS technology in the store then the card will actually use that. It does not require the store, in a technological sense, to have anything different than what it did previously.

Senator SIEWERT—What does it require the store to do?

Mr Matthews—The card of itself technologically does not require anything. What happens is that once you become approved as a merchant then you are sent a merchant approval pack. That contains a card that is swiped through the merchant terminal of the shop and that enables the shop to accept the BasicsCard. If you have not been approved and sent one of those cards to swipe through your terminal then the BasicsCard will not actually work in that store.

Senator SIEWERT—Presumably each of the stores that will be approved will be given a list of what you can and cannot buy.

Mr Matthews—It would probably be safe to say that the merchant approval process reflects the legislation. The legislation lists the priority items and also the four excluded items of alcohol, gambling, tobacco and pornography. The store is required not to sell those four items to the customer and has to have systems and procedures in place that will satisfy Centrelink through its assessment process that it will not sell those items to those individuals. But the store is also required under the framework to prove that a reasonable amount of its trade is the priority items as set out in the legislation. So you have to be a merchant that provides the priority items and have procedures in place that exclude the four excluded items.

Senator SIEWERT—Alcohol, tobacco, pornography—

Mr Matthews—And gambling products. It is probably also safe to say that the card is also geared around the more day-to-day transactional needs. We do not, for example, envisage the card being used to pay for things such as rent or utilities or any of the more fixed expenses. They are maintained as they are for all of the schemes. When the customer engages with Centrelink, Centrelink will direct debit to those payments. The card is there for the more day-to-day transactional purposes of people. It really is geared towards food, clothing, medical expenses.

Senator SIEWERT—What about fuel?

Mr Matthews—And fuel.

Senator SIEWERT—You can buy fuel?

Mr Matthews—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So what happens if I turn up at the checkout at Coles in Mirrabooka and I have a BasicsCard and I have chips, lollies and all of those sorts of things in my trolley? What happens to me?

Mr Matthews—The legislation does not make a distinction beyond that. We do not go down to the product level. Depending on the various schemes—for example, in the Northern Territory context—they also have discretionary money that is paid to them.

Senator SIEWERT—I understand, though, and I may have this wrong, that you can go beyond 50 per cent in this particular trial?

Mr Matthews—The intention for the Western Australian child protection trials is to set the income management at 70 per cent.

Senator SIEWERT—So you have very little discretionary money left?

Mr Matthews—Yes, 30 per cent.

Senator SIEWERT—Very little. Sorry Senator Scullion, I have got a lot more questions; I butted in and got sidetracked.

Senator SCULLION—Can I ask a couple of final questions in terms of the BasicsCard in Cannington. Is it used in conjunction with ‘gift cards’, the colloquial name given to them, from Target or Woolworths? They are gift card that were always used by these organisations. Are they currently being used in Cannington?

Mr Matthews—The trial actually has not commenced in Western Australia.

Senator SCULLION—Is it intended to be a part of it?

Mr Matthews—No. In the Western Australian context, customers will move straight to the BasicsCard. If you are referring to what are colloquially called ‘gift cards’ in the Northern Territory scheme, which are effectively a store value card that Centrelink has been issuing, then the intention in Western Australia is not to use that but to issue the BasicsCard, which operates in a different way.

Senator SCULLION—Good idea. Can you tell me the reasons a merchant would not be allowed access to the BasicsCard? If he is someone who is known to be a purveyor of the four sins that we are not allowed to provide, is that a case where you would say, ‘We are using our capacity as government to ensure that you are not someone that operates in this space.’ Are there any provisions like that?

Mr Matthews—If you are a merchant who sells any of those four items, it does not mean that you cannot be accepted for the BasicsCard. There is a general principle of the framework where, if the turnover of your store is beyond 50 per cent in those items then, in a policy sense, you are unlikely to be approved for access onto the BasicsCard because of the degree of risk. Where the percentage is lower than that then what we require of stores is for them to have systems and procedures in place not to sell those four items to the individuals.

These application forms ask the store to list what procedures they have in place. It can be training staff, signs up or other systems that they have in place. When they get approved on to the card they are sent posters and things like that to place in the store to help educate the customers and explain the system. It is a requirement of the store to have those things in place. We also have a compliance process in place for stores to go back to ensure they are meeting those requirements.

Senator SCULLION—Are there any other levers we can possibly use? I will give you a clear example that is on my mind. We have a gentleman who continues to insist not to sell Opel fuel in the middle of the Central Desert. He has decided that he will continue to be a purveyor of unleaded fuel and will not sell Opel. He will expect to be given a BasicsCard—a merchant green sticker on the front. Do we have the capacity within a policy sense to have a discussion with him about those other matters?

Senator SIEWERT—Excellent idea. We could make it a new sin.

Mr Sandison—As a starting point, with the use of the BasicsCard and the involvement there are policy parameters that are set by government. Then there is the work that we do, particularly with human services and Centrelink, on interpreting the broad settings of government. If there were instances like that then that would be a consideration for government.

Senator Chris Evans—I think one has to be careful about how far one takes it. We were bit worried earlier that Senator Siewert would not get her Tim Tams through the system. You have to be careful. That particular issue is obviously an important one. I think all senators would share your concern about that. Without any commitment, I am happy to mention to Minister Macklin that that is an issue that has been raised and she might like to have a think about it.

Senator SIEWERT—I am sure she will get it raised with her when she is in Central Australia next week.

Senator SCULLION—I have finished with BasicsCard.

CHAIR—Senator Siewert, have you finished with the BasicsCard?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, but I have other questions about the trial. I am finished with the BasicsCard.

CHAIR—Senator Scullion.

Senator SCULLION—I was going to move on to some questions about the FIMS, the Family Income Management System, trial. Would that be okay?

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—I would like an update on the Family Income Management System. Has that trial been expanded into non-Indigenous communities? I think the first trial was conducted at Mossman.

Dr Harmer—In Cape York.

Senator SCULLION—Indeed, but I was not sure. I know that we can deal with that tomorrow. I was talking about whether there are any non-Indigenous areas—

Dr Harmer—So your question is: are we using the Family Income Management System in non-Indigenous communities?

Senator SCULLION—Yes. I am talking about perhaps if there were any non-Indigenous areas that had—

Dr Harmer—So your question is: are we using the Family Income Management System in non-Aboriginal communities?

Senator SCULLION—Yes. Are you trialling that for specifically non-Indigenous areas?

Dr Harmer—No, we are not.

Senator SCULLION—I will be able to deal with that tomorrow, so thank you for that. My next issue is in 3.1, Support for families. I want to talk a bit about that, but Senator Siewert may want to segue into the remainder of questions in regard to that so we do not have to shift the officers at the table.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, if I could. I appreciate that we will be talking about some of these issues tomorrow, but I particularly want to focus on the Cannington trial because it is supposedly a non-Indigenous trial of income quarantining. I might just touch on school requirements, but I am aware that we have a Senate committee on that so I will try not to break the rules. In terms of the Cannington trial, what is the date now for its start? It was going to be September. What is the date now?

Mr Sandison—We are still waiting on going through with the finalisation of the agreement between the two governments, so the aim is still towards the end of the year.

Senator SIEWERT—I am still not clear, so I apologise for repeating a question that I have asked in the past but I am trying to get a handle on what boundaries we are using for that trial: are they the same boundaries for the school requirements trial?

Mr Matthews—I can answer that. The boundaries are not the same. The boundaries—

Senator SIEWERT—How simple!

Mr Matthews—It is probably a fairly detailed answer. In Cannington, there are about 39 suburbs that are deemed to be bounded by the trial which are intended to be in it, subject to the agreement of the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—So 39 suburbs?

Mr Matthews—It is approximately that. It is a relatively long list. Obviously, the agreement has not been finalised with the Western Australian government so it is still subject to change, but it is intended that the suburbs will be broadly those that are bound by the Western Australian Department for Child Protection in its case management area in the Cannington area.

Senator SIEWERT—Is that called Cannington?

Mr Matthews—Yes, it is the Cannington area and it has a number of suburbs around it which have been negotiated around. The Western Australian Department for Child Protection has its Cannington area region on that, so it is bound by that.

Senator SIEWERT—It is the Department for Child Protection's Cannington region; is that correct?

Mr Matthews—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—And it is 39 suburbs?

Mr Matthews—It has approximately 39 suburbs. I could have added them up wrongly when I did my list, but we will be able to provide a final list when the agreement is signed. At the next estimates, we will probably be able to table the final list of communities when that is agreed.

Senator SIEWERT—Is it possible to get it before the next estimates, because the next estimates are in February and I presume this would have started by then?

Mr Matthews—I assume we can take that on notice, so that when the agreement is signed we can provide you with the list of the final suburbs.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. And what is the boundary for school requirements?

Mr Matthews—That is also still subject to negotiation with the Western Australian government to finalise the exact location. Again, it is a similar concept to the child protection initiatives. It will be geared around the area for the trial focus of the schools, so it goes more on the school zone region for the relevant schools in that. At the moment, the detail of that is probably a question for DEEWR, who are negotiating with the Western Australian government. It is a smaller subset of the area of the child protection one; it is not as large.

Senator SIEWERT—So it is a smaller area?

Mr Matthews—Yes, it is a smaller one but the exact detail of the suburbs and locations is probably best referred to DEEWR.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. There are 39 suburbs. As I understand it, you are providing funding for financial counselling?

Mr Matthews—Yes, there is funding. There is approximately \$1.5 million in 2008-09 for money management services for the entire initiative in both Cannington and the Kimberley region.

Senator SIEWERT—For both Cannington and the Kimberley? Did you say \$1.5 million?

Mr Matthews—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—For how long is that?

Mr Matthews—For 2008-09.

Senator SIEWERT—And that is specifically for financial counselling?

Mr Matthews—For the money management/financial management. It clumps as money management/ financial counselling. Again, it is not quite my area of—

CHAIR—And that goes back to the other output.

Mr Matthews—Yes, it comes through another area of the department.

Senator SIEWERT—I beg your pardon.

Mr Matthews—The exact detail of the money management services is provided, but broadly it is about \$1.5 million for money management/financial counselling services.

Senator SIEWERT—And that is purely for people—

Mr Matthews—That was the funding that was provided through this initiative.

Dr Harmer—And associated with the trial.

Mr Matthews—It was associated with the trial, for the impact of the customers who are expected to refer through from the child protection initiative.

Senator SIEWERT—And how will that be spent?

Ms Farrelly—In Western Australia, it is \$1.2 million to support the child protection measure. That is made up of services for the Cannington district and also for the Kununurra-Wyndham region of the Kimberley.

Senator SIEWERT—I was not trying to divert from the Cannington area. Last time I heard, I do not think we had been told what the trial area was in the Kimberley.

CHAIR—No, we had not.

Senator SIEWERT—So it is Kununurra, is it?

Mr Matthews—The trial will operate in the Cannington area that we were talking about before, but also broadly the entire Kimberley region when it is fully switched on. So it is not just Kununurra.

Senator SIEWERT—Oh. You see, this is the first time we have been told this.

Mr Matthews—I thought—

Senator SIEWERT—In the past we have been told, ‘We are still identifying the region in the Kimberley.’ So this is going to operate in the whole of the Kimberley area?

Mr Matthews—It is the broad Kimberley area. Again, I can give you the postcodes of the Kimberley where it is intended for that to operate.

Dr Harmer—Has it been settled with the Western Australian government?

Mr Matthews—No, it is the same principle as the other ones.

Dr Harmer—The reason we have not been able to tell you is not that we do not want to or that we are hiding it; it is because it is not yet settled with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—But your intention is: the whole of the Kimberley?

Senator Chris Evans—I am not sure that is right, actually.

Mr Sandison—I think we said, ‘We are discussing with them,’ and the discussion is around that. It is not our intention; it has to be that agreed position with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—So your discussions are around the whole of the Kimberley?

Mr Matthews—The areas of the Kimberley where—well, it is hard to draw an exact border around the Kimberley.

Senator SIEWERT—It is a big area; I am aware of that.

Mr Matthews—You cannot actually answer the question without getting into the specifics of the—

Senator Chris Evans—I think the officer is making it clear this is subject to negotiation with the state government. If you are asking whether it is an all or nothing—whether it is the whole Kimberley or not—I do not think that is the case.

Senator SIEWERT—No, what I am saying is that the position you are starting from is that it applies across the Kimberley.

Dr Harmer—I am not even sure we can say that.

Senator Chris Evans—That is what I am saying: I am not sure that is right. I think what we are saying is that there is a negotiation about a trial in the Kimberley.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator Chris Evans—I am not trying to be clever. I think we were leaving you with the wrong impression, that it was—

Dr Harmer—That is exactly right. If you are asking whether we are negotiating from the starting point that we want the whole Kimberley, I do not think the answer to that is yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I will come back to Cannington in a minute, but are there going to be different boundaries or different areas for the school requirements trial?

Mr Matthews—The school enrolment trial will not be run in the Kimberley region.

Mr Sandison—It is only a subset of Cannington.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. Sorry to interrupt you, Ms Farrelly.

Ms Farrelly—I could give you an update on where the process is up to in the Cannington area in regard to financial counselling. We are in the process of doing a direct selection process. We have approached eight of the existing emergency relief providers in the Cannington district who also deliver financial counselling. They were invited to apply for funding.

Senator SIEWERT—Can you tell me how much funding is made available to that?

Ms Farrelly—For this, \$90,000 is available.

Senator SIEWERT—I interrupted you again, and I apologise. I want to go back at some stage and work out what we are actually spending the \$1.5 million on.

Senator Chris Evans—It is \$1.2 million actually.

Senator SIEWERT—Sorry, I wrote that down and it went down to \$1.2 million.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the officer made it clear that it was only \$1.2 million.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

CHAIR—Ms Farrelly, can I just clarify something: when you say you have ‘approached’ providers, is that through a letter or contact by the department?

Ms Farrelly—Yes, the department.

CHAIR—So the offer is under the head of the department?

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

CHAIR—So FaHCSIA has done that?

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So you have approached eight?

Ms Farrelly—Yes. Applications for that process closed yesterday, so we will be considering which of those providers is most suitable to provide the service in Cannington to supplement the other financial services that are already in Cannington.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not trying to be pedantic, but Cannington is 39 suburbs in the trial. So, when you are talking about Cannington, do you mean the 39 suburbs?

Ms Farrelly—I am talking about the Cannington district.

Dr Harmer—The trial area—whatever is agreed ultimately with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—So we have \$90,000 for a trial that covers 39 suburbs.

Ms Farrelly—It may.

Senator SIEWERT—The list is coming once we have agreed with the state.

Dr Harmer—We cannot give you a list until we have—

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I appreciate that. Could you tell me what we are spending that \$1.2 million on, please.

Ms Farrelly—There are already in WA a number of services that are in place, and these relate to services more broadly in WA. Those include financial management services available in a range of places. These include Kununurra. I think that to go into detail about the way that the budget is split up might be a bit pre-emptive in terms of the clarification about the range of other measures at this stage.

Senator SIEWERT—With all due respect, I asked how much is being provided for financial management. The \$1.2 million originally sounds good; \$90,000 sounds terrible. That is why I am asking. You are putting these people under an awful lot of stress. Just for your information—and I am crossing into the other inquiry here—we have been presented with a considerable amount of evidence that shows just what financial stress the people in that area are under and what stress those services are under. So they are already stressed and now you are going to be putting an extra burden on them.

Senator Chris Evans—I think there has been some confusion, and the department is a bit hamstrung by the fact that, because of the change of government, negotiations have not been completed and they are still working through that. I think the answer to your question was that they are existing services and they are being supplemented. I think it is fair enough to say that I got the same impression you did about the \$1.2 million. It is not for me to really ask the question, but I think it is reasonable to ask what additional money is going into financial services in addition to the service already provided. Then you will be able to say whether it is enough or not. Then we will at least know—

Senator SIEWERT—The \$1.2 million is not additional; it is what is already going in, is it?

Dr Harmer—It is actually quite important, and I am a little confused as well. Can we just get the answer to this, because I suspect what has happened is that there is an allocation for the trial areas for financial counselling and that some of it will go to supplementing services, some of it will go to new services et cetera. We will try to get you a breakdown of that and we will try to do it in the next hour.

Ms Farrelly—I am happy to provide now the information about financial management services in WA without prejudice to the decisions that might get made about income management. I think that it would be true. I am happy to provide that information.

Senator SIEWERT—Sorry; is this separate, pre-existing funding? I appreciate that you have said there is \$90,000, so that is extra; I understand. But is this new money that is going in or is it support for existing financial services?

Dr Harmer—The best thing, and we do this all the time, is for us to take this on notice and give you precisely what you want, which is exactly what additional financial counselling resources are going in to support the trials.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Dr Harmer—Okay.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be very much appreciated—for Cannington and for the Kimberley.

Dr Harmer—I am happy to do both.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be very much appreciated. Thank you.

CHAIR—'The proposed'—

Senator SIEWERT—The proposed Kimberley site or sites, because I presume you may still be looking at a number of communities if you are not going for the whole of the Kimberley.

Dr Harmer—Yes, and until we actually settle on exactly which communities in the Kimberley we will not know how many additional financial counselling resources we will need—whether it is one town, two towns or whatever.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, thank you.

CHAIR—I think your question is outside that.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

CHAIR—Keep going.

Senator SIEWERT—It is still about Cannington, but it is outside the financial management.

Senator Chris Evans—Can you ask an easier one, though?

Senator SIEWERT—No, not on this one. In terms of how you are working with the DCP, what criteria are you using to determine who will be income quarantined?

Dr Harmer—It will be subject—

Senator SIEWERT—Who will be subject to income quarantining or financial management?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Mr Sandison—Primarily that is a decision for them. It is not a decision-making process that we would be looking to take over or involving Centrelink in. It will be an issue for the child protection authorities in Western Australia.

Dr Harmer—It is a tool we are offering the state and they can access it in the terms they decide.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. Is there any process of appeal? Are you going to be doing any checks if the department has pinged somebody and they want to appeal, or if you think it is a serious enough case that they should be income managed?

Mr Sandison—Again, it is with the Western Australian government about their processes. When it comes to whether there has been a determination of the child protection authorities—that they have reached a point where there is neglect or a difficulty with the child—the decisions around income management might be issues where an individual, if it gets that far, would have discussions with Centrelink. But around child protection and the decisions for them, it is whatever the processes are within the Western Australian system.

Dr Harmer—So, given that the decision to refer them to Centrelink for income management will be a Western Australian decision, the appeal would be to the Western Australian decision maker.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. This is where I am having a problem.

Ms Beauchamp—I will just add to that. In terms of assisting our clients, our proposal is that the Western Australian government Department for Child Protection would be case managing each of the clients who are put on to income management—

Mr Matthews—And there will be regular contact. The income management of Centrelink will maintain regular contact with the customer throughout the income management process as well. It is a normal feature of the income management process where Centrelink will meet on a regular basis with each of the customers to discuss their deductions and monitor how it is going.

Senator SIEWERT—That is income management. Obviously when you are getting to this point you have families in crisis.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—And it is more than just income management support that they need.

Ms Beauchamp—Sure.

Senator SIEWERT—The thing is that here you are introducing a new level of sanctions, for want of a better word.

Dr Harmer—In some cases, what we may be doing with the additional tool is avoiding the child being taken from the family, because it is an additional tool that gives the Western Australian child protection authority greater confidence that the child will be looked after without taking them away.

Senator SIEWERT—Some of us dispute your evidence on that.

Dr Harmer—No, I am suggesting that there is a way of looking at it. If that is how they use it, you could look at it as a plus and a way of getting additional support to the family—something in between taking the child away and leaving them there.

Senator SIEWERT—I think we will have to agree to differ on that one, because I do not accept the premise on which you are basing this trial. What is happening here is that the state decides that it has reached a point where another level of intervention has to occur. But that intervention is provided by the Commonwealth, not the state.

Ms Beauchamp—No, but I think there is a range of interventions that the state department is looking at. Where they see income quarantining as part of their suite of tools or interventions that might help the particular family—

Dr Harmer—To protect the child.

Ms Beauchamp—then we will make our services available through Centrelink to assist.

Senator SIEWERT—But where I am coming from on this one is this issue of appeal to the Commonwealth. I am not trying to verbal you, but what you said to me is that that is up to the state. But it is your process—the Commonwealth process—that you are using in terms of income quarantining. Are they going to be able to appeal to Centrelink about this, because it is your process that you are using? The state is using your process. They cannot appeal to the state to stop the income quarantining, because it is not their process; it is yours.

Dr Harmer—I think it will depend on the nature of the agreement we eventually strike with the Western Australian government. I do not think we are at that point yet.

Senator SIEWERT—No, it is quite simple. Are you going to take away their appeal rights in the same way it has happened in the NT?

Dr Harmer—I will let someone who knows the answer—

Ms Beauchamp—I think that with the decision to place a family on income management they would not be able to appeal to Centrelink, but in terms of the administration of the income quarantining—

Senator SIEWERT—So you are going to take away their ability to appeal?

Mr Matthews—No, Centrelink is basically executing a decision made by the Western Australian—

Senator SIEWERT—Pontius Pilate.

Mr Matthews—There will be appeal provisions on the Western Australian side. What happens process-wise is that when Western Australia makes a decision they provide a notice over to Centrelink and Centrelink executes the notice. If the appeals in Western Australia are successful, that notice would obviously be revoked and income management would be—

Senator SIEWERT—So, Centrelink have no say over it. They just have to deal with Western Australia, even though it is your legislation.

Dr Harmer—Yes. And it would not make a great deal of sense to give Centrelink a say over it, it seems to me. If the decision about the need for income management comes from the responsible authority in Western Australia who decides that the family is not looking after or protecting their children, it is extremely difficult for Centrelink, not being the responsible authority, to make a decision on whether that is fair or not.

Senator SIEWERT—Centrelink staff are already copping it in the neck. Yet here you are going to get a group of people, some of whom will think they have been unjustly dealt with, and Centrelink will not be able to tell them anything other than, 'Go and talk to the department,' even though it is a Commonwealth authority.

Mr Sandison—The authority is the state government authority that makes the decision of the nature of the child protection issue it is confronting. The only Centrelink issue is the decision making of Centrelink. So a Commonwealth officer decision-making process is around the nature of the implementation of the income management and when they talk to the individual or the family about how the money will be managed and distributed. That is a Commonwealth government decision or a decision of an agent of the Commonwealth through the Centrelink officer. That would follow normal appellable rights or review processes of Centrelink decision making. But that is not about the child protection issue. That is still a state responsibility. It is the separation of powers.

Senator SIEWERT—Again, I do not agree with you. I realise I am not going to get anywhere, so I will move on.

Dr Harmer—Senator, we are giving you what the government has decided and established to negotiate with the Western Australian government. We are explaining it, or trying to. We are not necessarily defending it. We are explaining the rationale for the current situation.

Senator SIEWERT—I think Senator Adams has another question.

Senator ADAMS—I am wondering how many child protection officers the Western Australian department is going to employ, because there is another practical issue here. This is going to happen in communities, and if there are problems then these people who may be penalised will be very, very aware of who the person is—and usually there is only one person—who has put them in, and then the whole process goes on. It really worries me—particularly that person's safety, thinking about some of the communities we have visited.

Senator SIEWERT—We are talking about the Kimberley.

Senator ADAMS—I know. It could be very difficult. I know that is not your problem.

Dr Harmer—All we can do is take that as a statement, Senator.

Senator SIEWERT—I would like to go there, though, because that is where I was going next. Is the Department for Child Protection going to have more resources to deal with this issue in the Cannington area? Are you putting in additional support mechanisms? I can tell you now that the department does not have enough staff to adequately support these people if you are going to do this properly.

Mr Sandison—I think decisions about resourcing of Western Australian government officials is in their court. That is part of the consideration about the nature of the trials in those areas. It is for the Western Australian government.

Dr Harmer—And you would hope, Senator, that they would be as aware as you are of the fact that this trial is a new venture for them in a sense, to the extent that they agree with it, and therefore would understand that it will require additional resources.

Senator SIEWERT—So you are carrying this out and not requiring them to meet any standards or any levels of support officers for these people who will be subject to this trial?

Mr Sandison—I think the discussions that we are having with them to get an agreement in place cover the full range of what is the right level of services to support the trial, as they would rely on us to work with Centrelink and Commonwealth agencies about the right level of resourcing. The discussions include how the total process would be managed but those decisions are still with the Western Australian government.

CHAIR—Is this subject to an MOU? Is that the process of how it is signed off by the groups that are involved in it?

Mr Sandison—I do not know whether it is an MOU.

Dr Harmer—There will be some bilateral agreement, yes.

CHAIR—I am sure that some of the issues are exactly what will be included in that agreement. I know that is not the department's decision, but the content of what the mutual agreement is going to be is part of what we are seeking—

Senator SIEWERT—I want to go back there, then. I thought we were getting somewhere but I am not sure. You have just said that you are talking to them about what levels of support are required from them.

Mr Sandison—About how the whole process will be managed, and they would make the decisions about the level of support. They are the experts in the child protection area and—

Senator SIEWERT—I would not go that far.

Mr Sandison—The Commonwealth again has said that it is steering clear of that side. It is a state involvement and we are providing a tool for them, but the child protection authorities manage the child protection process.

Senator SIEWERT—So you are not saying to them that we are actually trying to achieve something. I am giving everybody the benefit of the doubt here, despite the fact that I do not like this. You are trying to achieve a better outcome in terms of child protection.

Dr Harmer—Indeed.

Senator SIEWERT—Part of that is actually dealing with the dysfunctional situation that some of these children live in. To do that there are some factors that need to be addressed. You will know them as well as I do. I would have thought that you would negotiate those with the state to achieve an outcome, so at the end there will be an outcome that you can tick off on, that you have met. How can you be assured that you are going to meet that outcome if you are not requiring the state to meet certain levels of resourcing before you sign off on the agreement?

Dr Harmer—Senator, the Western Australian government and its department have responsibility for child protection. They have a series of tools and mechanisms at the moment to protect children in that part of Western Australia. The Commonwealth government is saying, ‘We have another tool. We are happy to make it available to you if you believe it will assist you in helping protect Western Australian children. Here is the tool. Where do you want it to apply? We will, in addition to the tool, provide some financial counselling because that is part of our support. Your part of it in Western Australia is to set up whatever mechanism you need to efficiently and effectively run the trial to succeed.’ That is where our negotiations with Western Australia are at. We would not be in the business of offering them a tool and then saying, ‘These are the additional resources you need to put in’ et cetera. That is their business. We do not do child protection.

Senator SIEWERT—What evidence base are you using to say that just putting in a bit of financial counselling and income quarantining is going to solve this issue?

Ms Beauchamp—We are putting in an evaluation framework with the WA government in terms of our proportion of the initiatives. Ultimately we want to ensure that children are adequately sheltered, clothed and fed. The outcomes for people in the child protection system are the responsibility of the Western Australian government—

Senator SIEWERT—With all due respect, I asked what evidence base you are basing this trial on.

Ms Beauchamp—It is based on the advice of the WA government.

Mr Sandison—In one part we are dealing with the issue of income management and the management of money and the attribution of some of that money to things like the Basics Card and essentials. I think there is a view that the better use of that money for the child, where there may be negligence or an inappropriate level of food and clothing and school attendance and other things, is worth doing. So that is separate from the child protection side. In terms of the level on the child protection side, that is what the trial is for—whether or not it can improve the management of that process and the level of engagement with the family. That is why the case management side is part of the trial.

Dr Harmer—Senator, if the experts in the state department who are responsible for child protection agree to the trial, presumably they have sufficient evidence to suggest that this additional tool that the Commonwealth is offering will be effective. The evaluation of the trial will prove their point, presumably. That is why we are doing it as a trial.

Senator SIEWERT—The Commonwealth started this. The Commonwealth started income quarantining. The Commonwealth put in place the legislation in order to do this. What evidence did the Commonwealth have when you first introduced this to show that this was the way to go?

Dr Harmer—I do not want to go into the Northern Territory part because that will be a discussion for tomorrow.

Senator SIEWERT—We will talk about that tomorrow.

Dr Harmer—It has been reviewed.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I know.

Dr Harmer—We will get into tomorrow's discussion very easily there. It is a tool that has been made available by the Commonwealth. It is up to the states to use it if they believe it will make a difference. The state seems to believe it will. The child protection authority seems to believe it will. We are in negotiations about exactly how it will apply and in which areas. It will be evaluated and we will be able to answer once and for all whether it makes a difference.

Senator SIEWERT—What consultation are you undertaking about the evaluation of the trial?

Mr Matthews—The consultations with the Western Australian government are about the evaluation strategy which will be between the Commonwealth and Western Australian governments.

Senator SIEWERT—Will that be in place before the trial starts?

Mr Matthews—We are intending that, as part of the agreement, we will set out the broad arrangements for the evaluation.

Senator SIEWERT—So the agreement will be in place before it starts—the broad levels or the actual evaluation process?

Mr Matthews—The trial will not start until the agreement is signed with the Western Australian government. We certainly will not be turning it on until the arrangements are made with the Western Australian government. The agreement with the Western Australian

government will set out the evaluation arrangements so that there is an evaluation strategy in place from the commencement of the trial.

Senator SIEWERT—Have you got the baseline data on which to base that evaluation? I am thinking of broader things like the level of domestic violence that is currently there. There are a whole lot of things that it is highly likely this trial will create. Have you thought that through? Are you monitoring that? Have you got baseline levels for that now so that you can evaluate it later? Is that included in the evaluation in the first place?

Mr Matthews—Again, it is the same answer as for a lot of the others: we are negotiating the actual nature of that with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—You are not even setting down your basic criteria from which you would evaluate this so-called trial?

Mr Matthews—I am not saying we are not. There is not much we can say because we are developing that with the Western Australian government.

Senator SIEWERT—Are you including that in your negotiations—the negative sides as well? I am talking about the possible increase in child abuse, the possible increase in domestic violence, the certain increase in the use of emergency services.

Dr Harmer—It would not be a genuine evaluation unless we had it open and allowed for the possibility that there will be some negative impacts or at least looked at the evaluation to throw up any negative as well as positive impacts.

Senator SIEWERT—Will you collect that baseline data before it starts and ensure that is in place before the trial starts?

Dr Harmer—We will certainly be putting an evaluation framework in place before the trial starts.

Senator SIEWERT—You will be putting an evaluation process in place. Will you be collecting and making sure you have all the baseline data before it starts so we have something to evaluate against?

Mr Sandison—We will be discussing with the Western Australian government the data sets that they have to set a baseline in various areas of information. The extent to which that has been specifically discussed I do not have the information on.

Dr Harmer—We will take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated. I apologise but there is one issue I wanted to go back to in terms of financial management. There was a contract already let in Cannington. What about in the Kimberley?

Dr Harmer—We will take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—I know that you have already taken the other financial management questions on notice. If you could take that on notice it would be appreciated.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator SIEWERT—Could you provide information on how much this trial is costing the Commonwealth government? Are you able to do it now or take it on notice?

Mr Matthews—The funding for the trial is \$18.9 million over two years.

Senator SIEWERT—That is for all six?

Mr Matthews—For Cannington and the Kimberley region, yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So that is just for the WA section?

Mr Matthews—For the trial sites in Western Australia for child protection.

Senator SIEWERT—My brain is now clicking into the school requirements—the six sites.

Mr Matthews—There are six sites in the Northern Territory.

Senator SIEWERT—But for this one there are only two additional sites, which are the sites in Western Australia.

Mr Matthews—Yes, there are two sites, only in Western Australia.

Senator SIEWERT—And it is 18 point—

Mr Matthews—\$18.9 million over two years.

Senator SIEWERT—Could you provide the breakdown of what that has been spent on? I presume that includes the one—

Dr Harmer—We should be able to get that for you.

Senator SIEWERT—I presume that includes the \$1.2 million for finance management?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Mr Matthews—We could probably best provide that with the other information about the money management. We can give you a comprehensive outline of the funding elements.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated. Does that include any money going direct to Western Australia or is that purely the Commonwealth side of implementing this?

Mr Matthews—There is no funding being provided to the Western Australian government from the Commonwealth's initiative.

Senator SIEWERT—Has the state given you a commitment that they will put extra resources into Cannington and the Kimberley?

Mr Matthews—In terms of the discussions with the Western Australia government and their own resource implications, we have not quantified or clarified whether that is an increase or how they are going to meet the requirements.

Dr Harmer—It is difficult to imagine they could effectively participate in the trial without putting additional resources into the two sites. But we will try to get you an answer.

Senator SIEWERT—I will not go back to that argument; I will take a break.

CHAIR—We will break for dinner now.

Proceedings suspended from 6.26 pm to 7.33 pm

CHAIR—We will reconvene. I welcome Minister Stephen Conroy who is joining us this evening. Thank you, Minister. We are in the middle of group 3.1, Support for families, and the call is with Senator Scullion.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you, Madam Chair. I wish to speak about two areas under 3.1. We are all aware, when we talk about family breakdown in the conventional sense, it is normally about the principal partners. Tragically, and more so nowadays, family breakdown can also involve teenagers, who somehow feel disconnected from family. To parents, sometimes they seem like frivolous things, but to those people contemplating leaving home, it is a very important issue. I am sure the minister at the table gets the same sorts of emails that I think we all get about those sorts of tragic circumstances. What particular services are available to these families?

Ms Beauchamp—The primary service related to family breakdown in relation to teenagers, with the potential of them leaving the family home, is the Reconnect program. I think that has been covered under youth homelessness.

Senator SCULLION—I am aware of the Reconnect program.

Ms Beauchamp—There is a specific program. I am not sure if any of the officers here are available to provide details.

Senator SCULLION—I understand the details of the Reconnect program.

Dr Harmer—It has been very successful.

Senator SCULLION—Good; thank you.

Dr Harmer—All the data about the impact on youth homelessness since that commenced is very positive.

Senator SCULLION—Are there any other particular services?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes, there are other programs that are included in our Family Relationship Services Program at this particular time.

Mr Sandison—There is the adolescent mediation service, and I will ask Ms Fleming to run through the details of the services provided. Obviously, the broader Family Relationships Services Program at times picks up different members of a family group anyway, but this is a specific one that relates to adolescents.

Ms Fleming—There is a small program under the Family Relationship Services Program known as the Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy program. That particularly focuses on assisting families, before teenagers leave home, to identify issues and work with families to rectify those issues.

Senator SCULLION—When is it that a child can actually receive an independent living allowance?

Ms Beauchamp—The transition to independent living allowance is the responsibility of DEEWR. We could find that information for you.

Senator SCULLION—You can understand that this is an area under family support, and the government and the previous government might have carefully put them in different

areas—and I know we are not trying to avoid that at estimates, and I will take that on notice from someone else—but obviously that is a fundamental part of the issue.

The background to many of the emails—and I know that many of the people in this room, and certainly those at the table, would have seen this—is that the angst appears to come from this disconnection. One day the child does not come home and the parent asks, ‘What’s the go?’ and maybe hear second-hand, you know, ‘She’s moved in with the ugly guitar player you’ve always disliked,’ or whatever. That is not a personal experience, I have to say. My daughter will kill me!

Someone in government will decide to intervene in some way, and there appears to be some ongoing frustration that that intervention—and it may be in terms of isolation as assistance—causes further disconnection of that family. The reason I ask the question: in a very short time, both in my previous role and in my role as the shadow minister for human services, I have received all these emails, and they are not push-the-red-button emails. They are all completely different and they have a lot of detail, but they still reflect this frustration.

Do you have some policy parameters around ensuring that the veracity of the claims that one child may make, or some individual may make, is looked into, because many of the complaints we get, or the concerns that are put forward, are about the fact that you cannot possibly have talked to them: ‘You have never come and spoken to me. We are the family. No-one has ever asked us anything,’ so the veracity of whatever is said cannot possibly be checked. That is just an assertion put, but it is a common thread.

Do you have policy parameters that you would ask Centrelink, who are responsible for the payments? What sorts of policy parameters would you have around saying, ‘These are the sorts of investigations and the sorts of parameters that you would have to look into.’

Mr Sandison—Do you mean in relation to the adolescent getting income support?

Dr Harmer—You are presumably talking about emails from parents—

Senator SCULLION—Indeed.

Dr Harmer—who are critical of the fact that their son or daughter has been granted an independent living allowance or youth allowance, therefore giving them the capacity to live out of home and stay away from home.

Senator SCULLION—Often they do not know what sorts of things—

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—There is a special payment being paid.

Dr Harmer—We will do our best to give you some information around that. Mr Sandison may be able to do that. The truth is that both the transition to independent living and the youth allowance are the policy responsibility of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, but we may know enough about what processes Centrelink undertake to assess whether the person should be given an allowance.

Senator SCULLION—I appreciate your assistance, Dr Harmer, and I also appreciate that it did not matter what body here in this particular area—

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—I think you could ably say it is somebody else's problem, but could you just put your mind to some sort of an explanation of the process.

Dr Harmer—They obviously have some assessment process, which presumably, if they are young, involves social workers making some assessment and making various contacts. I suspect that often the reason the parents are not contacted relates to the allegation by the child that there has been some sort of abuse or some breakdown or something.

Mr Sandison—I think the starting point is that a person claiming income support will have to go through various processes to meet eligibility criteria, I think separate to other claims which may go beyond just the status of the individual. They will have to move through things like determining their age, because the different rates of youth allowance are based on the age of the child. If they are trying to establish independence, then obviously they are moving towards: are they beyond school age, particularly compulsory school age?

They will need, as a child, to have some evidence with them. If they make claims, then normally there are duty of care issues and Centrelink rules around the way in which a front-line Centrelink officer would then refer or link to a social worker, or indeed some of the psychologists, to make sure that there is support for the individual, and then they would follow that through.

But it is still an issue around standard eligibility criteria, so I think your question, be it on notice, would be around: what are the eligibility criteria and perhaps the duty of care to respond to issues raised by an adolescent who is claiming some form of income support?

Dr Harmer—To respond to the emails you are referring to, ideally something about: what is the policy in relation to checking with parents when someone under—

Senator SCULLION—That is a common theme, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—Yes, I know.

Senator SCULLION—I can see that they have a frustration and they have not spoken to anybody, whether it is right or wrong.

Dr Harmer—We will pass it on to DEEWR and get you an answer.

Senator SCULLION—I will put you on notice now that for the next set of estimates I might write to everybody with some sort of hypothetical—

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator SCULLION—because we have tried this before. I appreciate there is no mischief at all, but it is one of those areas that seems to fall into everybody's basket.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—The term 'child' gets lost in a number of different interpretations, but let's say someone is aged 15 and they are somehow entitled to some sort of payment, whatever it is. What sort of trigger does that give to family relationship centres or Reconnect and those sorts of services? Is there a particular trigger: 'Look, this person has alleged that they are having problems with the family,' whatever it is? In terms of needing that service, it is almost the start of a journey whereby they end up further apart rather than closer together. Is there a trigger from Centrelink? Examining the synergy between the policy-making

departments and the deliverer, what things would trigger you to say, 'Look, obviously this youth is going to be in need of Reconnect services now rather than later in the piece'?

Mr Sandison—Reconnect is not within the family space, it is linked to the housing, and it is not dissimilar to JPET, as well as a youth at risk program. It can be self-referral by individuals to some of those programs. They link up to schools. Individual providers under their contracts would engage with various other services in local areas, including schools. But, again, the detail would probably be something that we could provide. There would be guidelines to Reconnect—you said you are well aware of Reconnect—that would provide the information about how young people would enter the program. Reconnect does engage with, I think, children aged 12 to 17 or 12 to 19, but also with the family, about the engagement with the family, so it is not directed just to the child but it is an engagement with them and the family.

Senator SCULLION—You can understand why I have an ongoing concern. Reconnect is all about homelessness, in this term we use.

Dr Harmer—Yes, it is.

Senator SCULLION—I appreciate that, but Reconnect has always been—as has JPET—targeted as a program to give early intervention. That is what the policy is about—

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—and it is a great policy across government. It just seems in these particular examples that there is a trigger happening. Someone is waving a flag that someone is going to need something like a Reconnect program—and it is not only connecting with the community and friends, but the fundamentals of family really early in the piece.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—So as a government we are saying, 'Right, we know there's a trigger,' and say, 'Okay, well, that's housing,' and that sort of stuff. Are there any other direct processes that exist at the moment? If that is a failing, are we sort of planning to try to pick up some of those synergies when we know that somebody has put their hand up because there is a special payment of some form that is going to possibly be requiring other counselling services, rather than relying on—more proactive—self-referral or waiting until they run into those other ugly trifectas?

Dr Harmer—There are so many possible avenues for someone who has had trouble with the family and makes a break. They could be referred to Centrelink, or some service such as Reconnect, by the child protection agencies or the state departments. They might turn up at Centrelink themselves and say, 'I need some help.' They may appear at a homelessness service et cetera. It depends a little bit at which gateway they first appear as to which service they get initially or which route they take.

If they get presented at a homelessness service, they are quite likely to get referred into Reconnect. If they present at a state welfare agency, because there is some violence or abuse occurring, they are not likely to get referred to Reconnect; they are probably likely to get referred to some other service. It depends a little bit on the symptoms and the story, and the

diligence within which the person at the gateway decides to check the story and verify et cetera, but it is a mixture of Commonwealth and state services.

Senator SCULLION—That makes it all the more—

Ms Beauchamp—There are arrangements in place between Centrelink and social workers, state and territory governments, through the Youth Protocol, and where kids are coming to the attention of the authorities—whether they be the Commonwealth or state and territory government.

Dr Harmer—I think it is getting better because of the increasing awareness by different agencies of the importance of connecting and sharing information. One of the difficulties around that, of course, is privacy. They have to be very careful around privacy laws in sharing information, but—

Senator SCULLION—And I guess that is another common theme from a parent's point of view.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator SCULLION—They are saying, 'Well, he's 15. He walked out of home. I know nothing about it. You won't tell me anything because—'

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—'and yet nobody has asked me any questions.' I am not saying that that actually occurs, but there seems to be a common theme in the stuff that is being put forward.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator SCULLION—But I think we are going around in circles. I will pass those on to the minister to get a response. I am sure you know all the details of the sorts of issues that I am talking about, but perhaps I will—in concert perhaps with you—speak to the minister.

Dr Harmer—Sure.

Senator SCULLION—But I think it will be useful to have an answer perhaps from all of them, because at estimates we always seem to get a part of it wrong or a part of it should be in another department, so I will try to deal with it that way.

Ms Beauchamp—Just to confirm, it is the responsibility of DEEWR to manage the relationship with Centrelink, and there are detailed arrangements in place for supporting kids who come to the attention of both state and territories—

Senator SCULLION—Would you have a flow chart or something to say who enters it? Do you have that sort of thing?

Ms Beauchamp—We could refer it over to DEEWR, who are responsible for the administration and who work with Centrelink around assessing whether a child is independent and what they can do to get back with their parents. We will pass that on.

Senator SCULLION—When a constituent comes to see me or many other senators or members and says, 'What happened? Where am I up to?' it would be very useful to provide a flow chart that showed the different—

Ms Beauchamp—The steps.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—Yes, when you come in here, and if this is the problem—

Ms Beauchamp—Sure.

Senator SCULLION—I know it is a big ask, but I was not sure if you actually had something because that would be very useful on notice. I have a couple of questions on children at risk, and I do know that Senator Siewert wants to return to Family Relationship Services that was not the centre of my questions. Would you be able to give me—just remind me—the demarcation age between the state and the federal responsibility in terms of children at risk. There is a certain age under which the states and territories are responsible, and there is a certain age over. Is there any particular demarcation?

Ms Beauchamp—In relation to what, sorry?

Senator SCULLION—In relation to children at risk; once we identified a child at risk.

Ms Beauchamp—At any particular age?

Senator SCULLION—At any particular age. Jurisdictionally, who is responsible at what time? I am going to questions about transportability of responsibility—you move from one place to another. How do we ensure that the—

Ms Smart—That is covered by the youth protocol, which is a protocol between Centrelink and each of the state and territory child protection agencies. It is administered from the Commonwealth end through DEEWR. I do not know the actual age, but it is set out in the protocol.

Senator SCULLION—I will be able to find that from the protocol?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you very much. When a family at risk is identified, how are they tracked across Australia? We are a very mobile population, always packing up shop and shifting somewhere else. Who are the organisations and how are they tracked?

Ms Smart—Following the COAG meeting in October, it was announced that we would be developing a protocol between Centrelink and the child protection agencies in each state and territory around information sharing. The most important element of information that was identified by the child protection agencies was addressed; not just when people have moved interstate but within the state, as well. We are working with both Centrelink and the child protection agencies to develop that protocol by the end of the year.

Senator SCULLION—The information that is to be provided and shared between agencies to effect that will be part of that same protocol?

Ms Smart—That is correct.

Senator SCULLION—And it will be available at the end of the year?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—Would any part of that—for example, a draft; and I know this is purely government—be, in some cases, circulated to NGOs? I know in the past that has been a practice. Do you know whether that would allow for public input into that sort of a document before then, or not? I am sorry, I am asking for opinion. I am not sure if that is allowed, but I am just seeking some assistance.

CHAIR—You know it is not, Senator.

Ms Smart—It was not the intent in the context that what we are dealing with is setting out the process and the fundamentals: under what circumstances should information be requested? How will it be requested and in what form? What are the time frames for response to those requests? It is more like setting the processes between the Commonwealth and the states and the territories so that we have a clear path for the states and territories when they are dealing with a child protection case of a child at risk, and particularly where they do not know the location of the child.

Information is currently shared. There are arrangements under the Social Security Act where information can be shared, but the absence of the clear path between the levels of government is seen as a significant barrier, so that is what we are trying to overcome with the protocol.

Senator SCULLION—Okay.

Ms Smart—Certainly in the work that we did on information sharing leading up to the COAG meeting, we did talk with a number of non-government organisations about issues in that respect.

Senator SCULLION—Seeing that that is most likely not going to be available, there is no problem with—

Ms Smart—I am not sure.

Senator SCULLION—If it is, I will find out about it.

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—That will be fine. So we can expect to be able to have a look at the document in time for the next set of estimates, which will be in February sometime? One would expect that would be reasonable. I am not asking for an ironclad answer, but that will give us—

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I would like to go to some broader family policy, but still dealing with the issues of strengthening families et cetera—so looking at the services that are supporting child wellbeing. Where are we up to with strengthening families and communities and Communities for Children? As I understand it, they are reaching the end of their funding cycles. What are you planning next?

Ms Beauchamp—There is an evaluation going on of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which does cover Communities for Children. That should be completed towards the end of this year. You are right; funding has been extended by this government until 30 June 2009. So in relation to the programs that we have to strengthen and

support families, we can review those arrangements and see what we need to continue and put in place following 30 June 2009.

Senator SIEWERT—You may have said it and I missed it—it has just been completed now, did you say?

Ms Beauchamp—No, there is an evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which covers Communities for Children, which you mentioned.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—That should be completed towards the end of this calendar year.

Senator SIEWERT—So at the moment, if I interpret what you have said correctly, you do not have a plan for where those two programs are going until the study has been completed?

Ms Beauchamp—We will be considering those alongside other programs to support families, particularly the parenting appropriation and others, to make sure that they are targeted and we are getting the outcomes to strengthen families. So we are looking at the evaluation process as part of the contribution to the review of those community based programs.

Senator SIEWERT—The decision will be made between when the study is completed and June next year?

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—Does that study look at what role the Family Relationship Services Program has been playing in those programs?

Ms Beauchamp—No, that is a separate evaluation. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy covers primarily the Communities for Children programs and Invest to Grow and those sorts of things.

Senator SIEWERT—But when you are looking at the safety and wellbeing of children, is that actually being included in the suite of reviews or not?

Ms Beauchamp—There are a number of programs that impact on the safety and wellbeing of children: the parenting appropriation, which I mentioned; some of the financial counselling services; family relationship services. So there are a range of programs that we are looking at in terms of how we gather the evidence base to support strengthening those families.

Senator SIEWERT—Is that part of that same review, or is the review simply looking at those other two programs? Sorry, the review that you are undertaking now—

Ms Beauchamp—There is a review of our community program suite.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, thank you.

Ms Beauchamp—We do have a number of programs across the portfolio. So we are currently looking at those to make sure that they are well targeted. We are looking at streamlining administration processes, reducing red tape for service providers and other sorts of things and making sure that they are targeted to meet this government's priorities.

Senator SIEWERT—The Family Relationship Services Program is included in that?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I specifically wanted to chase that down. Then I have some specific questions about the Family Relationship Services Program. I have got the usual online—

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I knew you would be prepared for those.

Ms Beauchamp—We are.

Senator SIEWERT—I am still chasing down the whole consent form process et cetera.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

CHAIR—Maybe we can do without the questions and you could just read out the answers.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—I could read out the answers, if you like.

Senator SIEWERT—I understand the updated form has been in place now for a little while. We have been through the updated form discussion several times.

Ms Beauchamp—We have.

Senator SIEWERT—It is now in use.

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—I am wondering what proportion of people are not including their identifiable details?

Ms Fleming—It varies, but for the 2007-08 financial year we had about 40 per cent of unregistered clients and 60 per cent of registered clients.

Senator SIEWERT—When you said ‘it varies’, what do you mean by that?

Ms Fleming—If I took the figure now, because data comes in, it might be higher or it might be lower, but over the last financial year it was a 60-40 split between registered and unregistered clients.

Senator SIEWERT—It is October, so we have certainly gone through the first quarter. What is the first quarter showing for this year?

Ms Fleming—I would have to take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. You made a comment about ‘varies’. I would like to know if it is going up or down. Forty per cent does not surprise me, but it is pretty high. Is that producing any difficulties for the service providers or for the government?

Ms Fleming—We would like to be able to collect more broad based data about those unregistered clients and, through a working group that we have established with the service providers, we are exploring options to collect some more de-identified data from the unregistered clients.

Senator SIEWERT—In other words, the data that you want, they could actually collect?

Ms Fleming—We are looking at options.

Senator SIEWERT—Going back to when we first started this discussion a long time ago—and we have had it on and off since then—one of the ideas, I understood, of having people register and collecting the data was so that you could chase them through the system.

Ms Fleming—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—Has that been occurring and is it useful? How many clients are you picking up doing that et cetera?

Ms Fleming—We are able, through the system, to identify where the referrals are coming from for each service and the breadth of referrals for each of the services for registered clients, and we would like to be able to do that more for unregistered clients. There are a couple of options at this stage that we are looking at with the service providers based around some of the better practice options that came in the privacy impact assessments that we put forward.

But it is a process of a discussion, because we have to be able to fit with 104 different service providers' business systems. So we are trying to map and understand how those business systems work, to understand what kinds of changes we might be able to make that do not add to the red tape for service providers but give everybody more data than they would have at the moment.

Senator SIEWERT—How does the collection of that data specifically help either yourselves or the service providers provide better services?

Ms Fleming—We were looking at service types to see where the referrals were being received from and where we were referring to and whether that was operating effectively in each of the catchments or whether it was operating more effectively in some locations than others and, if so, what were the impediments or the opportunities to make that more consistent in other regions. That is one of the areas that we are looking at, trying to get more consistency of approach across providers and more awareness of services, if that is a problem.

Senator SIEWERT—It seems to me you have gone through a very extensive process to collect that level of data. How much has it cost overall and are there better methods for collecting that data than what seems to have been quite a cumbersome, extensive process?

Ms Fleming—The cost of the system up until 30 June 2008 was around \$1.9 million. I think we have provided that data. We have some further development still in the pipeline, for which we have a budget of about \$850,000 for the 2008-09 financial year.

Senator SIEWERT—Are they beyond the changes that we have already discussed? Is there a second round of changes?

Ms Fleming—That includes a web portal for the service providers to be able to directly log into the system and see their own agency's reports and then to compare their agency with national and state based averages.

Senator SIEWERT—Have service providers asked for that?

Ms Fleming—It was part of the development of the system at the time. In the past the department had to download and produce those reports for service providers. Now they can do it at their discretion, whenever they want, rather than waiting for the department to log

their request for a report, produce the report and mail it out to them. Now they have real-time access to those reports.

Senator SIEWERT—How often did people request the information manually from the department?

Ms Fleming—They requested reports frequently, but the exact number I would have to take on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could, that would be appreciated.

Mr Sandison—One of your questions was about the use of data in the performance of the services, and Ms Fleming responded about the referrals and identification. In terms of looking at the nature of a service and appropriate services in right areas and so on, understanding the nature of where the referral is coming to and linking that to the demographic of the customers being serviced, which are in the hundreds of thousands across the suite of subsets of family relationship services, is one of the key things of trying to improve how we interact with our service providers and for government—and indeed for everybody—having the right spread of services in the right places.

Senator SIEWERT—I am wondering why you need people's names in identifying data.

Mr Sandison—There is a difference between the data collection that might come in with or without a name. As you have said, I think, in previous sessions, the actual identity of the individual versus some of the understanding of their background or the issues they are facing is something that is useful in terms of helping the nature of the services and how the funding is split. Also, for the performance group and the working groups that are now being run with the peak body and with providers for government to get a better understanding of the performance of those services, it certainly builds into the evidence base of that understanding of what is going on.

Senator SIEWERT—You could do that without people's identifying data.

Ms Fleming—One of the differences of this system as opposed to other systems is that this system is actually, for 45 per cent of the service providers, their main system, so they do not have any other information technology system. That is why this system is more unique than a system where you just import and export data, although we do that as well for the bigger providers. But we have surveyed service providers, and 45 per cent of them have come back to us and said that they value the personal details being available to them through the online system.

Senator SIEWERT—Their own clients' or somebody else's?

Ms Fleming—Their own clients'. It is that dual operation of the system, being both a data collection system for the department and, for smaller providers, their own main data collection system.

Senator SIEWERT—I can appreciate why they would like a system where they could get their own clients' names, but I would suggest that 40 per cent of clients saying they do not want to register their details is a fair indication that people do not actually like their private details being held by government departments.

Ms Fleming—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Last time—I think it was the last estimates—we touched on the whole issue around consortia.

Ms Fleming—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—We had a bit of discussion about how you ensure the provision of services if consortia break down et cetera. Have there been any problems identified to the department with consortia, or has it settled down?

Ms Fleming—There was one instance of a consortium breakdown. We were at that time clarifying the rules that we would apply, so we have advised the sector of the rules that will apply where a consortium breaks down, around material change, and, if there is a material change to the tender, we will re-tender for that service.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay.

Ms Fleming—The minister announced that we would re-tender for the Geelong service, where there was a breakdown in consortia, and that was advertised on 11 October. We have also identified changes in the contracting arrangements, so we have advised service providers that, for new contracts or renewals, we will name consortia partners under subcontracting. Some people like that, some people do not—because they do not always see that subcontracting is the nature of their relationship—but that is the option we have under our legal contracting. All of that has been advised to the individual services to start with, and the providers, and we are looking at some governance training around consortia and advising people to look at their own consortia arrangements to make sure that they feel their interests are protected.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. That is a significant move from where we were last discussing it. Thank you for that. I will try to be quick. Can you tell me, in terms of going back specifically to the Family Relationship Services Program, whether you do research around the provision of services to try to refine the program? Is a research budget part of the program?

Ms Fleming—A number of the service types that operate under the Family Relationship Services Program evolved from better practice or innovative pilots. For example, the men in family relationships services evolved in that way. There is funding under the program to assist in providing innovations and new initiatives within the service. For example, we helped fund Centacare's development of Hey Dad! for Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops. We did some mental health first aid. We have done a range of different things with the services to assist them to develop new products and to share that knowledge amongst the service provider sector.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I did not realise some of those programs were funded under this particular program. How much funding is there available from that particular item under this program?

Ms Fleming—It varies from year to year.

Senator SIEWERT—How much is available for this year?

Mr Sandison—For that research project that is being done?

Senator SIEWERT—No, specifically for research under this particular program.

Mr Sandison—One thing: as a families group in the department, we look at a broad range of issues, because there is a lot of crossover between the services, the policy areas and so on. There is a range of work done. Some of it is done or paid for within the families group and some of it links directly with family relationship services. Also within the department we have a departmental research plan that is picked up through one of our central strategy areas. To isolate one research part, the key thing is that there are different elements of research contributing to a discussion around families broadly, children at risk, the different areas that are being looked at.

In this case, we do not have an annual budget of \$100,000 relating to FRSP. We look at the available money. Sometimes it might be better spent on a working group. The engagement with providers and the consortia in some of those working groups would be a good example, but hopefully now that has settled a bit and there are other things where it is research oriented. We would engage with the Institute of Health and Welfare and the Institute of Family Studies, as examples of trying to get that broader perspective to make sure these things do not operate in isolation.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for that explanation. Is it possible to get some of the projects that have been funded this year? I appreciate now it is not just under this program but a broader set.

Mr Sandison—We could get the annual report. There is still discussion within the department of priorities in work, but certainly the annual report identifies some of the research projects and consultancies that have run. We could identify those that have a family focus and provide them to you.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. So the ones that are listed in the annual report are ongoing?

Mr Sandison—Some are finished.

Senator SIEWERT—Does it list that for this new year?

Mr Sandison—Where there was a payment made, I think is the process for it entering into the annual report, so where that happened we can identify for you whether it was ongoing or the completion of a project.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated, thank you. Thanks. I think that is all.

CHAIR—Any other questions in the families area? Senator Bernardi, do you have any questions on families? Senator Boyce? Last call?

Senator SIEWERT—I had one specific question, if the trial people are still here.

Ms Beauchamp—I am still here.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, you are still here. There was a question that I should have followed up at the time, and I do not know if you have the information. If not, you could maybe take it on notice. It goes to the financial management money and the project for \$90,000. I understood that eight services had been approached to tender for that project.

Ms Beauchamp—Is that the financial counselling services that are currently in place in Cannington?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—They are funded by the Western Australian government, and we were looking at supplementing those. I have got a detailed answer to some of the questions that you have raised around Cannington and financial management. I am happy to table that.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be very much appreciated.

CHAIR—It cannot just be one page.

Ms Beauchamp—It is two pages. It also puts the question in context. You were asking, and Senator Adams was also asking, about 39 suburbs. It sounded like this massive program. We have made announcements that there are 1,000 places that have been supported through the child protection measure in Western Australia; 500 of those places are compulsory and around 500 are voluntary. They are indicative numbers only. We need to look at those in the context of renegotiating the arrangements with the Western Australian government. But we are only talking about a limited number of places that we have that funding for: the funding has been identified.

Senator SIEWERT—We are talking about the \$18.3 million. Are you saying that you are capping the number of places at 1,000?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So once you have identified—

Ms Beauchamp—Sorry. That is in Western Australia. The \$18 million that we referred to also picks up the six trial sites in the NT.

Senator SIEWERT—That is not what I understood from what was said earlier.

Mr Sandison—That money was for Western Australia and the as yet to be determined Kimberley area—

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Mr Sandison—and potentially almost clarified the Cannington area of 39 suburbs. That funding is to support those two areas for the child protection measure.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I understood. The \$18 million is for the Western Australian part of this.

Mr Sandison—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I had understood. I want to clarify the 1,000 places. Basically, what you are saying is that we are putting up the money for up to 1,000 kids.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Is this for the whole of Western Australia?

Ms Beauchamp—The whole of Western Australia.

Senator SIEWERT—And once we hit 1,000, that is it. Is that what you are saying?

Ms Beauchamp—That is what we have funding available for.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. That is still a lot of families. That is 1,000 families. Admittedly, there may be one or more children in a family.

Ms Beauchamp—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—But it is up to 1,000 families.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—That is still a lot of work—

Dr Harmer—Indeed.

Ms Beauchamp—Exactly.

Senator SIEWERT—for somebody to do on \$90,000.

Ms Beauchamp—Sorry. I think we have clarified the dollars.

Dr Harmer—You will see in the sheet that we have handed out, there is a breakdown of the \$1.5 million. I do not think that \$90,000 appears anywhere. I think we may have misled you, or identified the wrong figure.

CHAIR—Dr Harmer, are these officers going to be there tomorrow as well?

Dr Harmer—Some of them.

CHAIR—I am just checking. We know that we have been able to question this evening on the basis that Cannington at least is going to have people who are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I am thinking that, because of the complexity of this, if Senator Siewert can see the briefing note that you have provided, it may well be better that the questions then would be able to be more focused.

Dr Harmer—Indeed.

Senator SIEWERT—I am happy to take that on board, as long as I do not get told that I cannot ask about Cannington tomorrow. I will just ask about the Indigenous component of Cannington.

CHAIR—Maybe what we can do is move onto another area; let you have a look at that note now. Dr Harmer, I would hate tomorrow for us to be in a situation where people felt that they were not able to question as they would like. We are getting your briefing paper done now. I would suggest that we move on to 4.4. Do you have some more for Families?

Senator ADAMS—Just one. Would it be possible to get the 39 suburbs? I am aghast, knowing the area fairly well, as to just how far afield they go. Is there any way that you can get that information? The problem for us in the morning, of course, is that we are still three hours ahead of Western Australia with daylight saving.

Dr Harmer—I stand to be corrected, but I think what the officers were saying earlier is that there are still negotiations going on between the Commonwealth and Western Australia about specifically which suburbs will be included.

Senator ADAMS—Is that right? I thought it was the Kimberley area that you were not sure about.

Dr Harmer—No.

Ms Beauchamp—No.

Mr Sandison—It is identified as being under negotiation, with the government to finalise the area, but indicatively—there is the Kimberley and the various towns within. Cannington has the 39 suburbs, and they are the subject of the discussion with WA. The ‘Cannington district’ I think was one of the terms used. It is within that area that will be the final trial area.

Senator SIEWERT—I understood that they cannot tell us yet because they have not negotiated it.

CHAIR—Will the officers who are handling the Cannington processes be there tomorrow?

Mr Sandison—Yes.

CHAIR—Okay. What we will do is get the briefing paper. You can have a look at it now. We will go to 4.4, and then, if there are immediate questions, we can come back to them this evening. Other questions may have to go tomorrow. We questioned you this evening on the basis that it was not all Aboriginal. We will question you tomorrow on the basis that it is the majority of Aboriginal—

Senator ADAMS—I have got a few at 4.3.

CHAIR—We will go back to 4.3. Senator Bernardi jumped in with that call for 4.4—

Senator BERNARDI—I thought it was an inspired call, though, by you, Chair.

CHAIR—which is community partnership and delivery.

Senator BERNARDI—I have a few questions with regard to volunteers in some of the programs that are out there. I understand from June estimates that \$5 million has been allocated for the next three years for petrol vouchers for volunteer organisations. Am I correct? Yes? How was the figure of \$5 million per annum reached?

Dr Harmer—It was a government decision, I think, was it not?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes, it is.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Was there any evidence or research provided to the government by the department in reaching that figure?

Dr Harmer—It was an election commitment.

Senator BERNARDI—It is hard to keep track of them. It took us many months to get the 91 election commitments for the sports rorts program, so the petrol funding program has not featured. Can you tell me how many organisations have applied for petrol vouchers since the scheme began?

Ms Farrelly—Would you like to know how many have applied in this current round or the total since the beginning?

Senator BERNARDI—The total since the beginning, if it is available to you, otherwise you can put it on notice. I am happy for that.

Mr Lewis—The issue is further complicated because what has happened is that we have combined the volunteer grants and the petrol vouchers. So it is a bigger question than the one you are asking. That is a brief—

Senator BERNARDI—You do not have the information at hand or you do not have reasonable access to it?

Ms Farrelly—I am happy to take it on notice.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, I will ask you to take it on notice.

Ms Beauchamp—Sorry. Can I just clarify that. That is the number of applications?

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, please, for petrol vouchers. You might be able to supply this to me: I am interested to know how many vouchers have actually been issued so far.

Ms Farrelly—If I could clarify: there have been a number of volunteer organisations funded under the Volunteer Management Program, which used to be called the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants program.

Senator BERNARDI—Grants, yes.

Ms Farrelly—This year, as Mr Lewis said, we have combined both, so for the first time volunteers can apply for fuel reimbursement to support their volunteers. We have combined our volunteer equipment grant with the handing out of this support for fuel reimbursement. This year we have not handed any out yet. The process only closed last Friday. We will go through an intensive assessment process. I do not have the exact number but I understand it is around 15,000 applicants, which is pretty standard. It was what we were expecting.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure. I would be interested in the applications. I mean, you have given me that. I would be interested also in a breakdown per state, if you possibly can. I will let you know that in February—you would have handed some out by February, I guess.

Ms Farrelly—Certainly, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes, in February when we come back.

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

Senator BERNARDI—I would like to know how many vouchers have actually been distributed and that kind of information about the quantum; whether they are \$10 or \$20 vouchers or \$50 vouchers.

Ms Farrelly—Can I clarify that the fuel reimbursement will not be specifically by voucher.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Ms Farrelly—Voucher is, I guess, one method of distribution. When we looked at the best way to give organisations access to this funding and for it to be distributed effectively, we looked at reducing red tape for organisations. We are offering it as a grant to organisations to provide to their volunteers.

Senator BERNARDI—So it is up to them.

Ms Farrelly—They will distribute. We thought the policy position to administer a voucher system was quite expensive and so the not-for-profit sector then has the maximum flexibility. It also reduces government administrative costs, as you would imagine.

Senator BERNARDI—I appreciate that; I do. But what accountability is in place to ensure that there is compliance; that the fuel vouchers—and I will refer to them as that—are actually used for fuel reimbursement?

Ms Farrelly—In our grants administration—I am not sure if you are aware—we have been through a process to make sure that we apply funding arrangements commensurate with the risk of that grant. These grants are going to be at a minimum of \$1,000 and a maximum of \$5,000. Of that, the component for fuel can only be \$2½ thousand, so our accountability mechanism for these will be minimalist in terms of our administration: they need to keep receipts and then we will randomly audit a selection as part of our annual acquittal process.

Senator BERNARDI—Randomly. That does not tie in with the implied compliance in the media statement from 25 October which says:

Organisations will be required to provide a statement of acquittal for vouchers used to guard against any abuse of the system.

Ms Farrelly—They will be required to, yes.

Senator BERNARDI—I would read that to mean that anyone who is in receipt of them would be required to do it.

Ms Farrelly—Yes. They will be required on request.

Senator BERNARDI—On request. That was omitted from the press statement, I would guess. I would hate to be misled.

CHAIR—Ms Farrelly, the expectation of that statement is to ensure that people kept them?

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

CHAIR—That they may be asked to present them?

Ms Farrelly—Yes, absolutely.

Senator BERNARDI—And that has been explained by the department—

CHAIR—Yes, but I do not think that—

Senator BERNARDI—Well, it does not say that in the media release. The media release says:

Organisations will be required to provide a statement of acquittal ...

CHAIR—They will.

Senator BERNARDI—It does not say ‘on request’. It does not say that. I think that is rather disingenuous. But, anyway, we have established that.

CHAIR—We will disagree on that, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—Well, we will. There are many things we might disagree on.

Senator Conroy—Is there a question anywhere in that?

Senator BERNARDI—I am responding to the interjections from the chair.

Senator Conroy—I just wonder if you could ask a question—

Senator BERNARDI—I will respond to your interjections, too. Thanks, Senator Conroy, for doing that. It is nice to hear that you are still with us. There was another media statement on 25 October of last year by the ALP. A figure of \$69 million was referred to in relation to the Volunteer Grants Program. However, in Senator Stephens' media release of 5 September of this year, she referred to \$64 million in the Volunteer Grants Program.

Ms Farrelly—I think you are referring to an election media release.

Senator BERNARDI—That is right, yes.

Ms Farrelly—So between that and the election of the government, and then the budget process, the total amount is \$64 million; \$63.74, to be precise.

Senator BERNARDI—So to be cruel, the Labor Party has failed to keep an election promise?

Senator Conroy—That is not a question, that is—

CHAIR—Statement.

Senator Conroy—an opinion, a statement. You are entitled to ask about facts.

Senator BERNARDI—Sixty-four versus 69.

Senator Conroy—You are entitled to ask about facts, as you know, Senator Bernardi.

Senator BERNARDI—Sixty-four versus 69.

Senator Conroy—But you cannot invite officers to pass comment. I am sure you have got another question.

Senator BERNARDI—But, Senator Conroy, is \$64 million the same as \$69 million?

Senator Conroy—I am sure you have another question.

Senator BERNARDI—There is a basic one for you.

Senator Conroy—I do not accept the premise of your question.

Senator BERNARDI—Can you give me any indication of the breakdown of this funding?

Ms Farrelly—The breakdown is: of that \$21 million that is available this financial year, \$5 million of that will be for petrol reimbursement.

Senator BERNARDI—Where does the rest of it go?

Ms Farrelly—It will go to small equipment to support volunteering activities.

Senator BERNARDI—Up to the maximum of the \$5,000, starting at \$1,000 up to the \$5,000, which are the figures you gave before.

Ms Farrelly—Distributed in the same method I mentioned. Correct.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Ms Farrelly—So the total pool of \$21 million is being administered together in the same grants process.

Senator BERNARDI—Sure. You mentioned before that the application process has now been concluded.

Ms Farrelly—Yes, it closed.

Senator BERNARDI—For this year.

Ms Farrelly—Yes, last Friday.

Senator BERNARDI—And you had 15,000—

Ms Farrelly—I have not got the exact amount.

Senator BERNARDI—About 15,000.

Ms Farrelly—Because after it closed, then they came in in the mail.

Senator BERNARDI—Yes.

Ms Farrelly—They would have been—you know, they are coming from far-flung places, so I have not got the final figure.

Senator BERNARDI—Is there an expectation of how many organisations you will be able to fund? Obviously there is a limit on cash, but is there a minimum number that you are required to fund?

Ms Farrelly—There is no limitation. It will depend on how many apply. If people apply for less, then obviously more people get funded. I will be able to answer that in February.

Senator BERNARDI—I will look forward to asking that in February. I have no more questions on that, Chair, so if anyone else has some questions—

CHAIR—Anyone else on that topic? I do not think so, Senator.

Senator BERNARDI—No? Regarding the Volunteer Management Program—which was a \$16.7 million announcement on budget night—the minister's media release said that the funding would go towards training and management of volunteers. Could you enlighten me what the criteria are for choosing appropriate training organisations to receive the funding and, I guess, management of volunteer organisations.

Ms Farrelly—There are 50 volunteer resource centres and that funding supports the activities of those volunteer resource centres.

Senator BERNARDI—So the \$5 million announcement in the budget for training and support for volunteers through 50 volunteer resource centres is separate to the \$16.7 million. Is that right?

Ms Farrelly—No, it is part of it.

Senator BERNARDI—It is part of it?

Ms Farrelly—The \$16.7 million is for the training of 50 resource centres that provide the training and support to volunteers.

Senator BERNARDI—So \$5 million was announced on 12 May and then \$16.7 million was announced on 13 May, which included the \$5 million?

Ms Farrelly—That is my understanding.

Senator BERNARDI—Before the \$5 million worth of funding that was announced on 12 May, which is included in the \$16.7 million funding, what was the Commonwealth's contribution to the volunteer resource centres?

Ms Farrelly—I will need to take that on notice.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. Can you tell me how many volunteer resource centres there are in each state and territory? You might want to take that on notice, too.

Ms Farrelly—Yes, I will take that on notice.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you. I have nothing more on the volunteer resource centres, Chair.

CHAIR—Okay. Keep going.

Senator BERNARDI—I do not want to ask any questions on this next one either. Hang on, we have a GoVolunteer website.

CHAIR—GoVolunteer website, certainly.

Senator BERNARDI—In relation to the GoVolunteer website, \$64,000 was announced in new funding for the GoVolunteer website. Do you have a breakdown of how that is expected to be spent?

Ms Farrelly—The administration of the GoVolunteer website is a grant to Volunteering Australia.

Senator BERNARDI—Is it a one-off grant or is it in forward estimates? I do not have that information.

Ms Farrelly—It covers this financial year.

Senator BERNARDI—Thank you, Chair. That is all from me.

CHAIR—On 4.4?

Senator BERNARDI—Yes. I am leaving now and I would like to thank the department for being very cooperative today. You have been very helpful and I appreciate that.

[8.34 pm]

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Senator. We are now on outcome 4.3, Community recovery.

Senator ADAMS—Firstly, I would like to ask about the internal review of the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment. What were the results of your review?

Ms Janz—The internal review was looking at the administration of the payment itself, and we spoke to a number of service providers, including Centrelink that provides the payment, and a number of the NGOs that were involved in recovery around the various disasters over the last couple of years. It was looking just at the administrative processes, what we could do to improve the way we manage that payment, so in terms of the guidelines and how we put the guidelines together and those sorts of things. The outcome has not yet been provided to the minister. So the recommendations from that are very much internally focused. I probably do not have any more that I could give you on that at this stage.

Senator ADAMS—With the guidelines, have you found any way that you could perhaps get the payments out faster to the people involved?

Ms Janz—I do not know that the speed of the payments is an issue, because we generally have the payment activated within 24 hours of the minister making a decision and Centrelink then makes the payment available within a further 24 hours. So the speed is not really an issue. It is pretty quick.

Senator ADAMS—So as soon as the department has an issue to deal with, you then advise the minister—that is part of the process—and then it goes from there?

Ms Janz—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—Good. When you said that, I thought, ‘Well, let’s just find out how long it took.’ Could you give me several examples perhaps of major disasters as to how people are going to get funding? What would you classify as a major disaster?

Ms Janz—The two most recent activations for the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment were in relation to the Queensland floods; one in January and one in February. The payment is made available for six months from the time when the payment is activated. The minister has the authority to activate the payment, and it is legislated in the Social Security Act. It talks about a major disaster.

The things that she takes into account in determining whether or not a disaster is major are the impact of the disaster itself and the extent to which it might be unusual or it might be significantly large. She also looks at things like whether or not the state can cope with it. So it is state responsibility to look after property and community and then the Commonwealth government supports them. When something seems to be significant in terms of the extent of the disaster, or it was particularly unusual, then we would have a look at it to see whether or not it was considered to be a major disaster and then the payment would be made available.

Senator ADAMS—So fire would come into that as well?

Ms Janz—Yes. The floods—

Dr Harmer—Cyclones.

Ms Janz—Cyclones, yes. Cyclone season is coming on now. So we are looking forward to perhaps a busy time, or not.

Senator ADAMS—Yes. Seeing as we are going to be up north as a committee, I do not know whether we are that keen about being up there in the cyclone season. It was to get an idea of that, and I was interested in what you had found on an internal review, where you could make a difference. How many Bali victims or their families are you now still supporting?

Ms Janz—This is assistance for victims of the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings?

Senator ADAMS—Right.

Ms Janz—For the 2007-08 financial year, there were 13 people that were assisted.

Senator ADAMS—That still keeps going as far as rehabilitation?

Ms Janz—Yes, it is a lifetime rehabilitation package, so it is available for people when they need it. For instance, if somebody had bought a new car and needed it modified and then they bought a new car, they could then reapply and have another modification of the vehicle.

Senator ADAMS—That is good to know. The only other question I have is about the pandemic influenza. What type of education is available to the community for coping mechanisms in the case of an influenza pandemic? As a department, do you organise the advertising or making people aware that there is a pandemic about to happen or has happened? How do you actually communicate that?

Ms Janz—We have been fairly actively involved in whole-of-government arrangements around that. In relation to the medical elements, the department of health is obviously the lead, but in the last 12 months we have done significant work with our non-government organisations—so the service providers that we fund—and we have put together a business continuity kit for them and run 41 workshops around Australia to keep them better informed about what a pandemic is, what the impacts of it are and then how their organisation could cope better with it.

That is really focusing on them as providers of services to the community so that they have the best chance of still being able to provide those services in the community should there be a pandemic. At the same time, in the last 12 months we have also done significant work on preparing messages for the community on social and community impacts of a pandemic. These were focus tested, and we got some very good results about what the compliance rates were likely to be with those sorts of messages, any gaps in the messages that we prepared and what other things people might be interested in hearing about.

So we have put all that information together. That was for use by all Commonwealth government agencies and state and local government. The results of that are now available on a website that has been created so that all different levels of government can share that information and use it as they need to in terms of communication with the community.

Senator ADAMS—So it can obviously be activated very quickly if something does happen.

Senator BOYCE—Is it publicly available?

Ms Janz—It has not been made available publicly, because the purpose of it is for government to use in putting messages together for the community so that we know what sorts of messages they are interested in and what the best way is of getting through with those messages. There are risks associated with making it available to the public in general, because we do not want to create worry and panic too early.

Senator BOYCE—Before it is necessary.

Ms Janz—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you.

Senator ADAMS—What funding is given to the states or local government or the agencies you were talking about? Do they get any funding to promote the issues or not, or do they do it through their own networks?

Ms Janz—FaHCSIA does not fund them to do it. The workshops and the training material that we have provided was free for those NGOs, and the work came from some funding that we got from the previous government in the previous financial year. I am not sure of what the arrangements are in terms of how separate governments fund. FaHCSIA sits on a range of whole-of-government committees and as part of that we have certainly shared the information that we have come forth with with the state governments and prepared a range of message banks for them which they can use. So it is not costing them anything, but we do not fund them to do further activity using that. That would be up to them to determine themselves.

Senator ADAMS—You have the network set up anyway.

Ms Janz—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—That is the main thing. Is this government going to continue on with those same guidelines? You were saying that the last government had set this up.

Ms Janz—The funding came through from decisions from the previous government. I think a lot of the preparation work has been done now. A lot of different agencies have been doing a fair bit of work on pandemic influenza preparedness. As you said, there is only so much that you can prepare, and then there is a point where you cannot keep on preparing. I am not aware of what the current government's focus is on continuing any initiatives in the pandemic influenza preparedness space at this time.

Senator ADAMS—Dr Harmer, within the budget, is there a budget to keep this going on and updating guidelines?

Dr Harmer—In preparation for—

Senator ADAMS—For the pandemic influenza—

Dr Harmer—That is probably a health department—

Senator ADAMS—Is it?

Mr Lewis—The interesting discussion we have had with some departments around this is that the bite—the traction—of the pandemic work has sort of eased off for some reason. People seem to be not as exercised in terms of the discussions we have had with some of our colleagues in the states and territories about the pandemic issue.

In terms of the pandemic per se, that focus is certainly something that is not solo. We have been looking at other issues and utilising some of the thinking that has been used, and the frameworks for the pandemic might be applied to other hazards. That is the sort of thinking we are doing. But in terms of whether the government is going forward with funding, that is a separate question that the government will decide in the budget process. I am trying to give you a sense of where the pandemic sits in the continuum. It is a real threat—a bit like the AIDS campaigns and a whole lot of other things—but people seem to turn off and—

Senator ADAMS—Be complacent about it.

Mr Lewis—Yes.

Ms Janz—Yes, and that is what the research found when we tested some of our community messages; that there was a point where people were willing to prepare and then they were prepared to take the next step when the threat was imminent. So when it was on

their doorstep they would move to the next stage, but there was only a certain amount that they were prepared to do, because the threat was not imminent and there were other things that were in their lives that were more imminent threats to them.

Senator ADAMS—How many FTEs do you have in your area?

Ms Janz—My branch has an average staffing level this year of 24. It was fairly similar to that last year—maybe one or two less.

Senator ADAMS—That is all I have. Thank you very much. I am sorry to keep you so late.

Ms Janz—Thank you.

CHAIR—That is 4.3. Now we will move to 3.2, Child support, before we go back to finalise 3.1. Senator Boyce.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you. We have been bumping up and down all day, I think, against the National Child Protection Framework and where that is heading. Is it possible to get an overview of where that framework is at, please? Sorry, have I started at the wrong spot? Were you expecting Child Support first?

Ms Kinnear—I was, but that is fine.

Dr Harmer—We thought we just went to Child Support.

CHAIR—We did go to Child Support.

Senator BOYCE—Yes, but where else do I ask about the National Child Protection Framework if it is not under support for children? I do have questions on the child support funding issue, but I was going to put them last.

Dr Harmer—We are just looking for the right person.

Senator BOYCE—We will get this system sorted sooner or later, or I will.

Ms Beauchamp—Sorry, Senator, what was your specific question?

Senator BOYCE—The National Child Protection Framework which has been—

Dr Harmer—Where is it at?

Senator BOYCE—mentioned numerous times today but never outlined.

Ms Beauchamp—As you know, it was an election commitment. It has actually been placed on the COAG agenda, and there have been some decisions, particularly in relation to progressing the National Child Protection Framework and the associated work around information sharing for the next COAG meeting on 17 November. That was in the last communique.

In terms of what we have been doing, since May there has been a discussion paper that Minister Macklin released on *Australia's children: safe and well*. We have been using that as the basis for consultation with state and territory governments and with a number of other key stakeholders in terms of developing up what the framework should look like. It was interesting that the previous senator raised issues around children at risk and at what point the Commonwealth and the states and territories step in. What we are trying to do is work with

the states and territories to better define and better improve the effectiveness of current interventions, both from the state and territory point of view and also from the Commonwealth point of view. We are taking a public health model and looking at the early intervention and prevention agenda. Rather than just focusing on the hard end of child protection, we are looking at how we better protect the safety and wellbeing of children. The framework is currently being developed. It is in draft stage with the state and territory governments, and a paper will be submitted for the next COAG meeting to agree the next steps in finalisation of that framework.

Senator BOYCE—So you are currently looking at how we go about preventing children from being abused, neglected, undereducated et cetera? Is that what you are talking about in that area, when you talk about the social policy aspect of it?

Dr Harmer—The Commonwealth government's and our minister's proposal is that we will offer to assist the states. We are certainly not offering to take over child protection, but we have a range of avenues—

Senator BOYCE—I do not think anyone would want to take over child protection.

Dr Harmer—Indeed. Given the significance of it, there are a range of Commonwealth measures and Commonwealth information—we have organisations like Centrelink that can identify potential dangers early—and we are looking to promote, through the child protection frameworks, some consistency across the country, to promote information sharing—

Senator BOYCE—What I find quite easy to understand is working towards some sort of consistency around the legislative systems that are used by the states for child protection—the statutory sorts of protections. If we could talk about where that is at, that would be a starting point.

Ms Beauchamp—In terms of the legislative system—and there were a number of key themes that were raised in the discussion paper, and I do not have the discussion paper with me here—we are looking at things like workforce issues, Indigenous services, and a range of early intervention prevention models and then, as a secondary issue, what sort of legislative underpinning we need to get the outcomes we want.

Of course, on the child protection side in the state and territory based systems, they have specific legislative requirements. Getting consistency in definitions and information so we can look at information nationally is probably where the Commonwealth would like to see it head.

Senator BOYCE—I thought you were going to say it will be extraordinarily difficult.

Ms Beauchamp—It probably will be.

Dr Harmer—It will be.

Senator BOYCE—So where are we at with that? That was probably where my question was going. There has been some work started around developing a national child protection framework.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—How much time is that work perceived to require? Where are we now on that time line?

Ms Beauchamp—We are agreeing the high-level reform areas in the child protection framework with the states and territories, and some high-level indicators.

Senator BOYCE—So they have been established?

Ms Beauchamp—Yes, and they are being put to the next COAG to sign off. In terms of developing, I think one of the things that we would be looking at—

Senator BOYCE—On 17 November?

Ms Beauchamp—On 17 November. I think there will be further work required after that meeting to develop a concrete action plan under that, in terms of how we are going to achieve some of those agreed performance indicators and the like.

Senator BOYCE—As I said, it is a phrase that has been mentioned numerous times.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—I thought it was worth trying to just—

Dr Harmer—It is new territory.

Senator BOYCE—Absolutely.

Dr Harmer—It requires quite a lot of negotiation, discussion, between the Commonwealth and the states. We need to get high-level sign-off by COAG of the key framework so that we get over the first hurdle, and then we work at a lower level from then on with the states.

Senator BOYCE—Perhaps I should take advice here. There are two other broad areas that I want to cover. One is child support, the payment of money thereto; the other one is Australia's place in the world in terms of jobless families and children in jobless families, and what is being done about that.

Ms Beauchamp—Child support we can definitely help you with.

Senator BOYCE—Yes.

Ms Beauchamp—In terms of jobless families, details for that information would be held by the employment department.

Senator BOYCE—I realise that. We had figures that said that in 2005 when, as everyone here knows, our employment rates were at very good levels, we had the second highest percentage of children in OECD countries living in jobless families. That is obviously something that is going to get worse over the next 12 months. What is FaHCSIA looking at, planning, thinking, and doing about that? That is the question.

Ms Beauchamp—The department is focused on those families that are most disadvantaged, and jobless families are part of that.

Senator BOYCE—It is one of those bizarre things: the better unemployment gets, the more concentration you have of jobless families. Sorry, I did not mean to interrupt, Ms Beauchamp.

Ms Beauchamp—We are working very closely with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to see how our programs can fit with their programs,

so that we are better able to support jobless families at the local level. We will continue to use family relationship services, parenting, the family functioning responsibilities that we have to ensure the family unit can better support those households that are at risk.

Senator BOYCE—Are you planning in some sort of way for a need to ramp up those sorts of services?

Ms Beauchamp—We will certainly be monitoring and looking at the indicators in terms of children and families at risk that will be in touch with Centrelink and some of our other services, yes.

Senator BOYCE—How do you monitor that? What happens?

Ms Beauchamp—Through the programs that we have, there are a number of people that do present with a range of disadvantages, whether it is family relationship breakdown, mental illness, joblessness and the like.

Senator BOYCE—I am thinking more about children in jobless families at the present time. How do you monitor that? What are your early warning systems?

Ms Beauchamp—There are a number of pieces of work that we are developing in terms of children at risk, and jobless families is one of those risk factors, along with a range of other risk factors that I have mentioned. We will continue to monitor what is happening in terms of our family programs, to ensure that they do support children that might be at risk in those families. That is ongoing monitoring, making sure that our services are available and accessible to the harder to reach families.

Dr Harmer—If unemployment goes up, obviously there is—

Senator BOYCE—When the unemployment figures come out, you do what?

Dr Harmer—To the extent that there is an increased number of families with children in the unemployment list, then it puts pressure on our programs, and then it would be up to government to decide whether they allocate more resources.

Mr Sandison—One of the areas of learning for this is the longitudinal datasets. So we have the raw data, as mentioned, that links into the employment areas of the government; that would go through the various payments that they have, of single parents and partnered parents, and then those that are in the Newstart, youth allowance. Obviously, one of the issues to look at is that, depending on what the incentives are to go in and out of work—which is always a key—

Senator BOYCE—This is presuming that there is work to go in and out of.

Mr Sandison—Correct. But the Henry review that looks at the tax transfer system and tax incentives and so on—part of that issue is around what the incentives are to move in and out of income support and in and out of work. So they give you raw data on numbers—the numbers of children—and that can be crossed over with some of the broader families data. But the other element is the longitudinal datasets that give you more quality of information about what is happening in families, and they get used within FaHCSIA and also the Institute of Family Studies and the Institute of Health and Welfare, that will give you information and data about what is happening. Then the *State of the family report* that is being released by the

Prime Minister and Minister Macklin later this year will provide the first of the statements of where families are overall. For the first time, there will be a few points in the ground about where things can be looked at and what is changing and what are some of the key areas to be monitored.

Senator BOYCE—When is that to be released?

Mr Sandison—I think it is before the end of the year.

Senator BOYCE—When will the data from that be for? It will not be real-time data.

Mr Sandison—It depends on which element. Primarily it is driven through Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office of Work and Family, working with our department and other agencies, and they have a range of themes that will be looked at because of different issues with family. Depending on the availability of datasets—some might be from census data, others will be administrative data that might be income support, and others from separate research projects that have been done over the last three or four years—it really depends on the issue and the data that is available.

Senator BOYCE—It is pretty obvious, I think, that the number of jobless families in Australia is going to grow over the next 12 months or so. What I was trying to get to is: how well is FaHCSIA placed to respond quickly in terms of suggestions to government or adaptations of your own programs to deal with that?

Ms Beauchamp—In terms of the programs that we have discussed today around financial counselling and family functioning, parenting and the like, those are the programs that our client group come in contact with. We will keep monitoring—

Senator BOYCE—Except of course you would have greater demand for those services as well, wouldn't you?

Ms Beauchamp—We will be able to report that information and advice to our minister.

Senator BOYCE—How quickly?

Dr Harmer—Very quickly, Senator.

Senator BOYCE—Very quickly. I will stop there for now. It might be an interesting field to look at further in February.

Ms Beauchamp—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Child support: the budget papers said that there would be a saving of about \$450 million of family tax benefit from the changes that were being made to the child support formula. Where are we at in terms of those savings?

Ms Kinnear—Which budget papers?

Senator BOYCE—I am sorry. I will find the actual page, I hope. It is total resources for outcome 3, table 2.1.3. No, that is the wrong figure. I do not have it with me, sorry. There was \$449 million—

Mr Warburton—That was in the PBS. It was the performance indicator. It was the total savings for the maintenance income test within family tax benefit. It was literally that: it was the total savings from the operation of the maintenance income test. It was affected by the

child support reforms, but the maintenance income test was in place before the child support reforms.

Senator BOYCE—Yes, but we had \$449 million expected to be saved in this tax benefit around maintenance and—

Mr Warburton—In this financial year.

Senator BOYCE—Yes.

Mr Warburton—And we will not be able to report on that until the annual report next financial year. The child support reforms led to a reduction in the amount of maintenance income that would be assessed, and so the quantum of savings declined as a result of the child support reforms.

Senator BOYCE—Because more people are picking up family tax benefit to compensate for decreases in income support.

Mr Warburton—Because there was less child support paid.

Senator BOYCE—Yes. Perhaps we could talk a little bit about the child support payment itself. We have discussed this in some depth with Centrelink. There have been numerous letters to me, and I am sure probably to every other politician, from receiving parents who have been disgruntled by the change, and the change in the formula. What has the department received about this and how have you reacted to it?

Mr Emerson—I might start the answer to that and my colleagues might finish it. It is early days. As you know, stage 3 of the child support reforms was implemented on 1 July. However, there have been quite a low number of complaints from stakeholders. CSA have advised us that that is lower than expected. You may have heard that at the DHS estimates on Tuesday. In addition, the number of objections that CSA have received is decreasing on a month-to-month basis. I might add that, at a Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group meeting that was had on 9 October—

Senator BOYCE—Sorry, what sort of a meeting?

Mr Emerson—A Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group meeting, which we work closely with CSA to administer. There was some research that the Child Support Agency released, illustrating that there has been a boost in confidence in the child support system since the introduction of this scheme.

Senator BOYCE—Yes, I have seen that.

Mr Emerson—From a stakeholder perspective, some of the early indications—and it is early days—are that there is quite a decrease in complaints and objections.

Senator BOYCE—The complaints and objections were spelt out by Centrelink. Does the department itself receive complaints or objections, or are they always directed to Centrelink?

Mr Emerson—No, we do not. We receive ministerial correspondence, but objections and complaints are directed to the Child Support Agency.

Senator BOYCE—If I were to try and ring FaHCSIA, that would come back the other way? I would be told to tell Centrelink about it, would I?

Mr Emerson—If a customer has a concern with their child support assessment, they would be ringing the Child Support Agency.

Senator BOYCE—What sort of level of ministerial correspondence has there been on the topic, Senator Conroy?

Mr Emerson—I can answer that question. We have received about half of what was expected.

Senator BOYCE—What would that be?

Mr Emerson—Seven hundred and fifty items of ministerial correspondence were expected. We have received about 395.

Senator BOYCE—What prompted you to think there would be 750?

Senator Conroy—Experience.

Mr Emerson—Yes, previous experience.

Mr Sandison—Whenever any reforms go through, there is quite a detailed process.

Senator BOYCE—So this is just part of the impact statement, so to speak, is it?

Mr Sandison—You have to make a judgement, and that would link in to calls to the Child Support Agency and Centrelink, ministerials, and that is part of the process of working with our colleagues in the finance department to work out a cost on what might be needed to support any government reform. So, regardless of the availability of evidence, we have to make a judgement on what we think will be the amount.

Senator BOYCE—So it is part of a potential impact statement?

Mr Emerson—That is correct.

Senator BOYCE—So you have 325—

Mr Emerson—Three hundred and ninety five.

Senator BOYCE—Could you tell me, were there a lot at the beginning, then tailing off? Do they mirror or are they different from the ones that went to Centrelink in their incidence?

Mr Emerson—Generally speaking, the items of ministerial correspondence that we receive are of a policy nature. Early trends—and this is early days—since the implementation of the new scheme on 1 July are that the number of items is decreasing in this area, and they are primarily about care or the effect of the formula. But they are decreasing.

Mr Sandison—We need to be careful with the nature of them. I think Dr Harmer has mentioned at previous estimates the level of our ability to identify specific subsets of ministerial correspondence. Just to clarify, that figure was between April and the end of September, so that is not a monthly rate. The nature of letters, while they might raise various issues, was generally in the child support area. So before this round kicked in, there would still be letters to ministers about child support, regardless. It is difficult to gauge what the difference is and how many specifically relate to this issue.

Senator BOYCE—I am sure there would have been a lot of letters. It may just have been the nature of them that has changed since the change to the Child Support Agency. We were

talking before about the family tax benefit. The implication of it was that, if income support fell, family tax benefit would rise for the receiving parent. There have been a number of people, talking and writing to politicians, and certainly in the media, suggesting that if you are already on the maximum family tax benefit, for the poorest families—and it might only be \$20 a week you were getting in income support—if that has fallen to \$15, there is no way you can get more family tax benefit. How many families are in that category?

Ms Kinnear—Just to be clear, as the child support goes down, generally speaking the family tax benefit will go up, but it depends on a whole range of circumstances. The specific question you are asking is, how many people whose child support goes down are on the maximum rate—

Senator BOYCE—Yes, could not receive more family tax benefit.

Ms Kinnear—of family tax benefit and therefore cannot receive more? It is quite a small number, somewhere less than 1,000 people, because you have to be in a very specific circumstance to have that situation. You have to have an income of above \$42,000 and receive child support under the maintenance income free area, which is around \$1,200. Our analysis shows that the number of people who will be in that situation, where they are on maximum rate FTB and therefore cannot receive any more, is somewhere less than 1,000.

Senator BOYCE—Less than, 1,000. A number of these have corresponded with offices that I am aware of, but also the media. What is intended to be done there? What recommendations are you making there?

Mr Sandison—Minister Macklin, when there was the release of the distributional analysis back in August, made a commitment to look at monitoring the impact with the reforms coming in. It is our job to collect data, both in terms of ministerials as individual issues and also the data from the analysis. We will be picking up more data at the end of December from the Child Support Agency and then we will provide information to the minister in terms of a monitoring report. Then it will be a consideration for the minister. I think that was covered in the press release of 7 August.

Senator BOYCE—So it is a monitoring report? Okay. When you say ‘data from CSA’, are you talking about complaints and objections or are you talking about actual assessments per se?

Mr Sandison—We certainly talk to them about what is happening in terms of their feedback systems and so on, but also data about the change in the nature and the number of people getting the various amounts and who is paying what, so the payees and the payers and that sort of information. Like the information that was in the distributional analysis, it is along the same lines that we ask for data from the Child Support Agency. We also put it through a process of looking at it and examining it in from a policy context, and we use that to help provide the report to the minister.

Senator BOYCE—I would suspect that some of the people who are affected by this might think this is a slow process: that something that happened to them on 1 July is going to get reported to the minister in December and maybe then have something done about it.

Mr Sandison—There are a series of changes that will take place, and a lot of the assessments that have been done are based on what would happen if a person were receiving full payments. One of the issues with the child support system, where we make our estimates, is having to wait for what actually happens. Part of that also includes whether the people that are required to pay make the payments, because that has an impact as well on the totality of the system.

Senator BOYCE—I am sure it does. Sorry, did you have something to say, Ms Kinnear?

Ms Kinnear—I was going to make a point of clarification around the policy here. The implication of your line of questioning is that there is something that is not working in the policy here. The outcome that you are referring to would not be an unexpected outcome in terms of the policy that has been implemented, on the basis of the taskforce recommendations. It is not the case that, in every case where somebody receives less child support, it would be expected that they would receive more family tax benefit.

Senator BOYCE—Sorry. I am not criticising the program or its delivery in any way.

Dr Harmer—One of the things that will alleviate the impact on those that are perhaps considering themselves disadvantaged in this is the \$1,000 per child the government has just announced that people will get in December.

Senator BOYCE—But it will assist those whose family tax benefit was increased because of getting less income support as well. We are not talking about a similarly disadvantaged group. I am talking about this specific group who perceive themselves to be especially disadvantaged—

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—who are just receiving what everyone else is in December.

Dr Harmer—As Mr Sandison said, we are monitoring the situation. The minister has asked us to. She is committed to having a look at the details. We have to wait until the system settles down, as Mr Sandison said, to analyse whether people are making the payments et cetera. So we have probably not yet got a full or stable picture to let the government know exactly who we need to focus on, but we hope to have that in the next couple of months.

Senator BOYCE—However, I cannot help but think about analogies, for instance, to the pensioner system where people were saying that they were disadvantaged and had to wait a long time for government reaction to that. In fact, were being told for a long time that they would have to wait until at least next February to see what was going to happen.

CHAIR—Shall we move on.

Senator BOYCE—In terms of complaints or objections that you have received from paying and receiving parents for the child support, how has the balance gone? How does it split?

Mr Sandison—Because the complaints go to the Child Support Agency, I am not sure that we have that split. Human services and child support might. Sorry, are you talking about the ministerial correspondence?

Senator BOYCE—If you can do that. I was initially talking about the Centrelink figures, because I thought that would be something that would be more relevant in your area, but I am happy to put that on notice to Centrelink with some other questions I have asked them.

Mr Sandison—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Perhaps you can tell me about the ministerial correspondence. You cannot split it into paying or receiving?

Mr Sandison—Depending on what the person has written. Sometimes by the tone of the letter, obviously, you understand fully where they sit, but it is not always clear as to where they are in the system. The clearer correspondence would identify very clearly that they are a payee or payer and what their views are about the changes, but I would not say that all 395 would allow that level of clarity. We do not report on it and collect that data.

Senator BOYCE—I would have thought, by reading it, you could work out whether they were a payer or a payee.

Mr Sandison—Some become interesting letters.

Senator BOYCE—Sorry. I was not being amused by the answer. It is just that, with most of the ones that write to me, it is pretty easy to quickly work out whether they are a payer or a payee.

Mr Sandison—I could make assumptions about the split but I do not have data about the split.

Senator BOYCE—Those are my questions in the area of the Child Support Agency.

CHAIR—Are there any other Child Support questions? That concludes 3.2. We are going to go briefly back to 3.1, now that Senator Siewert and all of us have had a chance to read the briefing notes to see whether there are questions of clarification. Senator Siewert.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I would like to clarify, on this briefing paper that you gave us, who will be employing the three full-time financial counselling positions.

Ms Farrelly—The three organisations will be existing emergency relief providers that are also providing financial counselling services.

Senator SIEWERT—How many will be in Cannington and how many in the Kimberley?

Ms Farrelly—There will be three for the remainder of the financial year in Cannington.

Senator SIEWERT—Three until June next year?

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—What happens after that?

Ms Farrelly—That will be the subject of the budget process.

Mr Matthews—We have funding for 2008-09 but not beyond that at this stage.

Senator SIEWERT—It says ‘for the trial across Cannington and the Kimberley’. So will there be no counsellors there in the Kimberley?

Ms Farrelly—Sorry, I may have misled you. The three full-time positions: there will be two in the Cannington district and one in the Kimberley.

Senator SIEWERT—Where will the one in the Kimberley be based?

Ms Farrelly—It will depend on suitable agencies to provide it. As you would understand with some of these financial management services, we are working with service providers to increase their capacity. In the Cannington district, for instance, we have spoken to providers to see who is willing and able to provide the service, and we need to do the same in the Kimberley.

Senator SIEWERT—That is in Cannington?

Dr Harmer—In relation to the Kimberley, we will not know where the financial counsellor would most appropriately be placed until we have settled with the Western Australian government the location of the trial.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. I will come back to that in a minute. The two in Cannington: who are they going to be placed with?

Ms Farrelly—That selection process is still in progress. We asked for applications and they came in on the 22nd—yesterday.

Senator SIEWERT—Is that the same process that is being used for the existing emergency relief services?

Ms Farrelly—Yes. In that process, we approached eight of the existing providers and three came back with a proposal to provide financial counselling services.

Senator SIEWERT—So you approached eight for the emergency relief?

Ms Farrelly—No, I am sorry. We approached eight existing emergency relief providers to see if they were able to provide financial counselling services. The reason we approached those eight was that they were already providing state funded financial counselling services.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. So is that a different eight or the same eight that you approached for the \$90,000 for the emergency relief services?

Ms Farrelly—It is the same eight.

Senator SIEWERT—It is the same eight?

Ms Farrelly—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So eight have been approached for both the provision of the financial counselling services and the emergency services?

Ms Farrelly—The eight are part of our existing service system providing emergency relief.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Farrelly—So we only approached them to provide additional services, which are financial counselling. They are already providing emergency relief.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I appreciate that. That is what I understood had been offered before that closed on the 22nd. In fact, it says here that for the \$90,000 two financial counselling positions would be offered to enhance the existing emergency relief services.

Ms Farrelly—I am sorry if that was misleading. We are enhancing the financial management service by providing additional counselling. So the enhancement is the additional counselling, not additional emergency relief.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. I am sorry, it is late and I am a bit slow, but there are two different dot points here saying two different things about resources and financial counselling. For both dot points, are the same emergency relief services being used for the two full-time financial counselling positions, plus the other two financial counselling positions?

Ms Farrelly—There are three financial counselling positions spread across Cannington and the Kimberley. There are two in Cannington.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. So the subset here—

Ms Farrelly—Yes. So we approached our existing emergency relief providers—

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. The second one is a subset. Sorry, but the way it is written makes it look as if there are two different provisions of services. So the answer that you gave me two or three hours ago still stands—that is, you are expecting financial services to be delivered in Cannington for \$90,000?

Ms Farrelly—Which I have described here as two positions.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. Could you tell me where you could find a financial counsellor for \$45,000, plus on-costs?

Dr Harmer—Remember this is for half the year by the time we finish the negotiation.

CHAIR—This is a six-month—

Dr Harmer—Six months.

Senator SIEWERT—It is for six months?

CHAIR—That is not clear in the document.

Senator SIEWERT—Are you confirming with those service providers that it is highly likely it will be rolled over?

Dr Harmer—We cannot make commitments like that before government has made a decision about the program.

Senator SIEWERT—How much are you providing for on-costs?

Ms Farrelly—The \$90,000 is for the position plus on-costs.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay.

Ms Farrelly—They already have existing infrastructure as part of their emergency relief funding. So they are already provided for service from us.

Senator SIEWERT—You know as well as I do that, for each additional person that you employ, you incur certain other costs, particularly if you are a stretched non-government organisation. Up the top, you are saying 12 months worth of funding.

Dr Harmer—It is funded until 30 June.

Senator SIEWERT—So is it \$1½ million for six months?

Ms Farrelly—The total funding is the total year's budget. So you would appreciate that, when you have the \$90,000 allocated and then it is in place six months into the year, you can get twice as many people on, which is why there are two positions mentioned. So the full-year budget is the full year. The reason this is six months is a feature of when the positions will be in place, not an attempt to mislead, Senator.

Senator SIEWERT—I will look at this overnight as well.

Ms Farrelly—There are other services being delivered, which was what we were trying to show you in the rest of the document. There are 16 emergency relief outlets in the Cannington district and 18 of those in the Kimberley. It was also to show you that there would be new money management services implemented across Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Wyndham and to give you a progress report on each of those. In the case of Broome, Derby and Fitzroy Crossing, the funding agreements have been finalised and are about to be executed. We expect those to start early December.

Senator SIEWERT—So those are going to start regardless of whether the income management process rolls out in those towns?

Ms Farrelly—Yes. You would appreciate that what we are trying to do in the remote areas with the financial management services is to build up an infrastructure and to work with providers to support them. This takes time. In addition to the existing services, for instance, we have an existing money business service in Kununurra. So this financial picture is what we are rolling out to support people in these areas. It is not making a statement about where income management goes next.

Senator SIEWERT—Interesting, because the title is, 'Expansion of new financial management services to support income management in the Kimberley region.'

Ms Farrelly—Yes, that is the budget initiative, but you would appreciate that some of these implementations have different phasings as you roll them out and, with the best will in the world—you have to try and match them as closely as you can, but in the case of this we will hopefully have a bigger range of services on the ground to support people with their financial management needs.

Senator SIEWERT—Could you take on notice what level of funding each of those services is receiving and who is providing the services?

Ms Farrelly—I can give you that now, if you would like it.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay.

Ms Farrelly—I will just have to find it. I will take it on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. If you could provide that on notice, that would be useful. Where is the emergency relief of \$55,000 going to?

Ms Farrelly—It will be distributed on a needs basis in cases where there is unmet need or increased demand. As I mentioned, there are 16 emergency relief outlets in Cannington and 18 in the Kimberley. So we will be very closely monitoring increased demand. They already have funding to meet existing demand, and we will be working very closely—

Senator SIEWERT—That is a gross overstatement, I am sorry. They do not have funding to meet existing demand. I can tell you that right now. We heard that last week when we were in Perth. So \$55,000 is not going to go very far.

Dr Harmer—We will take that as a statement, Senator.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. I thought I would correct the record. Thank you. I will look at it some more and then look at it tomorrow.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Are there any other questions in Families? Thank you to the officers. We do appreciate it. The Senate Community Affairs Committee is now suspended until tomorrow at 9 am.

Committee adjourned at 9.32 pm