



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

ESTIMATES

(Additional Estimates)

FRIDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2009

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
Friday, 27 February 2009**

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

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Adams, Arbib, Barnett, Bernardi, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Farrell, Feeney, Fielding, Fierravanti-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 Bilyk, Boyce, Brandis, Crossin, Eggleston, Hanson-Young, Humphries, Lundy, Mason, Moore, O'Brien, Payne, Scullion and Siewert

Committee met at 8.03 am

CROSS PORTFOLIO: INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

In Attendance

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

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Executive

Dr Jeff Harmer, Secretary
Ms Glenys Beauchamp, Deputy Secretary
Mr Bernie Yates, Deputy Secretary
Mr Geoff Leeper, Deputy Secretary
Mr Bruce Hunter, 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 Anthony Field, Group Manager, Legal and Compliance
Mr Steve Jennaway, Acting Group Manager, Business and Financial Services
Ms Donna Moody, Group Manager, Program Performance
Mr Matthew James, Acting Group Manager, Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination
Mr Robert Knapp, Group Manager, Corporate Support
Ms Kerrie Tim, Group Manager, Indigenous Leadership and Engagement
Ms Amanda Cattermole, Group Manager, Indigenous Remote Services Delivery

Cross Outcomes

Mr Stephen Powrie, Acting Branch Manager, Performance and Evaluation
Ms Annette Gath, Branch Manager, Indigenous Investment and Northern Territory Bilateral
Ms Alison Smith, Branch Manager, Intergovernmental and Policy

Mr Bruce Smith, Branch Manager, Intergovernmental and Policy
Major General Dave Chalmers, Northern Territory Emergency Response Operations Centre
Mr Phil Brown, Indigenous Programs Investigations
Ms Megan Lees, Branch Manager, Indigenous Housing Policy
Mr Robert Ryan, Branch Manager, Indigenous Housing Delivery
Mr Ian Boyson, Section Manager, Indigenous Housing Delivery
Mr Greg Roche, Branch Manager, Portfolio Governance
Ms Caroline Edwards, Branch Manager, Land Reform
Ms Helen Board, Branch Manager, CDEP Program Management
Ms Kari Ahmer, Branch Manager, Indigenous Economic Development and CDEP Policy
Mr Geoff Richardson, Branch Manager, Indigenous Representative Body
Ms Karen Pickering, Acting Branch Manager, Leadership Delivery
Ms Amanda Doherty, Branch Manager, Reconciliation and Repatriation
Ms Liz Stehr, Branch Manager, Money Management
Ms Janet Stodulka, Branch Manager, Safety Taskforce
Ms Linda Young, Deputy Branch Manager, Safety Taskforce
Ms Jolanta Willington, Section Manager, Safety Taskforce
Ms Elizabeth Hefren-Webb, Section Manager, Welfare Payments Reform
Ms Michelle Wilson, Section Manager, Welfare Payments Reform
Mr Ty Emerson, Branch Manager, Family Programs and Governance
Ms Fiona Smart, Branch Manager, Children's Policy
Ms Robyn Fleming, Branch Manager, Family Relationship Services
Mr Mark Warburton, Branch Manager, Paid Parental Leave Taskforce
Mr Peter Southwell, Acting Branch Manager, Family Policy Development
Mr Gavin Matthews, Branch Manager, Welfare Payments Reform
Ms Allyson Essex, Branch Manager, Children and Parenting Support
Ms Bronwyn Turner, Section Manager, Welfare Payments Reform
Mr Anthony Beven, Registrar of Indigenous Corporations

Central Land Council

Mr David Ross, Director
Mr Bruce Nystrom, General Manager
Mr David Avery, Senior Lawyer

Department of Health and Ageing**Executive**

Ms Jane Halton, Secretary
Mr Philip Davies, Deputy Secretary
Mr David Learmonth, Deputy Secretary

Portfolio Strategies Division

Ms Shirley Browne, Assistant Secretary, Ministerial and Parliamentary Support Branch
Ms Linda Powell, Assistant Secretary, Budget Branch
Mr Richard Eccles, First Assistant Secretary, Portfolio Strategies Division
Ms Jennifer Bryant, First Assistant Secretary, Population Health Division
Ms Virginia Hart, Assistant Secretary, Drug Strategy Branch
Ms Kerry Howard, Acting Director, Indigenous Programs and Psychostimulants

Ms Jennie Shortt, Director, Alcohol Programs
Ms Penny Marshall, Director, Tobacco and Drug Prevention
Ms Jennie Roe, Assistant Secretary, Chronic Disease Branch
Professor Rosemary Calder, First Assistant Secretary, Mental Health and Workforce Division
Mr Nathan Smyth, Assistant Secretary, Mental Health Reform Branch
Ms Colleen Krestensen, Assistant Secretary, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Programs Branch
Ms Lesley Podesta, First Assistant Secretary, Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
Dr Geetha Isaac-Toua, Senior Medical Adviser, Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
Ms Joy Savage, Assistant Secretary, Remote Health Services Development Branch
Mr Mark Thomann, Assistant Secretary, Policy and Budget Branch
Mr Garry Fisk, Acting Assistant Secretary, Performance and Quality Branch
Ms Alison Killen, Acting Assistant Secretary, Program and Planning Branch
Ms Tarja Saastamoinen, Acting Assistant Secretary, Family Health and Wellbeing Branch
Ms Jenny Williams, Acting National Manager, Office of Hearing Services
Ms Mary McLarty, Acting Assistant Secretary, Nursing and Allied Health Branch

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Mr Shane Hoffman, Assistant Secretary, Social Policy Division

Department of Human Services

Ms Jenny Thomson, Acting First Assistant Secretary, Families and Income Support
Ms Marie Johnson, First Assistant Secretary, Chief Technology Architect
Mr Brian Olson, Assistant Secretary, Business Projects

Centrelink—Outcome 1, Output 1.1

Ms Carolyn Hogg, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Customer Service
Ms Moya Drayton, General Manager, Education Employment and Support Programs
Ms Vicki Beath, National Manager, Education, Employment and Disability Services
Mr Peter Searston, General Manager, Remote Servicing
Ms Jo Gaha, National Manager, Indigenous Services
Mr Tom Munyard, Manager, Budget and Management Accounting Branch
Mr Graham Maloney, National Manager, Income Management Branch
Ms Natalie Howson, General Manager, Client Business Division

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

Ms Sally Basser, First Assistant Secretary, Culture Division

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Ms Lisa Paul, Secretary
Dr Michele Bruniges, Deputy Secretary
Mr Ewen McDonald, Deputy Secretary
Mr Bill Burmester, Deputy Secretary
Mr Jim Davidson, Deputy Secretary
Ms Malisa Golightly, Deputy Secretary
Mr Graham Carters, Deputy Secretary

Mr Craig Storen, Chief Finance Officer and Group Manager, Finance Group
Ms Catherine Wall, Group Manager, Early Childhood Education and Workforce Group
Ms Lois Sparkes, Acting Group Manager, Early Childhood Programs Group
Dr Carol Nicoll, Group Manager, National Education System Group
Ms Susan Smith, Group Manager, National Initiatives Group
Mr Craig Robertson, Acting Group Manager, Tertiary Skills and Productivity Group
Ms Marsha Milliken, Group Manager, Income Support and Stakeholder Group
Ms Jo Caldwell, Group Manager, General Employment Services Group
Mr Bob Harvey, Group Manager, Indigenous Group
Dr Russell Ayres, Branch Manager, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch
Dr Caroline Perkins, Branch Manager, Tertiary Collaboration and Participation
Ms Robyn Priddle, Branch Manager, Foundation Skills and Pathways
Ms Jody Hamilton, Branch Manager, Australian Employment Covenant
Ms Julie Polsen, Branch Manager, Strategic Support
Ms Mary-Anne Sakkara, Branch Manager, Indigenous Policy
Ms Jo Wood, Branch Manager, Innovation and Partnerships
Mr Stephen Goodwin, Branch Manager, Indigenous Education Program
Ms Robyn Shannon, Branch Manager, Participation Policy

Attorney-General's Department

Mr Iain Anderson, First Assistant Secretary, Territories and Native Title Division
Ms Katherine Jones, First Assistant Secretary, Indigenous Justice and Legal Assistance Division
Mr Greg Manning, Assistant Secretary, Future Acts and System Coordination Branch, Native Title Unit
Mr John Boersig PSM, Assistant Secretary, Indigenous Policy and Service Delivery Branch
Ms Amanda Davies, Assistant Secretary, Classification
Ms Helen Daniels, Assistant Secretary, Copyright Law Branch

Australian Federal Police

Assistant Commissioner Frank Prendergast, National Manager, International Deployment Group
Commander Shane Connelly, Manager Operations and Missions

Australian Crime Commission

Mr Kevin Kitson, Executive Director - Strategic Outlook and Policy
Mr Jonathan Nicholl, Head - National Indigenous Intelligence Task Force
Ms Jane Bailey, Executive Director - Organisational Services
Ms Joanne Chapman, Financial Services Manager

Commonwealth Ombudsman

Mr Ron Brent, Deputy Ombudsman

CHAIR (Senator Moore)—Good morning, everyone. I declare open this estimates hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs on cross-portfolio Indigenous issues. The committee is considering additional estimates on Indigenous issues, which, to assist the committee and portfolio departments, have been grouped on the program in a new format into themes and issues for consideration across portfolios. The committee acknowledges the assistance of FaHCSIA in the coordination of portfolios—we do appreciate

that—so that the hearing may be conducted in this manner. The committee is due to report to the Senate on 17 March 2009, and 8 April 2009 has been set as the date for the return of answers to questions taken on notice.

Under standing order 26, the committee must take all evidence in public session—although I am not sure where any public could fit in the room! This includes answers to questions on notice. Officers and senators are well versed in the privilege provisions and protections and the scope of questioning for estimates. If you need reminding, the secretariat has a copy of the usual rules applicable to estimates hearings. You know what to do with mobile phones.

I welcome Senator the Hon. Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, representing the ministers for the portfolios appearing before the committee; and officers of the portfolio departments. I do want to state the committee's appreciation for the officers' appearance today. I know there are many of you and I know that we had to contact the departments yesterday and get you in very early, so we do appreciate that. We hope it will not be standard practice. Minister, do you wish to make an opening statement?

Senator Chris Evans—No, thank you.

CHAIR—We have an agenda, so it is my intention just to work through that agenda and have senators asking questions on issues. If senators do wish to ask a question, particularly in the unusual format of this room, could you just let me know, because it is going to be issue by issue.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Chair, before we start, I wanted to indicate some concern about the fact that these hearings are terminating today at noon on the basis, I understand, that no minister can be present so that the committee can, as originally planned, have a hearing until half-past three this afternoon. I would like an explanation of that, if I may, please.

Senator Chris Evans—Certainly, Senator. In accordance with past practice, we try and organise committee hearings with the cooperation of the committee and the ministers. On this occasion, a Friday, it was very difficult for us to find a minister. I have to be on a plane at 20 past one for an engagement in Perth—I am delivering a speech—and Senator Ludwig had to go around the same time. So that is the reason. We sought the committee's cooperation; I remember doing the same for Senator Minchin and Senator Ian Campbell over the years. It is a question of trying to be cooperative and finding the right solution. I think some of us had not factored in that this committee would be looking to meet all day on the Friday and—

Senator HUMPHRIES—Who was that somebody that did not factor it in? Because the Senate did make a decision some time ago that it would dedicate today—

Senator Chris Evans—I understand that, Senator—

Senator HUMPHRIES—from nine in the morning to 3.30 in the afternoon, to dealing with Indigenous issues because of their importance in the scheme of the government's architecture and the community's interest in these issues.

Senator Chris Evans—Certainly, and I have indicated to you that we sought the committee's cooperation, as in past practice, because we had difficulties in terms of ministers' commitments on the Friday. Now, as I say, we used to make similar arrangements for ministers in the previous government if we could find a cooperative way through. That is why

I have sought the committee's assistance on this occasion. If the committee feels it needs to convene again, that is a decision for it, I guess. There are also other opportunities for the committee in its other guises to seek further briefings and other information et cetera. But, on this occasion, we did have difficulty in terms of the commitments of ministers. We apologise if that has caused some inconvenience—and we appreciate the cooperation of the committee—but that is the reason.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Chair, I appreciate the minister's difficulty but, with great respect, I do not believe that the internal arrangements for the movements of government ministers is sufficient justification for us not to proceed with a hearing that we had planned for today until half-past three in the afternoon, and I would like to move a procedural motion that the committee resolve to sit until half-past three this afternoon to hear departments in relation to Indigenous matters, as originally provided for in our program.

Senator BOYCE—I would like to second that motion, Chair.

CHAIR—Senator Humphries, in terms of this process, we need to have a private meeting. I am sorry I was not made aware of this earlier.

Senator Chris Evans—Can I make a suggestion, Madam Chair. The difficulty is we are about to waste half an hour when all the officers in, it seems, their hundreds are here. I appreciate your concerns, Senator Humphries; I am happy to have a chat to you about it to see if we can find a resolution while the hearing is on. I do remind you that these sorts of courtesies were extended to the previous government—and I suggest you have a chat to Senator Minchin and a few of the other former ministers—and I think you ought to provide some balance to that. But maybe the best thing is if we start the hearing, given we have got so many officers here, and you and I have a chat about what the way through might be, if you are seriously concerned about it. And then, if you want to call a private meeting, obviously you can.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Thank you for the suggestion, but I wish to insist on my motion being considered at the moment, please, Chair.

Senator Chris Evans—Thanks for your level of cooperation, Senator Humphries! It will be noted.

CHAIR—We will leave the room, I think. It would be entirely inappropriate to do this here. My apologies to the officers.

Proceedings suspended from 8.09 am to 8.15 am

CHAIR—The committee will resume. Minister, we will work out the arrangements for how this will happen at the break at 10.30; I do not want to delay people unnecessarily. The committee has decided that it will continue to meet from 1.30 until 3.30. We will work out the arrangements for that with statements from the opposition and from the Greens about how they wish to proceed in terms of the types of questions they will ask and the process. It is an information-gaining process and it will not put public servants in a position where they will be asked questions they should not be, and that is the decision of the committee. We will work out the procedure at 10.30, at the break.

If we could continue with proceedings now by looking at the Northern Territory emergency response. My intention is to continue working in this area until 10.30 and then see how we are going. There is a lot of interest in this area, so it may well flow on beyond that. That is our opening area. Senator Siewert.

Senator SIEWERT—I would like to start off with where we are with the expenditure on the NT intervention—under each activity item, please.

Ms Moody—As I think we probably talked about last time, on a whole-of-government level we are tracking the administered part of the expenditure against the Northern Territory emergency response but we are not tracking the departmental component. Basically, the total budget for the administered part of the Northern Territory emergency response for the year is \$272.9 million. Of that, as at the end of January, \$134 million had been expended, which is approximately 49.1 per cent of the budget.

Senator SIEWERT—How much, sorry?

Ms Moody—It is 49.1 per cent. Sorry, I do not have totals by measure but I can go through them. For the coordination measure, the annual budget was \$12.9 million in administrative expenditure, and to date \$3 million has been spent, although I might add that, against that item, which is a FaHCSIA item, there is a much higher level of commitment, so there are a series of expenditures we expect to occur in February-March. Against the education measures—you will have to pardon my rough maths at the moment—there was an annual budget of approximately \$35 million, and expenditure is \$6.5 million. Against employment and welfare reform, there is a budget of approximately \$117 million for the full year, and expenditure to date is—it would help if I had a total; I am sorry about that.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I must admit I am finding this a bit—

Dr Harmer—Senator, we will give you this in—

Ms Moody—Do you want me to give you—

Senator SIEWERT—I ask this every single estimates.

Dr Harmer—Yes, yes.

Ms Moody—I have got the—

Senator SIEWERT—We only have a very short amount of time, and I am a bit disappointed that this is not more quickly available.

Dr Harmer—We will do our best, Senator, and we will certainly confirm the figures that Ms Moody is giving you orally.

CHAIR—Ms Moody, can this document be tabled?

Ms Moody—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—It is obviously now holding up the questions that we were going to ask, because this information is not instantly available. As I said, I am extremely surprised that this is not straightaway available, given the history in this committee.

CHAIR—Senator Siewert, we will get the document copied immediately and then you will have it in front of you and it might make it easier for the flow of the questions. Is there something you can continue with until we get that information?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, sure. Of the education expenditure of \$35 million budgeted, only \$6.5 million has been spent. Is there an explanation for the fact that the amount of money being spent against that line item is quite low?

Dr Harmer—If you are going to go through the various components, what you will be doing is touching on the whole range of departments that are here. One way of doing it would be for us, as you do it, to call them up, or we could leave it until we get to that department.

Senator SIEWERT—Point taken. We will do it as the departments come up. I do not want to waste time now going back through the expenditure. I will come back to that. Going to the BasicsCard, I want to talk about what is happening with that. It should be noted here that I do want to range onto the area of Cannington, as I indicated yesterday.

Dr Harmer—The BasicsCard will involve people from FaCSIA—not very much, only on the policy side—Human Services and Centrelink.

Senator SIEWERT—I will start off with the Northern Territory and then, as I indicated, I want to ask some questions about Cannington, specifically, in Western Australia. In terms of the Northern Territory, has it been rolled out at all centres now?

Mr Searston—We are still in the process of rolling out the card. We have currently got 13,294 customers with the BasicsCard in the Northern Territory.

Senator SIEWERT—How many have we got to go?

Mr Searston—There may be a couple of thousand, but that will be a moving number for us.

Senator SIEWERT—How many people are on income management?

Mr Searston—Fifteen thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight.

Senator SIEWERT—So you have got around 2,200 to go.

Mr Searston—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Where are those people located?

Mr Searston—They are in a range of the communities. I do not have a list of them exactly in each community.

Senator SIEWERT—So for the people who have not got them yet, is it because those communities are not covered or are there other reasons?

Mr Searston—No, Senator. There may be some people who were not in the community when we went there. We have got a rolling schedule of going to these communities—

Senator SIEWERT—So it is a mixture of both?

Mr Searston—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Have you had a lot of complaint about the card? How is the card being received?

Mr Searston—We have had a range of comments about the card. The merchants have provided us with reasonably positive feedback and, in general, the feedback from a number of the communities has been positive about the card. Some people have asked questions about it—how it works—but in general the feedback has been reasonably positive.

Senator SIEWERT—Has the outage that occurred in January also occurred previously?

Mr Searston—There was an outage early on that involved the provider of the card, but the outage that occurred on the weekend around 16 January—and I think that is the one you are referring to—was different. We had not had another outage like that.

Senator SIEWERT—What caused that particular one?

Ms Johnson—Senator, there were unplanned outages intermittently over that weekend of 16 and 17 January. Those outages were caused by a hardware failure at one of the companies that provides services to the BasicsCard. That company is First Data. The nature of the hardware failure was a number of hardware components there that failed and, as a result of that failure, a number of the BasicsCard transactions during that period were not able to be processed. The replacement of the faulty hardware actually required a further planned outage between midnight and 0.47 on 18 January 2009.

Senator SIEWERT—How many people did that affect? Did it affect all the regions that have the BasicsCard?

Ms Johnson—Firstly, you previously asked a question about the nature of the breakdown, so I will answer that question first and then go to the other. The sort of breakdown is actually quite rare and the companies that support the BasicsCard are now implementing, or have implemented, a more rigorous monitoring and alerting regime around those systems that support that. The total period of the outage was 13 hours and 46 minutes over that period. It was intermittent during that time.

Senator BOYCE—Could you give us the start and finish times of those 13 hours, please.

Ms Johnson—I could provide that on notice. There was a series of minutes and then hours—

Senator BOYCE—If it was 9 pm to 9 am it was obviously not quite as critical as it would have been had it been the other way round.

Ms Johnson—There were varying periods of times and we can provide that on notice. There were 1,735 declined transactions for 829 individual cardholders to a total value of \$77,522.32 in transactions. From the close of business on 20 January 2009 Centrelink has put in a range of contingency processes, and I will pass to my colleague from Centrelink to talk about those. We have also put in place a number of contingency processes with the card provider as well.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could go through that, that would be appreciated.

Mr Searston—I think that it is important to state that Centrelink was not aware of this outage at the time. We did not become aware of it until the next morning after the outage had been resolved.

Senator SIEWERT—Did people try to get on the helpline to tell you? Did the hardware providers not know or not tell you?

Ms Johnson—We were not informed that there was the outage.

Senator SIEWERT—I cannot imagine that people with the card who had transactions declined did not actually try to tell you. I understand—and it is through media reports and a telephone call to my office—that people did try to go to a Centrelink office, which was closed. I realise that it was a weekend but apparently Centrelink offices have been open in the past on a Saturday.

Mr Searston—The main period, as I understand it, of this outage happened between 8 pm on Friday night and about a quarter to eight on Saturday morning so the Centrelink office would not have been open during that time.

Senator SIEWERT—But it would have been later in the day?

Mr Searston—On a Saturday?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Mr Searston—There was a period of time when Centrelink offices were open on a Saturday, when we were using stored value cards. But with the implementation of the BasicsCard, Centrelink did not have its office open on that Saturday. But it would not have been open at quarter to eight on the Saturday and the outage was resolved in time for business on that Saturday.

Senator SIEWERT—From the time it was fixed on the Saturday were people able to access their accounts? You said that the value of declined transactions was \$77,522. What time did it go down on Friday?

Ms Johnson—It was intermittent during that period. There were some periods when the lines were up, when the hardware was performing, and there were times when it was not. During those periods when it was not performing the transactions would not have been able to occur. So some people would have been able to do transactions and other people would not have been able to do transactions, depending on when they attempted to do their transactions.

Senator SIEWERT—What time did it start on Friday?

Ms Johnson—I will just need to go and get that detail for you.

Senator SIEWERT—From the hours that you have just said it seems as though it was overnight. That is what I took from what you just said. But \$77,000 of transactions were attempted by 829 people trying to use their card. Generally people do not do their shopping at that time—

Senator BOYCE—In Alice Springs—

Mr Searston—Senator, in Alice Springs there are some supermarkets that are open of an evening.

Senator SIEWERT—Was it just in Alice Springs this occurred?

Mr Searston—No, but I was just responding to the mention of Alice Springs, so I was just—

Senator SIEWERT—I can tell you that in Cannington none of our stores are open at that time.

Mr Searston—That is the reason, I understand, that the card was in use: there are some places like Alice Springs where the supermarkets open of an evening.

Senator Chris Evans—I think, Senator, that is a reflection on WA's trading hours!

Senator SIEWERT—Let us not go there! Okay. Can we go back to the fact that you are not informed at all—no-one tried to get on the phone and ring when their BasicsCard was not working?

Ms Johnson—Not from our provider.

Senator SIEWERT—Sorry?

Ms Johnson—There was no notification from our provider that the system was down.

Senator SIEWERT—From Centrelink.

Mr Searston—As far as I am aware, there were not large numbers of calls to our 24/7 call centre asking about the card. There was nothing out of the ordinary that would have alerted us that there was an issue here.

Senator SIEWERT—So how did you find out?

Ms Johnson—I believe that there was notification from one of the merchants who had difficulty in processing the transactions, and that was the initial way that it was realised that there was a problem. That notification went to the card provider, but there was no subsequent communication from the card provider to the department.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. Sorry, Mr Searston; I distracted you. If you could tell us now what you are doing to make sure this does not happen again.

Mr Searston—Yes. We have got a 24/7 hotline and what we have put in place with the people who work on that hotline is for them to make us aware of anything out of the ordinary in relation to BasicsCard questions so that we can get be alerted of any outages or what we think might be issues with the card. As my colleague mentioned, we have got a stronger regime, as I understand it, with the card provider where they are more alert to where the BasicsCard may not be working for a particular period of time, so that any BasicsCard trends can be quickly noted and we are aware of those. Once we are aware of them, we have a range of options if individual customers are having problems. We might be able to arrange with the customer to, say, take some money off the BasicsCard and make a payment to a store that is able to receive a payment; some people may be able to use a proportion of the other component of their funds that is paid to them; or they may be able to get support from family members or someone else. But we have got a range of options that we could go through with a particular customer to help them in that situation.

Senator SIEWERT—It is extremely difficult, though, when you turn up to a supermarket with your BasicsCard and it does not work, through no fault of your own—I am not talking about when there is not enough money on it; I am talking about when it just does not work—to go through the options that you just talked about. What happens then?

Ms Johnson—It would depend on the nature of the issue or the outage. As my colleague has just said—he went through them—there are a number of improved processes that we are going through, including communications to customers, communications to merchants and then communications from the card provider back to the department and to Centrelink. So if there was an issue anywhere in the system which meant that customers were not able to use their BasicsCards then merchants would be informed of that and Centrelink would be informed of that so that they could provide advanced communications to their customers. So there are a range of communication mechanisms there. But, again, it depends on the nature and the time of the outage. If a customer then phoned up the Centrelink call centre, further information could be provided to the customer as to how they could do their purchasing.

Senator SIEWERT—You talked about your clients, but under this process are the merchants informed? Some of the people using these cards are travelling, they do not have a phone at home and they do not get to the post every day. They are coming to town to do the big shopping and they have probably not been informed of what is going on, despite your best efforts. Are the merchants informed, did you say?

Ms Johnson—Yes, communication does go out to the merchants.

Senator SIEWERT—Under the new process, communications go out to the merchants as soon as the card does not work?

Ms Johnson—Yes. As soon as we are able to identify the cause of the issue, that information does go out to the merchants.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not worried about the cause of the issue. I am worried about the fact that the BasicsCard is down and people are trying to use it. They have a full trolley load of shopping and they are declined at the checkout. We should not be putting people in that situation. As I said, it is different if the card is declined because people do not have enough money—that is a separate issue. I am worried about people turning up at the shops and their card is declined because of an outage they did not know about. It is the fact that not only have they travelled hundreds of kilometres to get food but they also feel a great deal of embarrassment and frustration when they cannot buy their shopping, and their kids literally go hungry.

Dr Harmer—I think the officers would well understand the difficulty there. They have indicated that they have done quite a lot of things to try to avoid the situation and to provide an avenue for people to let them know about it so that they can fix it quickly. I am sure you are aware of this but I just note that, under the income quarantining, only 50 per cent of the income is on the card and, therefore, in most cases people will have access to funds that are not on the card. As I understand, only part of the quarantined money is on the card. This is a very significant and very serious issue, but there are other funds available to most people.

Senator SIEWERT—You would be as aware as I am that, in many cases, people will have spent the extra money they have got, for example, in getting into town to do their shopping. Would it be fair to say that the 50 per cent on the BasicsCard is essentially the money they use for food shopping? Other money that is quarantined is used for rent and electricity et cetera.

Ms Wilson—It is important to note that people can use their income managed funds for travel in relation to priority needs. People have been accessing their income managed funds to

travel from outlying areas to do their shopping. In fact, Katherine Taxis is now taking the BasicsCard. So there are arrangements within people's income managed funds for them to use it for travel.

Dr Harmer—While Ms Wilson has the floor, Senator Siewert you asked earlier about the locations of the BasicsCard rollout. We actually have that, and so we can give you the locations of where the BasicsCard is operating. Is that what you were asking for?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, I was. Instead of going through the list now, could that be tabled?

Dr Harmer—We can give that to you.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I appreciate that the system in Cannington has only just started, and I also found out yesterday that some people in Cannington are already on it. I appreciate why we cannot talk about numbers and things like that at the moment, but I would like to know whether the BasicsCard has been rolled out throughout the Cannington district or anywhere else in the Perth metropolitan area.

Ms Wilson—The BasicsCard was rolled out in Kununurra, Cannington and Wyndham on 24 November. I cannot speak for merchants, but that is the date when it became available for customers.

Senator SIEWERT—Kununurra and Wyndham—

Ms Wilson—Cannington was on that date of 24 November.

Senator SIEWERT—Cannington is a large area. When we are talking about it, are we talking about Cannington, the suburb, or the 39 suburbs that make up the district of Cannington?

Ms Wilson—I am just telling you that customers within the Cannington area had access from that date, but I cannot speak for when the merchants came on line. I think that is a matter for Centrelink. Is that what you are getting at?

Senator SIEWERT—I need to know where it has been rolled out in the Cannington district.

Ms Johnson—Senator, are you after the number of merchants in the Cannington area?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Johnson—I will take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—Has it just been rolled out in Cannington or can you use the BasicsCard in other areas in Perth?

Ms Johnson—If you are after the number of merchants in that particular area, I will be able to provide that on notice. I do not have it at hand at the moment.

Senator SIEWERT—Moving away from the numbers, let us say I live in the Cannington area but I do not yet know where the merchants are located. Can I go outside the borders of Cannington to use my BasicsCard, or can I only use it in the local stores?

Ms Johnson—It would depend on the merchants who are authorised.

Senator SIEWERT—Are Coles, Woolies and IGA all signed up?

Ms Johnson—I would need to find out the details of the nature of the merchants signed up in the Cannington area and whether Coles and Woolies have also enabled other stores in surrounding areas as well. It goes to whether those other stores have undertaken their staff training and so forth. I am not able to answer that specifically just at the moment.

Senator BOYCE—If I have a BasicsCard, how do I know where I can use it? What communication strategies are you employing?

Ms Johnson—Centrelink provides that information at interviews when they are providing customers with the BasicsCard. They inform them of the merchants where they can use their BasicsCard.

Mr Searston—There is a comprehensive process that we go through with a customer to talk to them about how they can use the card, if they want to change their PIN during the issue of the card and where merchants are available. For merchants there are posters and stickers that people can be aware of that identify where a store might be to use that card.

Senator BOYCE—From the time when a person firsts get the card, the number of merchants could change or increase—one hopes. How would they know about that?

Mr Searston—They can identify the stores by where the posters are displayed.

Senator BOYCE—But I have to go to a supermarket to see whether it is a supermarket where I can shop. Isn't there another way of doing it?

Mr Searston—We have tried to make sure that, where we have a BasicsCard, we have the major suppliers of food and clothing in those areas signed up. My colleague mentioned the examples of Woolworths and Coles and those types of stores. People know to use those stores.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could provide the list of merchants, that would be appreciated. Does every merchant involved put all their staff through training on the use of the BasicsCard?

Ms Johnson—All merchants that sign up for the BasicsCard are required to comply with the merchant terms and conditions. They sign on to a merchant approval process, and that merchant approval process goes to matters such as what goods cannot be sold, for example. It is then up to the individual merchants to provide training to their staff.

Senator SIEWERT—Is it required in the merchant code that all staff are trained in the use of the BasicsCard?

Ms Johnson—There is some specific training that stores such as Woolworths and Coles provide. In terms of what can and cannot be provided, the base level of training is part of the merchant terms and conditions that merchants provide, but merchants often go on to provide other specific training to their staff.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not trying to be difficult, but is it required that all staff in merchants are trained in how to use the card and how to relate to people who are using the card?

Ms Wilson—Merchants have to demonstrate in the merchant application process that they have a training strategy in place to ensure that relevant staff are trained in the use of the BasicsCard.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not trying to be difficult, but you are not answering my question. Is ‘relevant staff’ all staff who come into contact with clients with a BasicsCard, and are they trained in how to relate to people who have these cards and the terms and conditions of the card. I am greatly concerned that a person with a card may come into contact with a staff member who does not know what they are doing or how to treat people who have these cards with respect. Are all staff who come into contact with clients with a BasicsCard trained?

Ms Johnson—I am not able to say whether all staff who come into contact with customers with a BasicsCard are trained. What merchants are required to do is to provide training to staff who are in the business of actually processing purchases and transactions, so people at checkouts et cetera. That does not mean that all checkout operators are trained; it depends on the nature of the actual merchant and how they manage the various checkouts. But they are required to provide training to staff who are on the checkouts that receive customers with BasicsCards.

Senator SIEWERT—Does that mean you have the potential where you have a couple of checkouts that are the BasicsCard checkouts and you cannot turn up to any checkout with your BasicsCard? I have heard that has happened.

Ms Johnson—I am not able to answer that question. I am not sure.

Senator SIEWERT—So you cannot tell me that it does not happen.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the officer cannot tell you that, Senator. I think it stands to reason, given the nature of casualisation in a lot of the retail area, that there would be staff who were not trained. My own son when he was on the checkouts at the IGAs I suspect started within hours of arriving at the shop. Would he have been trained in it? I doubt it very much. I think we all accept that. What the officer is saying is that best endeavours are made to make sure that appropriate staff are trained. I guess we need to take on notice whether or not there is any evidence that special lanes are being used, which I think you are getting to. We can make best inquiries about that. The idea is that staff be trained to be sensitive in handling these things, but we would not give an assurance that all staff have been trained because we know that would not be the case, given the casualisation in retail. But the officer will take on notice the question about whether or not people are being directed towards one lane.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated, Minister. You said the card has been rolled out into Kununurra and Wyndham. I am aware of the announcement this week in WA that particularly the voluntary system was rolling out into a number of other towns now. How soon is the BasicsCard going to be rolled out into the other towns?

Mr Searston—I am not sure of your exact question, but we have rolled out the BasicsCard into areas in WA where these measures are being implemented—

Senator SIEWERT—I am not trying to cut you off, but I thought earlier you said Cannington and Wyndham.

Mr Searston—No, I did not, Senator.

Ms Wilson—My understanding is that the BasicsCard has been rolled out across the entire Kimberley now.

Senator SIEWERT—I definitely wrote down Kununurra and Wyndham. Maybe I misunderstood the original ones.

Ms Wilson—They were just the ones that were rolled out at the same time as Cannington.

Senator SIEWERT—So it has now been rolled out across the Kimberley.

Ms Wilson—That is right.

Senator SIEWERT—When was that?

Ms Wilson—I think completed before the 23rd, which was the date that the rest of the Kimberley went. The BasicsCard being rolled out is a preliminary to people actually being able to be referred. Like a precondition, if you like.

Senator SIEWERT—I have just seen the list. Thank you. So where it says the rollout of voluntary income and child protection measures, you can assume that the BasicsCard has been rolled out as well.

Ms Wilson—Yes.

Mr Searston—That means we have got merchants available and as a customer wants to use that card or needs to use that card we would be able to help them understand the use of the card and what merchants they needed to use in those towns.

Senator BOYCE—On future plans for the rollout of the income management plans, thank you for those figures taking us up to 23 February. What is the next tranche, for want of a better word?

Ms Wilson—We are currently fully rolled out to all of the areas where income management is to be in place in the current funding cycle, and any future expansion is a matter for government.

Senator BOYCE—In a program and policy sense, the rollout of income management and the BasicsCard is complete as far as the department has been asked to it.

Ms Wilson—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Some of these questions have come from Senator Judith Adams, who has asked for an overall assessment of the response to and success of the rollout.

Ms Johnson—Is that in relation to income management or the BasicsCard?

Senator BOYCE—Income management. Her question particularly related to child protection, but income management.

CHAIR—They are very wide questions.

Senator BOYCE—I know.

Mr Sandison—Basically, the evaluation work and assessment of the outcomes from income management is an ongoing piece of work. Funding was provided to undertake some evaluation work and follow-through but it is part of the linkages to other elements of the NTER response as well. So it is part of the overall evaluation. We do not have specific

information now. We have anecdotal evidence linked to the sale of merchandise in some of the stores in the Northern Territory and the change in behaviour in terms of fresh food being bought—things like that—and better management of money but not a full evaluation.

Senator BOYCE—So the anecdotal evidence is that money is being managed better and better food is being bought; is that what you are saying?

Mr Sandison—That is from the stores, and the supply of food in the stores has improved. But, again, it is part of an overall response, so we do not have an individual evaluation of the income management at this stage.

Senator SIEWERT—How could the Prime Minister claim yesterday that income management has been successful?

Mr Sandison—Based on that evidence.

Senator SIEWERT—Anecdotal evidence.

Mr Sandison—The information that we have in terms of the management of the money and the change—but, again, the stores are part of a broader issue for the NTER.

Senator SIEWERT—When will that evaluation be done and can we see the framework for that evaluation?

Mr Sandison—I would have to take that on notice in terms of the timeframes involved.

Senator BOYCE—But it will be a formal evaluation as part of the NTER; is that what you are saying?

Ms Wilson—That is right. Evaluative activities are underway at the moment and the Northern Territory component of income management had a baseline study in four communities where it has not started. We are now in the process of developing and finalising the evaluation plan to go back to those as well as include other things in the evaluation, such as changes in store inventories, changes in expenditure patterns—things like that. However, the timing of any release of that evaluation will be a matter for government.

Dr Harmer—Ms Wilson is saying that there is considerably more information than just the odd story. We have been collecting information. The Northern Territory Emergency Response review team looked at this issue and we are collecting a range of information. We are just not able to make it available. It is part of advice to government and the Prime Minister would have had access to a lot of the information when he made that statement.

Senator SIEWERT—So the Prime Minister can use it but none of the rest of the community can see it and evaluate it?

Dr Harmer—It will be a matter for government, as it usually is. When evaluations and work going on in this form are made available, they become part of the public record.

Ms Wilson—We have a number of pieces of information that are assisting us in knowing how things are going. They include the stores reports that are available, which we could provide to you.

Senator SIEWERT—Is there a newer one than the one from last year?

Ms Wilson—There have been two stores reports now. The first stores report was in June 2008 and the second was in November 2008. We also have government business manager surveys, which are also available publicly. They have some evidence about income management in the Northern Territory. There are also a number of submissions to the NTER Review Board's activities that have evidence in them as well.

Dr Harmer—In addition to that we have some information from a survey of stores on the expenditure patterns as a result of income management as well.

Mr James—My colleague Ms Wilson touched on this matter. The second stores post licensing monitoring report, which involves us interviewing licensed store owners, is on the internet and we are about to undertake another one of those. My colleague also mentioned the GBM survey that is also on the internet. There is a range of other information in our monitoring report as well that we released last year and the NTER review report itself collected information about changes in expenditure patterns as a result of income management.

Senator BOYCE—Does all that income management evaluation apply only to the Northern Territory or does it include Western Australia?

Ms Wilson—There is an evaluation of the Northern Territory, which I just touched on. We are also in the preliminary stages of finalising the evaluation activities to go forward into the next period for the Western Australian measures.

Dr Harmer—The Western Australian measures are just starting, really. They have not been going as long as those in the Northern Territory.

Senator BOYCE—Yes. I just wanted to satisfy myself that we were not going to base it all on the NT experience.

Dr Harmer—No. We will be looking at how it is working.

Ms Wilson—We will be working with the Western Australian government, obviously, on the child protection measure that has been rolled out in Western Australia.

Senator CROSSIN—Sometime, I think, last week or earlier this week there was an answer to a question on notice provided by the department that had a link to an evaluation report that was on your website, and that link was not functional.

Ms Wilson—I am not aware that it is not functional.

Dr Harmer—Senator, can you give us information about that, because we can remedy that quite quickly.

Senator CROSSIN—I am just talking about the link to the website. We discovered during the week that it was not functional. I will get back to you about it. I think the response from the department was that that evaluation report was due to be finalised and made public by the end of the week, so I am just wondering if that has happened.

Dr Harmer—We will check on that if you can give us the information.

Senator CROSSIN—I will find the answer to that question and get back to you in a minute. I will ask another question, about the basics card. What is the arrangement when somebody needs to travel interstate urgently, without warning?

Ms Wilson—If somebody is travelling to areas where their basics card is available then they would be able to ask Centrelink about which pensions are available.

Senator CROSSIN—No, I did not ask that.

Ms Wilson—However, Centrelink has contingency arrangements for people when they do travel. For example, some people travelled to Canberra from Alice Springs in early February. Those people were contacted by Centrelink because they had said they were travelling. Centrelink made other arrangements for them. I believe that they used the contingency of the old store card method, and then they would have been able to use the store cards here in Canberra.

Senator CROSSIN—I did not ask that, though. I asked what happens if they need to travel interstate urgently. Let us say there is a car accident in Alice Springs at 10 o'clock on Thursday night and I am airlifted to Adelaide with my son. My Centrelink payment is due on Friday and I am there in Adelaide, only being able to access half of my money. What do I do in that situation?

Ms Wilson—They would be able to call the Centrelink call centre, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That would be the first port of call; that is my understanding. Once they were in Adelaide, they would be able to engage with the Centrelink office there.

Senator CROSSIN—Are there arrangements for people in those situations to get what would be quarantined cash given to them and have some payback arrangement made?

Ms Wilson—Cash payments or unrestricted direct payments are not available to people from their income managed funds under the Northern Territory emergency response—that is part of the income management—because people have access to 50 per cent of their other funds. However, I understand that somebody in those circumstances could talk to Centrelink about an urgent payment that would bring forward their payment.

Dr Harmer—Perhaps Centrelink might have a little bit more information about this, but from my experience with Centrelink they are incredibly flexible and helpful in particular cases, such as the one you have described. If they were in Adelaide, the Centrelink office in Adelaide has a 24/7 hotline and I would be surprised if they would not very quickly work out a way of ensuring that the person had access to the funds they needed.

Mr Searston—As you have described, Centrelink would work with the customer to try and make sure they got access to funds to allow them to travel or, if they were in South Australia, we could help them with stored-value cards if they needed to buy some food or clothing. But, as described, we would need to work individually with each customer to try and find an option to help them.

Senator CROSSIN—Even if that occurred on a Saturday or Sunday, it is still possible to ring them, is it?

Mr Searston—Yes. We have arrangements whereby, if someone rang that 24/7 hotline and indicated that they needed assistance, we have officers on call to assist them with ways that they could travel or get access to stored-value cards in some other situation.

Senator SIEWERT—With regard to the assessment, we have just talked about how you are evaluating how it is being used now. I thought that the idea was to improve people's

income management skills and ideally—and I am hoping that is still the plan—to take them off income quarantining and allow them to once again manage their own money. What are you doing in terms of moving people through that system and looking at and evaluating people's skills so as to hopefully allow them to come off income quarantining so that you get permanent change? At the moment all you are doing is measuring what you are doing to people's income management, basically. What is the planning for moving people through this system and off it?

Dr Harmer—Senator, Mr Sandison can fill in the detail, but you will be aware that, at the time of the release of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Review Board report, Minister Macklin made a statement which went to replying to some of the key recommendations in that report about income management. That was that it should quickly be moved to a more voluntary arrangement and that it should certainly quickly be made compatible with the Racial Discrimination Act. The government made some statements at that time about working on that—

Senator SIEWERT—I am aware of that.

Dr Harmer—and made a commitment around the timing of that. Let me assure you that we are working extremely hard to make sure that Minister Macklin has the advice that will allow her to fulfil that commitment.

Senator SIEWERT—When are you going to meet that commitment? It was—

Dr Harmer—In spring.

Senator SIEWERT—In spring—September.

Dr Harmer—We will.

Mr Sandison—The minister said that the legislation would come in spring. The commitment was to look at the changes and look at the measure and that spring would be the time frame for the legislation and the extension of the income management would continue for a period of 12 months.

Senator SIEWERT—I am aware of that. That is not what I—

Dr Harmer—That is the intention. As we mentioned at the time—and I think the minister acknowledged this as well—it is not easy to solve that issue, but we are working on it and that is the current intention.

Senator SIEWERT—Are you going to be working with people to work out how you move people from the current system?

Dr Harmer—I think it would unwise for us to speculate on the changes that the government might decide to make consistent with the minister's statement.

Senator SIEWERT—Is it possible to get a copy of the evaluation framework that you are using to evaluate income management beyond what you have told me? You have said you are also working on an evaluation process.

Dr Harmer—Senator, would you like a document which indicates the various dimensions of our evaluation work?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, please.

Dr Harmer—We can put that together for you.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Have you tabled the figures on the total number of people who are under income management at the moment by location?

Mr Sandison—We did not have the locations. The answer was provided in terms of the numbers of people who were on income management. We do not have the table showing numbers by communities here with us.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Is it possible to obtain that?

Dr Harmer—We should be able to provide that to you on notice.

Senator HUMPHRIES—And that is for both in the Northern Territory and in other places, such as Queensland?

Dr Harmer—It should be possible to give you that information, Senator.

Mr Sandison—In relation to income management in Western Australia, in the committee hearing yesterday we noted that there are some small numbers in areas. So, with that caveat in terms of potential identification of people, we will do that.

Senator HUMPHRIES—So you would have ‘Other Western Australian’ or something like that to cover those.

Mr Sandison—Yes.

Dr Harmer—That might also be the case for the Cape York welfare reform trials because the family relationship centres in Queensland are making recommendations to Centrelink about families that should have their income quarantined. I think there are four places in Queensland that are subject to that trial and, at this stage, the numbers might be quite small in a couple of those towns as well. Subject to that, we may have to give you Queensland figures rather than those for Aurukun, Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge or whatever.

Senator SIEWERT—I am aware that housing is on the agenda separately, but I do want to go to the housing and land reform component of the intervention very quickly. How many townships have now been surveyed—has the survey process been completed?

Ms Edwards—I presume you are referring to the cadastral survey?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Ms Edwards—That was completed in full. The desktop work after that has also been completed. Some revised boundary proposals were provided to the minister. I understand that those proposed boundary reductions were approved this week, and land owners have been written to yesterday or perhaps the day before advising them of the reduced boundaries.

Senator SIEWERT—How many townships have changed in terms of control? How many of those have now been handed over in terms of the new decision-making process under the NT intervention? Have they all been handed over now?

Ms Edwards—The original 64 five-year leases provided for in the NTNER legislation are all in place. They have it in two batches: one at the time of the original legislation coming into place, and the other in February 2008. There has been no addition or changes to those since.

Senator SIEWERT—I think we will deal with housing under the separate component. One question that I do have: do all prescribed communities now have government business managers?

CHAIR—That is not a housing question.

Dr Harmer—I do not think the people at the table can answer that. They all have access to a government business manager. In some of the smaller places, particularly if they reasonably close together, I think one business manager serves two towns. I think we have got something like—and operating from memory while someone who actually knows might come to the table—60 government business managers in the 73 communities. General Chalmers will know the answer.

Senator SIEWERT—Sorry I moved on to that.

Ms Edwards—In relation to the prescribed communities, the question I presume you are asking is in relation to the 73 main communities, because obviously the prescribed areas cover a large number of other smaller communities. So I just want to be clear that your question is in relation to the 73.

Senator SIEWERT—The 73, yes.

Major Gen. Chalmers—We have 58 government business managers at the moment. As the secretary indicated, they serve 73 communities. So some serve two communities which are close together.

Senator SIEWERT—I had not written that question down, so I flipped onto that while I remembered it. I apologise.

Senator BOYCE—I have some more questions on government business managers. Is it better to put those here now?

CHAIR—Where are you up to, Senator Siewert? Are you following on with government business managers?

Senator SIEWERT—No, I was going to go back to housing.

Dr Harmer—We will do our best to manage, but—

Senator SIEWERT—It is my fault for moving onto that.

CHAIR—Do you have a series of housing questions on NT intervention or general housing?

Senator SIEWERT—NT specific.

CHAIR—Senator Payne has a clarification issue about housing. Do you wish to have that clarified now?

Senator PAYNE—Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to work out if I can where the questions about the SIHIP program, lease negotiations, housing and South Australia and housing in Queensland should go—whether they go here or elsewhere?

CHAIR—It would be my understanding that they would go in the section under housing, which is later in the day.

Senator PAYNE—Or is it in Closing the Gap, Madam Chair, under Healthy Homes?

CHAIR—My understanding would be, depending on the question. If it is particularly under Closing the Gap, it would be Healthy Homes, but general SIHIP questions would be at the end. Do you agree with that, Dr Harmer?

Dr Harmer—We can do it anywhere as long as we know it is now on housing and I can have the housing people here. If we stick to housing. Whenever we get to housing we can answer all of those.

Senator PAYNE—Accept that I might not be here towards the end of the day, but I can put those questions on notice—I have a flight which is not negotiable.

CHAIR—We are looking at the NT intervention at the moment and looking at housing to do with the NT intervention. Senator Siewert has questions on those. Then we will go back to the business managers. I do encourage people to stick to the topic. Otherwise it makes it very difficult.

Senator SIEWERT—Just to explain the flick there, it was because under this area, under housing and land reform, that was where you were building houses, as I understood it, for government business managers. That was correct, wasn't it?

Dr Harmer—It would be here you should ask questions.

Senator SIEWERT—I understood that the housing and land reform component contained the component of the NT intervention that was building houses for government business managers. That is why I asked about government business managers. Have all government business managers now got accommodation in the community they are stationed in?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I would have to take that on notice confirm exactly. As you know, we have worked through some problems with the accommodation that we built in the Top End for some of our government business managers. We have now deployed alternative demountable accommodation and that accommodation is being opened at the moment. I am just not entirely aware at the moment if all of it has been opened.

Dr Harmer—I think the answer is the vast majority, but General Chalmers rightly wants to be absolutely accurate about whether everyone.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could take that on notice, that will be appreciated. In the past in the budget you have reported against housing and land reform. In the budget you have given here, it is not presented the same way as it was in the past. Is that because you have finished that component of the intervention, the housing? As I understand it, the housing was not about providing housing for communities, it was about housing people—

Dr Harmer—Housing is a broader issue and is being described by a bilateral agreement between ourselves and the Northern Territory, which is where we get to this program et cetera.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I understood. Now that you have completed that component of the intervention, is that is why it is not appearing here now?

Ms Edwards—I am sorry I have not got those figures in front of me, but the key element of that figure that has been reported in the past I understand had to do with the cadastral survey and the vast majority of that funding was spent in the last financial year so it does not appear. I do not think there is any other major expenditure under that head under the intervention.

Dr Harmer—It was the first year of the intervention only and is now in a sense a mainstream part of the activity.

CHAIR—Does anyone else have questions on housing to do with the NT intervention? No. We will move back to government business managers.

Senator BOYCE—Major General Chalmers, you mentioned that there are 58 government business managers. All those positions are filled. Are there any unfilled positions for government business managers?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I would say firstly that there is not an establishment, as we would say in the military, for those positions. We are aiming to have about 60 government business managers. That is a value judgment on how we think communities need to be served. But we are adaptive and we change in accordance with our assessment of the needs of communities. Government business managers are moved if necessary to other communities where the need might arise. As we develop government business managers sometimes we start them in smaller communities and move them to larger communities. So it is a little bit of a moving feast. Our aim is to have about 60 government business managers and that is the level we are at at the moment.

Senator BOYCE—How long has the longest appointed government business manager been operating now?

Major Gen. Chalmers—So far we have had 14 government business managers serve their initial 12-month contract and choose not to renew. Generally that was for family reasons. The remaining government business managers, I do not have a specific figure but of the order of about 45, have served from the commencement of the program. So we have got quite a number of government business managers who are on a second 12-month contract.

Senator BOYCE—And that is how it is intended to continue, as 12-month contracts. Is that right?

Major Gen. Chalmers—That is my understanding, yes.

Senator BOYCE—How do you get to be a government business manager? What is the process?

Major Gen. Chalmers—It is a national office responsibility to recruit government business managers so it is not specifically my area. I will try and be helpful if I can, but I do not want to incorrectly advise you.

Mr Knapp—As and when there is a need, there is a special round of advertisements, and applications are sought from people interested in being government business managers.

Senator BOYCE—So you have a list, or is it a public advertisement?

Mr Knapp—It is done publicly. It is an open process for people to apply for the position of government business manager.

Dr Harmer—Because there is quite a lot of training—cultural training and all sorts of other things that we invest in for the group—if we have a number of vacancies we do them together. We recruit two or three so that we can put them through the training and development et cetera. We currently have about 60, and that is probably the right number. But, as General Chalmers said, if there are two small communities being served by two GBMs but we believe that one of those communities needs constant support, we might want to recruit another one, and we go through an open process. We are now pretty clear about the skills that are necessary for success in these jobs because we have now had 18 months experience in this. We know pretty well who will make a successful GBM.

Senator BOYCE—Who selects the successful applicant when you advertise for government business managers?

Major Gen. Chalmers—We use an independent process. A panel is established to interview and—

Senator BOYCE—Who establishes the panel, and what sorts of people are generally on the panel?

Major Gen. Chalmers—My understanding is that the panel comprises regional GBM network support managers and HR officers from national office.

Senator BOYCE—What input would a specific community have on the choice of a government business manager?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I have written to communities and advised them that it is our intention to appoint a person to the community, and I name the person and give the communities the opportunity to provide feedback. On a couple of occasions communities have come back and indicated to the operation centre that, for whatever reason, they are uncomfortable with that particular person. In those cases we have shuffled and moved the person to another community. But generally the name is unfamiliar to the community. They accept that we have appointed someone and they take that person on good faith and give them the opportunity to establish themselves in the community. That is what has happened in the vast majority of cases.

Senator BOYCE—Has that led to any problems? Have there been situations where there has been friction between the government business manager and the community?

Major Gen. Chalmers—It has been a learning experience for us, for the GBMs and for the communities as we have established the positions. There have been some occasions where there has been friction. In those cases we have looked to mediate and to mentor our GBMs to see what changes might need to be made. In a couple of cases we have moved the GBM to a different community.

Dr Harmer—We have also recruited around 20 Indigenous engagement officers to work with and support the government business managers in many of the towns. The intention of this is to help with the government's stated objective to build a more consultative relationship with the communities and to start to break down the them and us attitude that may have been

present with the initial rollout of government business managers—and that is working quite well.

Senator BOYCE—What does an engagement manager do?

Dr Harmer—They are Indigenous engagement officers. I will get General Chalmers to explain, but I think they are local people from the community who are employed to work with the government business manager and act as a liaison point. They speak the local language and they are well regarded in the town.

Senator BOYCE—So they work with the government business manager once they are appointed. They are not involved in engaging with the government business manager.

Major Gen. Chalmers—That is correct.

Dr Harmer—They work with them. We believe they will help to ensure positive and productive relations between the government business manager and the community.

Senator BOYCE—Are there intended to be 60 engagement officers?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Currently the government have funded 18 Indigenous engagement officers and that is how many we have engaged. It would be a matter for government to review that program, to assess how successful it has been and to look at whether it could be expanded.

Senator HUMPHRIES—I take it that none of the government business managers themselves are Indigenous.

Dr Harmer—Oh, yes. There are a quite few who are.

Major Gen. Chalmers—We do have quite a few Indigenous government business managers. I do not have the figure with me, but it would be of the order of perhaps 15 per cent of our government business managers who are Indigenous.

Senator HUMPHRIES—I assume that they do not work in the communities from which they come, however.

Major Gen. Chalmers—No, although we have employed government business managers in the region from which they have come.

Dr Harmer—But, for the reasons that you are implying, we are pretty careful to have a government business manager who is Indigenous not working where they come from.

Major Gen. Chalmers—Indeed, and to this point we have not had any problems in that regard.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Do you think it is clear to the communities concerned what the government business manager is there to do? I have had some reports that some communities are not clear what the GBM is there to actually do? What are they there to do? Can you give me a succinct description?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Let me answer your first question and then we can go on. There is no doubt that there will be people in communities who are not clear on what the government business manager is there to do. Regardless of our communication programs on the GBMs' engagement, clearly in large communities it is difficult for everybody to know

and, to a certain extent, people do not want to know. They do not need to; it is not important to their daily lives. GBMs make every effort, of course, to engage with a primary network of people in the community and then to extend beyond that to get to know as many people in the community as they can.

One of the reasons we started the Indigenous engagement officer program was to assist with that second tier level of engagement—that getting to know the people in the general community as opposed to the people who are in positions of power in the community. Government business managers are employed to ensure that government programs are rolled out to communities in a way which best suits the communities. They understand what government programs are available and they understand the needs of the community. Their job is to link those two things together. They also act as, let us say, traffic policemen for government officers visiting communities. For example, last week we had around 225 Commonwealth government officers visiting 73 communities—

Senator Chris Evans—Not all at once, I hope.

Major Gen. Chalmers—during the week.

Senator Chris Evans—Not as a group?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Not as one group.

Senator Chris Evans—I was just starting to worry that this was the policy approach!

Major Gen. Chalmers—At its peak we might have had some 1,200 Commonwealth officers visiting communities in a week. That is a deluge. It needs to be coordinated. We need to understand that communities have sorry business or other reasons why it is not suitable for different departments to send officers to the community. We need to understand that sometimes communities get fatigued by the number of people coming and demanding their time. The government business manager is there to provide a point of reference. It is required, through a visiting officer notification, that visitors inform the government business of their proposal to visiting. He or she then coordinates the visit with the people who need to be visited and provides advice back that, ‘Yes, the visit is suitable, the time is suitable and the people who need to be seen will be available’. It makes government business more efficient but, more importantly, it makes communities less fatigued by the number of visits that occur.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Has that been communicated in writing to the communities concerned in some way?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Indeed, we had a communication program, where the government business manager’s roles and responsibilities were outlined in a fact sheet to communities. I think, though, that the proof is in the pudding. In other words, it is not so much some words on the paper as to what government business managers do; it is the performance of those officers in communities, in building trust and in building relationships, that really is making the difference in communities.

Dr Harmer—Senator, as we get past that point—and you would be aware of this—the review board that reviewed the first 12 months of the operation were very complimentary about the role of government business managers and were quite positive about their role continuing.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Just one last question: what kind of people were they before they became GBMs—public servants?

Major Gen. Chalmers—We have a range of backgrounds and skill sets. They are mainly public servants, because we are looking in the first instance for people who understand government business and who can manage and monitor government business in communities. As we established the program, we particularly recruited people who had good understanding of communities, who had worked in communities before and who were very comfortable working in communities. As Mr Knapp indicated, we now advertise widely. We had a hundred applicants for our last recruiting round. These are people who have a range of skills.

Dr Harmer—When we talk about public servants, we are talking about the broader public service, including state, police, military—the wider public sector.

Senator SIEWERT—In the expenditure statement it says government business managers and just has an amount; it does not say what has been spent year to date. Is there a reason for that?

Ms Moody—This is only the administrative expenditure and does not cover the department's departmental costs. We are not tracking at a whole-of-government level the departmental costs for this financial year but are only tracking the administered costs. Because GBMs are employees of the department, they are covered in the department's departmental budget, so that is not included in these numbers.

Senator SIEWERT—There is an amount here of \$36.5 million, but it does not then have it in the actual expenditure.

Ms Moody—I can give you that number. The first tables on this page that show the actual expenditure do not include the departmental expenditure—that is, the departments' own running costs—of any of the departments involved in the NTER. Government business managers are considered to be part of FaHCSIA's own running costs. But I can give that to you.

Dr Harmer—Are you looking for the cost of the government business managers up to date?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Dr Harmer—We can give you that.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay, but Ms Moody has raised a further question for me. It says the total expenditure is \$459.9 million. So government business managers total cost is included in that.

Ms Moody—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I am confused about you saying it is part of the departmental cost when it is listed against the NT intervention.

Ms Moody—In the first two columns of this particular table we are tracking year-to-date expenditure. If you look at the column titled YTD, year-to-date, administrative expenditure, that does not include departmental expenditure of the individual agencies. It only includes

money that the department is, for instance, providing to the non-government sector or other governments.

Senator SIEWERT—But that departmental budget is still allocated against intervention.

Ms Moody—Yes, but this particular report does not show that. I can give you the GBM part of that separately.

Senator SIEWERT—So you are saying, ‘We can track how much the department spends on the NT intervention but we cannot give it to you as a running total.’

Ms Moody—Across the various agencies that have departmental expenditure, we are not tracking that at a whole-of-government level. This is a whole-of-government report. I can give you a separate FaHCSIA one where it would be tracked.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be very much appreciated.

Ms Moody—I will take that on notice.

Dr Harmer—We can do that. Each department would be able to give you that figure for their expenditure in terms of their admin funds for the Northern Territory intervention.

Senator SIEWERT—But the bottom line is the total budget allocation for GBMs is \$36.5 million against this budget, regardless of where it is spent.

Ms Moody—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for clearing that up.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Just on that point: if you are saying that you can provide the FACSIA figures for departmental costs associated with the intervention, I ask the minister whether we can have figures for the other departments as well. I do not want to have to wait for each department to come up today to ask them the same question. Can we have, for each of the departments, the total departmental expenditure which is involved in the intervention? Can we have figures for the same description as FACSIA is about to provide?

Ms Moody—We should be able to do that, the only caveat I would put on that is that, in the first year of the intervention, because we were operating on a financial regime that was a no-win, no-loss requirement, every dollar that we spent on NTER was very carefully put into a separate bucket.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Are you talking about FACSIA now?

Ms Moody—No, I am talking about across the agencies. We did the original money in some degree of ‘what would we need’ or ‘not sure’ so we had a no-win, no-loss. So everything had to be accounted for. In the current financial year the departmental component of the NTER spend is being managed, I guess, in a more normal way. So while most agencies will have major parts of it recorded specifically as Northern Territory Emergency Response there will be some elements that they have just blended into ‘I am providing this service across a range of measures including the NTER.’ We will do our best to get it.

Dr Harmer—What Ms Moody is saying is that it will not be an easy task for some of the departments that have a relatively limited role and are now operating, in terms of their

interaction with the Northern Territory communities, in a standard way. It will not be so easy to get those figures, but we will do our best.

Senator HUMPHRIES—You are saying that you cannot precisely quantify how much is being spent in the Northern Territory?

Dr Harmer—We can get pretty close. The amounts for the departments that are relatively small operators in this will be relatively small so we will be pretty close. We will do our best to get it.

Senator HUMPHRIES—In other words, we will have estimates.

Dr Harmer—Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES—On that same issue: do you have figures for the number of staff that are committed to the NT intervention in, say, FACSIA?

Ms Moody—We answered a question on notice about that last time.

Senator HUMPHRIES—If you have answered the question, can we have an update?

Dr Harmer—We will do that. It will naturally be an estimate. It will be close. But, for example, part of my time is spent on NT as is part of Mr Knapp's time and part of the finance manager's time.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Again, an estimate is all right. Can we have that for the other departments as well?

Ms Moody—It is the full staffing figures for all agencies. We will go out and coordinate with other departments but it does contain an element of estimate. At October it was 155 for FACSIA and I would expect it has gone up a little bit since then because of the Indigenous engagement officers. I do not think they were on board in October. Other than that, I would expect it to be relatively stable.

Senator SIEWERT—While we have Ms Moody here—and I apologise for going back—I have a question. A figure is listed in the expenditure statement under employment and welfare reform. There is a component there which says 'NTER flexible funding special account' and it shows \$68 million is being expended. What was that for?

Ms Moody—As part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response and changes to CDEP, a special account was created by the Commonwealth to fund the conversion of what should be government funded services to make them not CDEP positions but real jobs. It is that money. It says that it is fully expended. That means that we have moved it into the special account where it is now being used to fund those positions.

Senator SIEWERT—What happens to those positions into the future? You have \$68 million there now, and it is really good that we are converting those into full-time jobs. What happens once those are converted? Do the agencies then put it into their budget? Once it is converted, does it then become normal agency expenditure?

Dr Harmer—It becomes part of each agency's expenditure.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for clarifying that. I would like to follow up on Senator Humphries's question about these other areas of departmental expenditure. All of those that are blanked out on here at the moment will be picked up under that?

Ms Moody—Yes.

[9.34 am]

CHAIR—We will now move on to law and order.

Senator SIEWERT—How many people have now been charged with any offences relating to child abuse?

Dr Harmer—I doubt whether we have that information. It would be a Northern Territory police matter.

Ms Moody—I am aware that that question was asked of the AFP earlier in the week and I think the commissioner undertook to get some information from the Northern Territory police concerning that.

Mr Prendergast—In response to that question in relation to the child abuse task force, I understand that there have been 37 arrests and three summons. I do not have information on convictions at the moment.

Senator SIEWERT—Of those arrested, how many for underage related offences?

Mr Prendergast—I will have to take that question on notice but I understand it is the bulk of them given the nature of the work—

Senator SIEWERT—Sorry, I should correct that question: I meant where the people who are charged are under age.

Mr Prendergast—I will take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—Over what period of time were those arrests made? Is that over the whole period of the intervention?

Mr Prendergast—That is correct.

Senator SIEWERT—Are you able to break that down into how many are Indigenous and how many are non-Indigenous?

Mr Prendergast—I will take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—How many communities now have a police presence? I realise it is the Northern Territory police that are there and not the AFP.

Major Gen. Chalmers—There are 18 new watch-houses opened as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. There were 15 police presences in the 73 communities before the Northern Territory Emergency Response. So now there is a total of 33 police presences. Of course, as you are well aware there is always a tricky area in that the remaining communities are served by visiting presence and that visiting presence can be quite adequate if the station is nearby. As distance becomes a problem, communities are less well served. That is why we have opened new stations.

Senator BOYCE—'Police presence' means individual police personnel?

Major Gen. Chalmers—What I mean when I say ‘police presence’ is that a watch-house is actually established in the community and usually three police officers—although it depends on the size of the community—are permanently posted to that watch-house and live in the community.

Senator SIEWERT—There was a report towards the end of last year, and I talked about this in the Senate, of a community being raided because the police thought a gun was present. I understand that that was the Northern Territory police, but I am wondering how much liaison is going on between the AFP and the Northern Territory police around issues like those raids. Do they communicate with you before those raids are undertaken? Or with anybody else?

Mr Prendergast—I believe I recall the issue you are speaking of. That activity would be normal community policing where the police are responding to information. They do not communicate with us before that activity is undertaken. The AFP officers, in terms of the intervention, are deployed in support of the Northern Territory police and the AFP officers who are deployed operate under Northern Territory police command. While we are in ongoing liaison with the Northern Territory police in relation to the deployment our members et cetera, we do not exercise any operational control—neither should we.

Senator SIEWERT—For the AFP officers who are deployed, how many are deployed in the Northern Territory?

Mr Prendergast—At the moment we have 62 deployed.

Senator SIEWERT—And where are they deployed?

Mr Prendergast—Forty-seven of those members are deployed in 24 remote communities; seven are deployed with the CAT team in Darwin; and the remainder are based in Darwin, and that includes our contingent commander involved administrative support and training for the contingent. I have the names of the stations that they are deployed in.

Senator SIEWERT—It would be appreciated if you could table that. I do not want to take up people’s time going through the list.

Mr Prendergast—The document I have in front of me has the names of our members on it, which is perhaps not helpful. But I am happy to provide that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be fine. For want of a better word, the AFP officers essentially become Northern Territory police officers.

Mr Prendergast—That is correct. They are sworn into the Northern Territory police.

Senator SIEWERT—In effect, you are loaning them to the NT police.

Mr Prendergast—Seconding them.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Do they wear NT uniform?

Mr Prendergast—Yes. They actually undergo a conversion course at the commencement of the deployment with the Northern Territory police. They operate under Northern Territory police control.

Senator SIEWERT—How long are they deployed for?

Mr Prendergast—Generally for six months.

Senator SIEWERT—Are they rotated?

Mr Prendergast—Yes, that is correct.

Senator SIEWERT—How long are you going to have people stationed in the Northern Territory?

Mr Prendergast—As long as we are required to by government.

Dr Harmer—That is a government decision.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Last time we were told about the Australian Crime Commission's investigation that indicated that five organisations in the Northern Territory ought to be further investigated for the possession of pornography on publicly funded computers. Where does that investigation stand at the moment?

Mr Prendergast—I am not able to answer that question. Perhaps it needs to go to the Australian Crime Commission.

Dr Harmer—We have someone from the Australian Crime Commission present.

Senator HUMPHRIES—I would have thought that the actual investigation of these organisations would be conducted by the police in the Territory rather than by the Crime Commission. Am I wrong about that?

Cmdr Connelly—That is correct, Senator. It could have been allocated to a number of places in the Northern Territory. It could also be with the Joint Northern Territory AFP Crime Commission CAT team, which is the sexual assault investigations team. That allocation could be to a number of places.

Mr Kitson—The ACC does not investigate any of these matters. We are an intelligence task force and we provide the information to agencies such as the AFP and the Northern Territory police and where appropriate to FACSIA.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Then who can tell me what the current status of the investigation is?

Dr Harmer—It would be the Northern Territory police presumably.

Ms Moody—The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs undertakes the audits through correspondence with organisations within the community. A second audit was undertaken in August, and that is still being followed up. We might have to take your first question on notice.

Dr Harmer—If we can get information for you, we will.

Senator HUMPHRIES—I appreciate that there are no NT police here but it would be nice to know where that investigation stands. Obviously FACSIA has not been asked to remove any publicly funded computers from any communities at this point in time?

Ms Moody—I need to take that on notice. I will see if I can find out and come back to you later in the morning.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Ms Moody, you mentioned a second audit that the department is doing. I am aware of a second audit that ACC was doing, which was scheduled to be completed on 1 December last year. Are we talking about two separate audits?

Ms Moody—The only audit I am aware of in terms of pornography on publicly funded computers is being undertaken by the department. I am not aware of a separate activity by the Crime Commission.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Are you Mr Kitson?

Mr Kitson—Senator, I can assist there. The Crime Commission assists the department with some technical aspects of interpreting the data that is downloaded from those computers. The results of our enquiries and technical analysis are provided back to the department.

Senator HUMPHRIES—It sounds like it is the same audit. It is just passing between the two agencies.

Mr Kitson—Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Ms Moody, you said you did not know where they stood at the moment.

Ms Moody—No. I will get you some feedback on that.

Senator BOYCE—We had the earlier audit. Will there be a final and formal and public report on that audit?

Ms Moody—I am not aware of plans for one. I would probably need to take that notice.

Dr Harmer—It would be better for government. This would be part of our ongoing work and monitoring advice to government.

Senator BOYCE—But the first audit has been competed and a report has gone to government on the topic. Is that correct?

Ms Moody—I am not aware that we have made a formal report on it to government other than through normal monitoring processes.

Senator BOYCE—What was the result of that first audit then?

Ms Moody—The first audit was undertaken in June 2008. Two hundred and sixty organisations were sent a request to undertake the process and 160 organisations responded. Of those organisations, 96 did not have computers within the prescribed areas and therefore did not have an issue with it. Sixty-four organisations completed the audit. If issues were highlighted and warranted further investigation as a result of that audit, what I do not have is what then happened. The issue then is that there needs to be a further analysis to decide whether that was actually pornography. I need to get those.

Senator BOYCE—Are you able to take that on notice?

Ms Moody—I will take that on notice. I will get you that information.

Senator BOYCE—I think you mentioned that roughly 100 did not respond to your first request. Is that correct?

Ms Moody—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Was there follow-up with those organisations?

Ms Moody—There was follow-up. I can say that in the December 2008 audit the response rate was significantly improved. A smaller number of organisations were sent the correspondence about the audit in the December audit, and that is partly because of the creation of the shires—because a number of the organisations that we would have been communicating with previously would have been subsumed into the shires. You would have a better response rate when dealing with another level of government. So there was a significantly improved response rate. In fact only nine organisations have not responded and they are being followed up at the moment.

Senator BOYCE—How are they being followed up?

Ms Moody—People visiting them—for instance, our ICC staff—or GBMs might talk to people about—

Senator BOYCE—As a result of that first audit was any material seized by local police?

Ms Moody—I will have to take that on notice. I have the process here but unfortunately I do not have the result. I will get back to you on that.

Senator BOYCE—Who would have been concerned about the result? Who would be accountable for the result? It is one thing to do audits, but the process was about removing—

Ms Moody—I believe that if an issue that appeared to be pornography was identified then that would have been referred to the police in the normal course of events. But I will confirm that as well.

Senator BOYCE—So there is no-one here who can tell me?

Ms Moody—No.

Dr Harmer—It would be a police matter, presumably for the Northern Territory Police.

Senator BOYCE—Yes. But would there not have been a follow-up from the department to see that this program was actually achieving results?

Dr Harmer—If we discovered pornography through our audit and referred it to the appropriate authority we would consider that quite a successful operation, I think. That is what the intention is.

Senator BOYCE—Has there been any feedback to the department from the communities about the bans on pornographic material on computers?

Ms Moody—Not that I am aware of but I can check that with our Northern Territory office. I can take that on notice and check it.

Senator BOYCE—Has it been a good or a bad thing? What has been the view of the community?

Dr Harmer—General Chalmers may be able to shed some light on that, Senator.

Senator BOYCE—That would be good.

Major Gen. Chalmers—I cannot specifically answer your question, but I can give you some anecdotal information.

Senator BOYCE—That would be a start.

Major Gen. Chalmers—As you know, the issue of pornography is of great concern to women in communities. In particular, they are concerned about the prevalence of DVDs. They are also concerned about free-to-air type material, which many women in communities consider to be pornographic. I would say that, generally, people in communities are less concerned about publicly funded computers because most people do not access them on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, our program is designed to ensure that the use of publicly funded computers accords with government standards and values. So the program of auditing is aimed at ensuring that usage logs, filters and monitoring of computers are put in place so that people who use those computers are not offended by something they find on the computer and that other people are not using the computers to download material that they should not be downloading.

The program is in its second audit, run by the Northern Territory state office for FaHCSIA. The compliance rate is much higher for responses and the follow-ups are going through. As the information comes back to FaHCSIA's state office then they work with communities if material has been found to ensure that filters, monitoring and training occurs and that the correct usage of computers occurs, as well as passing the matter to police material if illegal material is found on the computers.

Senator BOYCE—You did mention the general ban on serious pornographic material. Would you like to comment a bit more on the feedback you have received from communities about whether there has been success in limiting the exposure of people, particularly of children, to the material?

Major Gen. Chalmers—It is a very difficult issue to gain more than just a sense. People are not comfortable in talking about this issue, particularly to me. Sue Gordon had a lot of success with women's groups and talking to women about the issue, and about the changes that they had seen as a result of the bans. It would be fair to say that changes were not occurring as fast as we would have liked. Material is banned so we have ensured, for example, that contractors coming into communities do not bring pornographic material with them. That was one source of the problem. But I could not tell you that there are now no either unrated or X rated DVDs being shown in homes. Clearly that is something that we are trying to eradicate so that children are not exposed to that material. But there is a journey in this and part of the journey is around education of people on the effects of pornography as well as just simply banning it.

Senator BOYCE—Have things changed?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I am very optimistic that we are taking the right steps in the right approach, but I cannot tell you specifically because I do not have the empirical data on this issue.

Senator BOYCE—How will we know if there has been success in this area?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I think over time we will know from women, particularly in communities, who will start to see a change in the exposure of that material and from their sense about what is happening in communities. They are the best source of information for us.

Dr Harmer—Senator, in some of these things it is hard to get scientific information. It does not mean it is not worth doing and, as General Chalmers said, you can get a sense in the community from government business managers and people who visit about the level of comfort of the women who were concerned and hearing stories about access to information.

Senator BOYCE—Would I be unfair in summarising what you have said, General Chalmers, as: the women are not yet satisfied with the rate of progress in this area?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I think that would be a fair characterisation. I think it is an area that we need to continue to work on.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you.

CHAIR—Any further questions on law and order or alcohol?

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. You will have seen the same reports as I have in the media during the week of comments on alcohol and about alcohol still being very available in communities. I am wondering about the implementation of the alcohol restrictions, how they are working, whether people are running sly grog in and what is happening about that. Is it appropriate to ask about that now?

Dr Harmer—We will have a go at it. If I am correct, the main story that was running about that was around Tennant Creek, which is not one of our prescribed communities.

Senator SIEWERT—There were comments in relation to Tennant Creek but there were also general comments about the general availability of alcohol.

Major Gen. Chalmers—Justice Riley did make general comments about the terrible scourge of alcohol and its impact on Indigenous people. Of course the Tennant Creek town camps are of concern to us. In answering your question more generally, we have made substantial moves to try and limit the supply of alcohol into communities, through prohibition and through income management, which reduces, as you know, the amount of cash available for people to spend on alcohol. Have those measures been enough? There is a lot more to do, as Justice Riley rightly pointed out. This is a terrible problem. It is not a problem that can be solved readily and easily. It needs a comprehensive solution: a solution that goes to education of people, goes to support to people who have an alcohol problem, goes to supply reduction and limitation measures, goes to grassroots-level alcohol management plans developed by communities with the support of police and other government agencies. All those measures are measures that we are working on but which are going to take a long time to have impact.

Dr Harmer—One of the other dimensions, obviously in addition to the policing and the things that General Chalmers has raised, is the income quarantining for 50 per cent of their money. That is just one of the other measures aimed at restricting the likely flow of alcohol.

Senator SIEWERT—Have there been a lot of sly groggers caught running alcohol into communities? Is that a problem?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Yes, it is a problem. I am not aware of the statistics on how many people have been caught and subsequently prosecuted. But, clearly, when communities are dry and alcohol problems occur in them then someone has run alcohol into the communities. That is an issue that the police take very seriously and do a lot of work on in order to try and intercept that alcohol coming into communities.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. In terms of rehabilitation centres, I know this is a touchy subject because, in theory, communities are supposed to be dry, but the fact is that, as you have just said, they are still not completely dry. How many rehabilitation centres are available in the NT?

Dr Harmer—I think this is a department of health issue.

Senator SIEWERT—Do you want me to do it under health outcomes? Instead of dragging people up to the table now, I will do it when we get to that.

CHAIR—This is particularly issues to do with the Northern Territory emergency response?

Senator SIEWERT—It is related.

CHAIR—We will do the rehab area when the outcome for improving child and family health comes up. Senator Boyce has some questions on alcohol.

Senator BOYCE—General Chalmers, you talked about grassroots programs around alcohol. What education programs are being run in the communities around alcohol and alcohol abuse?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I cannot answer that question; I would have to take it on notice. There may be an officer here who is able to.

Senator BOYCE—Should I leave that one till another time?

Ms Moody—I can say that we are working with the Northern Territory government on a couple of future projects in that space including, for instance, evaluating current alcohol management plans in some communities and how they work and looking to expand alcohol management planning and alcohol education capability. So there is some further work, but that does not quite answer the question about what is on the ground now. We will take it on notice.

Senator BOYCE—Who would know what is on the ground now—only the Northern Territory health department?

Dr Harmer—The Northern Territory government would have the primary responsibility for this area. But, as you know, in many of the elements of the intervention we are working very closely with them in the policing and in a lot of the other things we are doing.

Senator BOYCE—Hence my asking the question here.

Dr Harmer—We may be able to get some information, but they will be primarily responsible for that.

Senator BOYCE—Also, if you are going to ban alcohol you know that you are going to be causing problems in a community, probably not as bad as the ones that existed before but nevertheless there will be problems.

Mr Prendergast—I can advise the committee that police are generally raising these sorts of issues at community council meetings and police are also actively engaged in—

Senator BOYCE—What issues are those?

Mr Prendergast—In terms of alcohol abuse. For instance, if there is a rise in alcohol abuse in a community, that issue is being raised by police in the community council meetings in an attempt to find community solutions.

Senator BOYCE—That would apply to sly-grogging as well?

Mr Prendergast—Absolutely. As for police engagement in the schools, alcohol is an issue that police are actively engaging with children about in the schools. There are other things as well, like truancy and so on, that are being raised at that level too.

Senator BOYCE—So this is education about the dangers of alcohol abuse et cetera?

Mr Prendergast—Yes, and picking up on the issue that you need to focus on supply reduction but you also need to focus on demand reduction and there are programs in place in the schools to try to do that.

Senator BOYCE—My other question here relates to the current signage in communities about alcohol bans. What is currently done and what input do communities themselves have into that signage?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Senator, as you know, the act requires that information relating to the bans be displayed at the entrance points to communities at places like barge landings and community entrance points and highways where people are entering a prescribed area. As at 27 January there are 211 of the 227 highway and boundary signs deployed and 97 of the 137 community barge and airport signs installed.

Senator BOYCE—So there are still some signage—

Major Gen. Chalmers—There is still some to go. That has been caused by problems with engaging contractors and by wet season issues. There has been considerable interaction with communities on the signs. As you are aware, some people in communities were unhappy with the wording on the signs particularly with the word ‘pornography’ appearing on the signs. So in response to that, the signage has been changed and so the words ‘restricted material’ appear instead of pornography.

Senator BOYCE—Thank you.

Senator SIEWERT—Under that night patrol element of this component, according to the—

Dr Harmer—We will need to get the Attorney-General’s Department people for that.

Senator SIEWERT—Under the night patrol services provisions of this component of the intervention as of 31 January the expenditure was about 37.5 per cent, so we are a good way into the year. Is there a specific reason for that expenditure percentage? Communities really like the night patrol services and strongly support them so I am wondering why expenditure is down and whether there is a problem with the night patrols.

Ms Jones—In terms of the status of the night patrols, at the moment in relation to the 73 communities we currently have a 68 active night patrols. There are two night patrols at the moment that are inactive due to seasonal issues and three where we are still in consultation with the communities. The status of ‘active’ depends on the particular community and the number of days that the night patrol might be operating and the number of times that it

operates within a particular community. You may be aware that the model that was chosen to roll out the night patrols was one using the shire arrangements—

Senator SIEWERT—Yes. I want to go to that issue as well.

Ms Jones—There have been some challenges associated with that because the new shires did not come into operation until 1 July 2008. I think it is fair to say that there have been some issues both in bedding down the arrangements and in the shires building up their capacity to manage working the night patrol services. In recent months we have seen that increasingly improve and, over the last two to three months, there has been a significant increase in the level of active patrols throughout the Territory.

Senator SIEWERT—Would lack of expenditure be an indication of the problem in converting to local government running the night patrols?

Ms Jones—Yes, it is in the case of the shire arrangements. The money has gone out to the shires, but it is an issue in terms of their capacity to expend it in the first half of the year. From the reports we are getting back from the shires, that is increasingly improving.

Senator SIEWERT—So when you say that there are 68 active night patrols, those patrols might not be at the level that they were before but there is at least some level of activity; is that right?

Ms Jones—In many of the communities there are night patrol services where previously there were no services at all. In communities where there was already an active night patrol service it might be delivered in a slightly different way, because previously it might have been delivered by the local community council and there may be different staff members involved. It would vary from community to community and we would really need to answer that question on a community-by-community basis.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I am interested in. I have had some feedback about the difficulty of the changeover, and in fact I have had some quite strong concerns expressed about the changeover. Will you be doing a survey evaluation of the changeover to make sure that it is now operating smoothly and that community members are happy with the new arrangements?

Ms Jones—We have already undertaken a review of the implementation process for the night patrols under the Emergency Response. That review involved discussions with all the relevant communities as well as with the government organisations, and it was completed in December 2008. We have provided copies of that review to our night patrol service providers and to the communities, and there are a range of recommendations that we are commencing to work through. One of the key things we have been doing is having workshops with the individual communities and with night patrol service providers, and we have plans to have ongoing training sessions with the shires and the communities throughout the remainder of this year.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you.

Senator SCULLION—I have a couple of questions, and perhaps Mr Prendergast or Mr Chalmers can assist me. First of all, from my visits to many of these communities, Mr Chalmers, I have to say that your representatives and the managers of government business

have been nothing short of excellent. I think the job they are doing in the communities is outstanding. Having lived in and around the communities for over a couple of decades I have found moving through them and seeing the real changes on the ground very heartening, so thank you.

Major Gen. Chalmers—Thank you, Senator, I will pass that on to them.

Senator SCULLION—Mr Prendergast, I have put a question on notice with regard to gambling in these communities. I understand that it is a bit of a challenge in that it appears to be an accepted part of the culture in communities. I am talking about it being the culture of everybody in the community, including the police officers. That is not a slight on police officers, it is just something that has been happening for a very long time and it was too hard. I am not sure what basket it is in but it just seems to have been the case for a very long time that many people gambling with lots of money was quite okay. You did not screech to a halt in a police car and ask them what they were doing. Of course you knew what they were doing. There is what is called the casino tree. It has always been and you can always find them there.

As part of the intervention, I think we were all hoping that there would be some cultural change in some of those matters. The very reason that gambling is one of the most regulated environments in Australia is that, in an unregulated environment, there is a capacity for individuals to ensure that they end up with all of the money and a capacity for individuals from other communities to visit and take all the money from those communities, which I know you would be aware happens from time to time. That is obviously not in the interests of the changes the intervention was dealing with.

The other issue, of course, is that it is unlawful. Without alluding to any mischief from anybody, how are you dealing with this acknowledged difficult issue? There has almost been tacit assent. For 20 years police officers have walked past and said g'day, so people wonder why you are changing your mind now. I acknowledge that must be a part of the issue. You have written back to my question on notice and indicated that we are moving towards compliance. I wonder if you are able to tell me how you are doing that. Have you talked to people in the community about our intent? Is it our intent to stop this happening? I understand, and I probably agree with your approach, that you are not just running out and trying to arrest people because they have packs of cards. I acknowledge that is not the way to go. But could you give me a bit of a brief about how you are going with that, and what sorts of time lines do you anticipate for some of these changes, if any?

Assistant Commissioner Prendergast—The issue of gambling in the Northern Territory is really an issue for the Northern Territory Police. So in terms of any strategy that the AFP per se may have in place, I cannot assist you with that. Change in any community is difficult, and you are quite right that approaches to issues such as gambling need to be appropriately calibrated so you do not do more harm than good in terms of community relationships. On that point, I would really need to take the rest of the question on notice, and I am more than happy to go back to my counterparts in the Northern Territory and get some more information about the approach that they are taking.

Senator SCULLION—If you could, I would appreciate that. It is a great opportunity. I am sure the Northern Territory police force would also welcome the opportunity to have their

position put on the public record. Thank you for that. Major General Chalmers, in regard to the signage, thank you for acting on feedback from the community. I think it was very useful and timely. I am not sure what it cost—I am not interested, actually, because it was worth while.

As I drive around, there are still signs in places that I just cannot fathom, I have to say. I was driving cross-country from Beswick straight across to the Roper Highway, taking what was a shortcut but there was rain and it did not turn out to be a shortcut. But as you are leaving Goondooloo or Moroak, heading back towards the Roper, there is a sign on the property, right in the middle of nowhere, about pornography. It is a big sign. Then you go through Elsey's boundary to Roper, and the major highway that turns off and goes back to Beswick does not have a sign on it at all. So the only sign is midway, on a station.

Is it possible to have a review of where the signs are? I know some of them were put out like that in the early days, and I do not think anyone has been particularly offended by it, but it seems a bit of a nonsense sometimes when you are driving around. Again, I am sure there is no mischief, but can you review where they are positioned? I note that some of them have been moved from some of the places they were in on the highway, which I think were a bit silly. But are you having an ongoing look at the actual placing of these signs?

Major Gen. Chalmers—This is an issue that I have raised with the program manager for all those reasons. There is a legislative requirement in the first instance to place the signs in particular spots, and they are in fact placed using GPS coordinates to get them at exactly the right legally required spot—

Senator SCULLION—Even if they are in the wrong place.

Major Gen. Chalmers—but there are some common-sense issues here, Senator, that I agree with you on. The program manager has undertaken to review those locations in conjunction with communities to ensure that we have the signs in places which make sense as well as meeting the legislative requirements.

Senator SCULLION—In terms of the people who are trafficking those substances into these communities, the anecdotal information I have now is that in those areas that have become completely dry those people are obviously out of a job. They have either shifted or found some other source of employment. Is there some sort of benchmark you can give me about how that is going? Having spoken to night patrols, I know they do a great job but are dead bored. We are all pretty excited by that because it generally means we have managed to exclude alcohol and substance abuse in the community. Are there any benchmarks that you use about how many arrests are being made or how many people travel on a particular road? How can we in a less subjective way work out how the compliance regime is going to ensure that alcohol and other substances do not get to the committees?

Cmdr Connelly—It is a hard question but I think I can help. Firstly, it is going to take some time to track arrest statistics because Northern Territory Police, as most police forces, quite often takes people into protective custody. Many of those people are in protective custody because of alcohol related problems. If you were to track those statistics over the long term, you may see an improvement and you may not. One thing we have learnt in law enforcement over many years in terms of alcohol and drugs is that quite often you displace the

problem. The problem moves from point A to point B and the people who tend to use those substances will follow the supply. So it is very hard to track the displacement affects. I am sure there are many good people from the bureau of criminology who might be able to help us there. It is a long-term project, and I know that Northern Territory Police is looking at long-term strategies and the effects of the intervention, particularly in relation to alcohol and drugs, child pornography and sexual assault. NT Police is looking at all of its work and the long-term impact on that as part of its projects.

Senator SCULLION—Estimates is, as I said, an opportunity to provide through a third-party process those aspects which the Northern Territory Police think are appropriate, and obviously they have been very cooperative in all other matters of the intervention. It would be very useful if we can get a report of some of the trends. Obviously there has been a great deal of great work done. Wherever you go that is very evident. If we could have a look at some trend lines perhaps once or twice a year at estimates, we would be able to see how those issues are tracking. It used to be that a certain amount of alcohol or other substances constituted trafficking, but it is all trafficking now. Obviously there has been a pretty serious effort. I was pulled up on another little back road out of Hermannsburg. I did not get a body search—sorry, that was probably inappropriate—but they were looking for cartons and they were very serious. People used to say there is always a back road. Well, there is always a copper on the back road now—it is fantastic. I would like us to see some of that trend information so that we can judge that, yes, there are less people attempting to do this and the compliance regime is working. I acknowledge that is within the purview of the Northern Territory government and we are not necessarily asking for that, but I know of the cooperative nature of your relationship and would ask if you could perhaps provide that at the next set of estimates.

Assistant Commissioner Prendergast—We are happy to talk to Northern Territory Police about what data they have available and provide that notice.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you.

Mr James—We do a monitoring report, and our first one is on the internet. We are looking to release the next one probably around April, depending on how long it takes to get all the material. We get a lot of material from the NT Police, including material about alcohol related incidents in individual communities. We do not report the individual community data in that monitoring report but we can look at things like to what extent those incidents are happening in the places where there is extra police versus the other communities. The bottom line with the data so far is that we are seeing an increase in alcohol related incidents, but a large percentage of that is related to increased police numbers, and a significant percentage of that is reporting in the Themis communities that did not have police before. There is also an increase in alcohol related incidents because of the laws themselves making things illegal that were not before. We will try as much as we can in that monitoring report to also try and address the sorts of issues you have raised with the NT Police. The data itself is hard to interpret partly because of the issue of reporting and the way that has changed over time.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you, Mr James. I have one last question on alcohol. I do not know if I have come in on this at the right time but, Major Chalmers, could you give us a general indication of some of the strategies? I know there is a field of thought—and I happen

to share such views—that there are communities over time where you can have alcohol in very controlled circumstances. It is all about the notion of living with alcohol rather than prohibition. I would always like to think that we would be moving in that direction over a period of time after the stabilisation period has occurred. You would be aware of many incidents and areas where strong compliance and respect for that compliance because of the consequences can be socially extreme. Not being able to go to the pub in the Tiwis to have a beer for a couple of weeks is pretty extreme. Because of that, people tend to be better behaved around alcohol and there are a whole range of benefits to that. Have you started to put your mind to how the Living with Alcohol program in some of these areas may be achieved? What sort of work have you done towards that?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I think you have summarised the situation extremely well. In fact, now the Northern Territory FaHCSIA state office, the Northern Territory government and the Liquor Licensing Commission are working together with a view to developing alcohol management plans in communities. As you have said, there are some very successful programs in communities. They are grassroots programs. They are programs that have been developed and established by strong community members and Northern Territory police officers working together and they are programs that enable people to drink safely, both for themselves and for other people. Where it is appropriate and where communities feel it is appropriate then, clearly, that is a way forward. Work is now being done to build on the supply reduction measures that exist through prohibition to enable those places where community members feel it is appropriate to have access to alcohol in a responsible way to develop management plans.

Senator SCULLION—Could I put you on notice that I would like to ask about any developments in that area at further estimates. Again, I acknowledge that this is not an estimates in which we examine the activities of the Northern Territory government. The intervention is very much a partnership approach. Within their capacity to provide information on how they are going with those things, we would appreciate it. Part of the motive for my question is, whilst we do not have the exact numbers, it appears that when you want to go for a beer now you travel 300 kilometres on pretty bad roads, often in pretty bad vehicles. People in the communities are saying, ‘We are losing people and having higher rates because people have to leave the community.’ Clearly, it is something that I think will resolve a number of issues. I would be very keen to hear how we are continuing in that area. Thank you for that, Major Chalmers.

CHAIR—That concludes questions on law and order. We will now take a break and will resume with education.

Proceedings suspended from 10.23 am to 10.42 am

[10.42 am]

CHAIR—We are now returning to consideration of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. The session we are going back to now is on education.

Senator MASON—I will just go back to the last estimates hearings. Mr Harvey, you may recall that I asked a couple of questions on notice because we did not have sufficient people here. I will go back to the answers that were provided to those questions. I asked:

In relation to the Northern Territory Emergency Response, in the 12 months since the beginning of the initiative what educational outcomes have been achieved by the Indigenous school-age children?

The second question I asked was:

How do these outcomes compare to outcomes achieved in the 12 months before the Emergency Response?

In other words, I wanted to compare what utility had been made of the Commonwealth's money regarding educational outcomes. The reply I got back was:

Results from the 2008 National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) will provide common information about student performance to parents and teachers across Australia - including Indigenous students in the Northern Territory.

Mr Harvey and officers, when will that information be available? Is that available now?

Mr Harvey—The NAPLAN data is available now.

Senator MASON—And it is for 2008?

Mr Harvey—That is correct.

Senator MASON—In the next paragraph, you go on to say that:

Changes in student achievement will be able to be monitored over subsequent years on this basis to show the impact of the Northern Territory Emergency Response...

In the final paragraph, you say:

Due to changes to the national literacy and numeracy testing regimes in 2008, it is not possible to compare 2007 and 2008 educational outcomes on this basis.

In other words, you cannot compare the academic results before the intervention and post-intervention. Is that what you are saying here?

Mr Harvey—Generally, yes.

Senator MASON—You see the problem, don't you. The problem is: how does the Commonwealth parliament know that the money it has put forward has had any effect at all?

Mr Harvey—There are a range of data now available. As I said, there is the NAPLAN data. Equally, the government has set some ambitious targets in terms of closing the gap. The NT emergency response has only been running for a couple of years. There are a whole range of different issues that have impacted on Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, but now we do we have a very reliable database. That information is provided equally. The NT government produce information on attendance and enrolment, so you are starting to get, in the NT and other states across Australia, quite a good database to understand the impact.

Senator MASON—Let me get to that. The parliament will make that assessment. But you are saying that you cannot compare two sets of data. I am not very good with numbers as the minister knows; however, usually you can compare two sets of data, even if they are quite different, in terms of percentages, excellence and merit and so forth and performance. Why can't you do that and provide that to the parliament?

Mr Harvey—The NAPLAN data will provide you with reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy.

Senator MASON—But will it make a comparison?

Mr Harvey—I understand that. I was going to go on to say that you can also have data in regard to attendance and enrolment as well. We can provide that to the parliament in terms of comparisons between 2007 and 2008, but you will understand that, unless you have some trend analysis, you can have variability between collections. For example, in the NT the enrolment data is collected eight times a year and you can look at trends between preschool, primary school and secondary school. We can present that to you. You can look at attendance percentages as well.

Senator MASON—So what areas can you provide this committee with where we can make a sensible comparison between pre and post intervention educational outcomes?

Mr Harvey—We can give you the NAPLAN data, we have already had that conversation.

Senator MASON—That does not provide a comparison pre intervention. You keep saying that, but I want to be able to compare pre and post intervention.

Mr Harvey—What we can provide to you is enrolment data 2007 and 2008.

Senator MASON—What else? What educational outcomes other than enrolment can you compare?

Mr Harvey—We actually now have a very extensive and reliable database which we have never had before where you have comprehensive data on reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy across each state and you can also look at the data by metropolitan, regional—

Senator MASON—Sure, that is great, but how will you know if you are making any improvements?

Mr Harvey—You will know.

Senator MASON—From comparing pre with post. How will you know?

Mr Harvey—You will not completely know.

Senator MASON—No, exactly. That is great, isn't it? All this money, great fanfare, great goals—no question about that—but you will not know in fact whether you have been successful.

Senator Chris Evans—I think the evidence is that you will from this time forward—

Senator MASON—From this time forward, I agree but not pre.

Senator Chris Evans—No, but I think it would be fair to say that you could make a reasonable assumption about what it was the year before. It clearly would not have been a lot better. I accept your point that we will not have full information. That is one of the problems with a whole range of systems, as you understand. The officer is just telling you the facts.

Senator MASON—I accept that, but I am not happy. The Commonwealth votes money for these purposes. It cannot make a comparison of its efficacy. We have a year zero situation and then we go forward. That is fine and I accept the goals as admirable. I am not contesting that.

Senator Chris Evans—No, but measuring them is important, Senator. We all agree on that. My very strong view is that we have not made good progress in the past because we have not had enough accountability in the system. Your point is well made as well. But I think all

the officer can tell you is what he knows at year 0. What information do we have? Kampuchea keeps coming to mind, doesn't it?

Senator MASON—I was just thinking that!

Senator Chris Evans—It might be useful if the officer can tell you what we had beforehand and we can see whether that is of any value.

Senator MASON—We have attendance data and so forth. Is that right, Mr Harvey?

Mr Harvey—That is right.

Senator MASON—I think I have that already, actually.

Mr Harvey—Yes, you have. You have attendance and enrolment data. We can give you more comprehensive attendance and enrolment dates.

Senator MASON—You can? If you could provide that to the committee, that would be terrific. Can I move on. I am not happy with that. All of this money is being spent, and we cannot compare pre and post. We are in a dry gully. I think Senator Siewert earlier this morning procured a document, a cross-agency summary report as at 31 January this year. Just help me here, Mr Harvey. Under 'enhancing education' there is a total admin budget, and there is year-to-date administrative expenditure and it is zero. Why is the money for enhancing education rolling out so slowly?

Mr Carters—The enhancing education component, which has the—

Senator MASON—Do you have the same document as I do? I want to make sure you have it. Senator Siewert, I think, procured that.

Mr Carters—Yes; I have just got it now. It has year-to-date expenditure of zero. The good news is that we do expect to spend all that money. The reason there is a year-to-date expenditure of zero is that there are three components, which I will go through for you. The first one is additional classrooms. With respect to that one, there are 26 new classrooms being built; 15 of those have been completed and the other 11 are expected to be completed by June 2009. Those 26 classrooms are covered by the two years 2007-08 and 2008-09. The extra funds that this is being assessed against are for the last six of those classrooms. That is the last six of the 26.

Senator MASON—Yes, I understand.

Mr Carters—In other words, we are spending all the previous year's money before we spend the money for this one. We do expect to have all 26 done, but that will come at the end. The second one is 'accelerated literacy'. Again, we are expecting to spend those funds. We need to negotiate those funds through the NT department of education and the NT Catholic Education Office. We are in the process of doing that. We are very close to completing that.

Senator MASON—It has taken 12 months. You have not spent—

Mr Carters—Sorry. If I can finish, Senator, I will just explain what has happened.

Senator MASON—Yes, sure.

Mr Carters—We get appropriated the money on a financial year basis but the reality with these sorts of things is that it is in a calendar year—an education year—where the spend is important.

Senator MASON—I see.

Mr Carters—If we again go back to 2007-08, the contracts, if you like, were signed on that in about March 2008 for the 2008 year. In fact, a lot has been achieved through the 2008 year with the NT education department and the Catholic Education Office in the NT. We are on a similar time frame now. We are negotiating what will be signed up and agreed to for the 2009 education year, and we are expecting again to have again those signed next month. It is a similar sort of time frame. Then that money will be expended. What we have on offer—

Senator MASON—I see. Even though it is nearly March, you are saying it is not in fact relating to the financial year—that is, March, April, May, June—but relating to the calendar year and the education year.

Mr Carters—The 2009 education year, yes. So, again, in that context we are expecting to sign up on that and to expend that money before the end of the financial year. What we are negotiating with the NT Department of Education and Training is to roll out accelerated literacy over 2009 for a figure which is close to \$8 million. Do you want details of what—

Senator MASON—No, I do not. But it is now the end of February. The school year has commenced and you have not spent any money. Are we still living off the previous amount?

Mr Carters—The previous one was for the 2008 education year. This funding will be for the 2009 education year.

Senator MASON—But it is 2009 now.

Mr Harvey—There is no discontinuity in the delivery of the programs. We are just dealing with funding matters. Mr Carters is dealing with how we fund. Programs continue to get delivered.

Senator MASON—I would have expected it to have happened before the school year started, that is all. Obviously not. That is how you operate.

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Mr Carters—Ditto with the Northern Territory Catholic Education Office. There are similar arrangements in place.

Mr Harvey—We met with both the NT DEET and the Catholic Education Office late last year. We have a process in place where we meet with them on a regular basis to discuss program funding and delivery.

Senator MASON—That explains, then, the non expenditure of the funds.

Mr Carters—Yes. The third component was the quality teaching package. Again, that is a similar set-up. We negotiated that with the NT government around a similar time last year for the 2008 year.

Senator MASON—When was it last year? Did you say March?

Mr Carters—Yes. The Northern Territory Department of Education and Training we signed on 26 March. That was the accelerating literacy and the quality teaching package. The Northern Territory Catholic Education Office we signed a little later, on 3 April.

Senator MASON—So if I ask these questions in the budget estimates you will have full details of expenditure.

Mr Carters—We will indeed.

Senator MASON—Good. The second question that I put on notice last time was about enrolments and attendance. You touched on this before, Mr Harvey. My maths is not good, but you have two figures: enrolments and attendance. The most important figure, however, might not be enrolments or attendance; it might be how many children there are in that age cohort, which is a different figure. So you have how many children there actually are, how many are enrolled and how many attend. That would give a much more accurate figure of the efficacy of your programs. Do we have figures on age cohorts and how many kids there actually are?

Mr Harvey—Yes, we do.

Senator MASON—Can you make available the number of kids enrolled, as a percentage of the age cohort, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous?

Mr Harvey—Yes, we can do that. I do not have that with me.

Senator MASON—That would be very interesting because it actually changes the equation considerably.

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—You will take that on notice?

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—For what years can you provide that?

Mr Harvey—The challenge is that the data is from the 2006 census. We would to marry as much data as possible.

Senator MASON—Can you go back to 2006?

Mr Harvey—We can do the population, but at this point I cannot commit to enrolment and attendance data for 2006. But we can draw assumptions about the population and present that data, yes.

Senator MASON—But you certainly have 2007-08 and you can provide population details for 2007-08. I know the committee would be interested in that because that would give a better reflection again of what Mr Dodson and Mr Pearson have been talking about all week—that is, getting kids to school. The information the committee has before it is about attendance as a function of enrolment rather than attendance as a function of population. I think the committee would be very interested in knowing what the population stats are for Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids taken in by this program. Is that okay, then?

Mr Harvey—Yes, Senator.

Senator MASON—Do you understand why the committee would be interested in that?

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—Can I go to the review. I actually wanted to pay a tribute to the review board. Rarely do I do this, Minister—rarely do I pay a tribute—but I must pay a tribute to the review board.

Senator Chris Evans—I am sure that is not right, Senator Mason. I have found you to be very generous.

Senator MASON—I do so particularly in relation to the part of the report dealing with enhancing education. I thought it was a very honest and revealing assessment of the intervention, in particular where it states:

The Review Board believes that these comments, expressed in benign and understated government language, support the Board's assessment from its community visits that there is an education system failure in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.

That is a big statement. It is not a partisan statement at all. It talks about dysfunctionality across all political parties and across the bureaucracy. I thought it was a very honest assessment of the challenge before this parliament—before this nation, in fact.

The review report outlines that the enhancing education measure consists of five submeasures. Mr Carters, you have mentioned some of these in your answer to me before. You will have noticed that there are five listed: additional classrooms, accelerated literacy program, school nutrition program, volunteer teacher initiative and quality teaching package. They are all measures to enhance education. But they are in a sense the means but not the end. That is right, isn't it?

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—What are the ends we are trying to achieve? What are the outcomes? I have no problem with those means but what are the ends? Where are we going?

Mr Harvey—Where we are going is to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage and—

Senator MASON—But what are the benchmarks?

Mr Harvey—The benchmarks are, within a decade, halving the gap in literacy, numeracy and reading for years 3, 5 and 7. That is why this NAPLAN data is so important, because when we get a decade out we can look back at closing the gap. We know what the size of the gap is. You are right about the NT—it has the most significant challenges in closing the gap. So that is the objective, basically: closing the gap on literacy, including reading, and numeracy, and also increasing year 12 retention.

Senator MASON—That is terrific but in listing those five measures, which really are means to those ends, the review board makes assumptions and the government makes assumptions that all those particular means will mean better ends. For example, there is the assumption that the school nutrition program will have a positive outcome in relation to literacy and numeracy. That is the assumption, isn't it?

Mr Harvey—Correct.

Senator MASON—But the review board's report says on page 30:

The available evidence on the school nutritional program indicates no link with increasing school attendance.

In fact there is some evidence that schools with the nutritional program deter children from coming. I am not sure what that says, but there is some evidence to suggest that. So my problem and the issue for this committee would be: these assumptions are being made, government money is being used on a school nutritional program but there is no evidence that that is going to enhance those outcomes. That is what the review board says itself.

Mr Harvey—I understand that and we spoke to the review about these matters. The important thing is—and you have got to draw on experience in Australia and internationally—that unless children have had a solid meal in the morning and at lunch their ability to participate effectively is lower. Through these interventions, if we can ensure that they are able to concentrate effectively, you can then draw conclusions about their ability to achieve higher results.

Those nutritional programs also involve the community more broadly in the school system, which is critical as well—to get greater community involvement. They provide jobs within the community, and that is very important in terms of role models to the community. So there is a whole range. But the most important thing is that, if a young person in school has both a good breakfast and a good lunch, we know that they will more effectively participate. Complementing that with quality teaching, accelerated literacy—

Senator MASON—That presumption to me sounds totally correct. All I am suggesting is that the evidence is perhaps not there.

Mr Goodwin—I will tell you a little story about the school nutrition program. I think this will go some way towards changing your opinion.

Senator MASON—It is not my opinion; it is what the review board says.

Mr Goodwin—I was out at Nooka school last week—90 kilometres west of the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Roper River. That school has a very effective school nutrition program in operation. The classrooms are provided under the NTER and they are also running the quality teaching and accelerated literacy program—the three Commonwealth funded programs. I spoke to the principal at length about what he thought of those interventions, and he said that, combined—but especially the school nutrition program—have resulted in a massive increase in attendance at the primary school level. Before the Northern Territory intervention started, the average secondary school attendance across remote schools in the Northern Territory—and I am guessing here because I do not have my figures in front of me—was around 38 per cent and the average primary attendance was around 54 per cent. Now, at Nooka school, that principal has primary school attendance of 92 per cent, which mirrors urban schools. He credits the school nutrition program as being an absolute driver of improving that attendance.

Senator MASON—Perhaps the review board—

Mr Goodwin—The review board did make its review very early in the piece, and the school nutrition program has taken time to get up and running, especially in those northern—

Senator MASON—Did the kids have to get used to the food, did they? Was the food popular among the children? It is a serious question.

Mr Goodwin—And it is a very good question. In fact, the Nooka school has changed its day partly around the school nutrition program because it is so popular. So the kids at Nooka have a hot meal at morning recess and then they have their sandwiches, fruit and fruit juices at lunchtime—and they are supervised while eating that. I have never been to a mainly Indigenous school where the kids have been so happy, active and openly socially active. We had kids running up and introducing themselves and—

Senator MASON—It is good news and I am delighted, but I do not have much time left for questions.

Mr Goodwin—It is a really good news story. And those stories are replicated around other schools in the Territory as well.

Senator Chris Evans—Before we go on, I would like to add that being fed rather than not being fed is far preferable, even if the food is regarded as healthy and not perhaps what they want.

Senator MASON—For you and I both, Minister.

Senator SIEWERT—While we are on nutrition, can I just ask why expenditure to the end of January is only 31.8 per cent?

Mr Carters—The school nutrition program is paid twice yearly and the next payment is not until April. On that basis, there will be significantly more money expended in the next couple of months.

Senator SIEWERT—So you are reimbursing the money?

Mr Carters—The first amount is sort of a sign-on amount and then there is a second component mid-way through the year—so that will put it up. We do expect that all that money will be expended. There are also funds as part of that. It can be for old equipment, such as whitegoods, tables and chairs and all those sorts of things. All that expenditure is included there as well.

Senator MASON—I did hear what Mr Goodwin said, and it is a great story. But if you look at the statistics provided by you, Mr Harvey and Mr Carters, enrolments and indeed attendance—attendance is a function of enrolments—for Indigenous children have actually dropped between 2007 and 2008. These are statistics that you provided. They are just up in provincial areas, by 0.2, and then down by 0.6—that is right, isn't it? It has dropped. And in very remote areas it is down 4.6 per cent. I am not suggesting that the story you are telling me is incorrect, Mr Goodwin; I am saying that the facts are sometimes harsh. It is not a go at anyone, but the parliament has to know that the money it is voting for these exercises is working, and the statistics, the information provided by the department, do not bear that out—or it does not bear it out yet.

Mr Harvey—That is true.

Senator MASON—These are early days. I accept that.

Mr Harvey—Your point is very correct, Senator. These are early days, as we say.

Senator MASON—It is not a good start, is it?

Mr Harvey—Is not a bad start. Mr Goodwin talked about very good examples. We know from international experience that if we are feeding the kids we will get better results. We just have to be optimistic that these strategies will come together and we will see over the next couple of years increased attendance and enrolment—and better results as well. Also, there is a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in terms of attendance and enrolment. The sorts of measures that we just talked about, if we again look at international experience, will contribute to achieving better attendance and enrolment.

Senator MASON—But you only have to look, don't you, Mr Harvey, at those figures that you provided me?

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—Look at the very remote Indigenous children: 63 per cent attendance in 2007 down to 58.9 in 2008. That is not much better than one in two kids attending school. Mr Dodson's and Mr Pearson's—and indeed the government's—objectives are great, but they are going to be hard to fulfil, aren't they?

Mr Harvey—Yes.

Senator MASON—It is not, Mr Goodwin, that I am in any sense cynical about what you say, but I remain to be convinced about the utility. I just hope that it all does work out in the end, Mr Harvey.

Senator SIEWERT—Can I ask about safe houses? I would like an update as to where we are and how many are now operating.

Ms Smart—As at the end of February, eight safe houses had commenced operation. These are in Nooka—there are two in Nooka; Peppimenarti; Lajamanu; Nguuu, which has two; Apatula; and Kalkarindji. I will just add that the remaining safe houses are due to open, we are advised at this point, by April.

Senator SIEWERT—So there are now 16, as we discussed?

Ms Smart—There are 22 safe houses in what is now 15 communities. In one of the communities there were difficulties getting agreement on land for the safe house to be located on, so it was moved to a community 20 kilometres away, and there were two in that community. So there are still the same number of safe houses, but one has been moved. So it is 15 communities.

Senator SIEWERT—Are the 22 safe houses all the new safe houses?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So eight have started?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—And the rest—the other 14—are going to open by the end of April?

Ms Smart—April is what we are advised, yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Has the safe house in Yuendumu opened yet? That was not included in your list.

Ms Smart—No, it has not, and I do not have a date for that opening at this time.

Senator SIEWERT—As I understand it, there are some issues with the one in Yuendumu—is that correct? I have been told that people do not want to use that one because of its location. It was near where somebody unfortunately passed away.

Ms Smart—I am not aware of that. I would have to take that on notice and come back to.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could let us know how that issue has been resolved that would be appreciated. Can I assume, therefore, that all these safe houses are now clear to be used in terms of the issues related to chemicals and air quality?

Ms Smart—Yes. The Northern Territory Chief Medical Officer gave clearance, I understand, in January for the occupation of all the safe houses.

Senator SIEWERT—Is the delay opening further ones due to accessing staff?

Ms Smart—It is for a number of reasons. One is to do with recruitment and training of staff. Another is weather conditions, as you would be aware at this time of year. And another relates to particular events or cultural activities that may be occurring in a community which makes it inappropriate to open at that particular time.

Senator SIEWERT—Have all the safe houses that were planned to be built under the intervention now been built?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—I now have some questions around expenditure on some of the programs. The family support package at the moment has \$9.5 million against it with no moneys expended against it. I am sure that is not the case, so could you fill us in on what is happening there?

Ms Smart—The bulk of those monies go to the Northern Territory government. At this point in time, I understand that \$5.71 million has been paid this financial year.

Senator SIEWERT—That has gone to the NT?

Ms Smart—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—Why has that not appeared?

Ms Smart—I am not certain of the answer to that. I could take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be appreciated. What are the NT government doing about reporting against that? Have they started rolling out that program?

Ms Smart—The program, as you are aware, consists of the three elements which commenced last financial year: safe houses, which last year largely involved construction; mobile child protection team, which commenced last year; and remote Aboriginal family and community workers, which also commenced last year. At last estimates, we had not concluded the agreement with the NT government at that point, so it was a little more difficult for me to give you that information. The agreement that we have now concluded with them has a series of milestones and we pay on them attaining those of milestones. In the first instance, from memory, in January it was around the sign-off and total completion, and any retro fit that was required due to air quality of the safe houses, as I understand it, has now been achieved. Some

of those funds are clearly pointed toward the mobile child protection team and to promote workers, and so those funds have been released as well.

Senator SIEWERT—The early childhood program has had only a small amount of money allocated. Where are we with that?

Ms Essex—There is a range of early childhood programs under the NTER. There are five playgroups—two intensive playgroups and three locational supported playgroups. And there are four other programs in that. Funding agreements have been entered into with agencies to deliver those services, and they are being delivered. I understand that the discrepancy in the funding amounts is related to the fact that milestone payments are made progressively throughout the year. I will take on notice the exact amount of expenditure to date for you, so that we can give you some clarity around that.

Senator SIEWERT—I would appreciate that. I cannot remember off the top of my head where the playgroups are. Have you provided that on notice before?

Ms Essex—Yes, but I can provide it to you again.

Senator SIEWERT—If you could that would be appreciated.

Ms Essex—There is an intensive playgroup in Katherine and at Tennant Creek, and there are locationally supported playgroups at Milingimbi, Numbulwar and Yuendumu.

Senator SIEWERT—Are they being well used? Are a number of people using those services?

Ms Essex—I do not have with me the details of the number of families but I could take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I would like to know what the take-up rate is.

Ms Essex—My understanding is that the take-up is good and that we are pleased with the take-up rate, but I will get detailed numbers for you.

Senator SIEWERT—How are they then integrating with the schools, with kids moving from the playgroups into the school system?

Ms Essex—The playgroup model is around engaging parents in the program. These are supported models, which means that there is a family worker. The exact mechanism of interaction with a school in a particular location is a function of both that community and the relationships that worker has. I would like to take on notice the exact mechanism that is used in each community. We could come back to you with that.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you.

CHAIR—We will now look at child and family health as it relates to the NTER.

Senator SIEWERT—The first obvious question is: how many kids have now been checked and how many have been followed up?

Ms Podesta—As of December 2008, there were 12,943 child health checks undertaken, which is approximately 72 per cent coverage of all of the children in the prescribed communities.

Senator SIEWERT—And that is their first check?

Ms Podesta—That is the child health check, which establishes the baseline of their health condition, identifies where children are in terms of growth and developmental milestones and identifies if they need to have further treatment.

Senator SIEWERT—How many now have received their follow-up check for issues that are identified through the first check?

Ms Savage—The number that Ms Podesta has provided is actually of current child health checks—that is, child health checks that are part of the current action plan to which follow-up is being provided by way of clarification. Regarding follow-up, we have data available from a preliminary report that was published in December and is available on our website. We know that 81 per cent of those children who were referred for primary health care have in fact received at least one primary health care follow-up. We have figures also for the other areas of referral if you would like those.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes please.

Ms Savage—Forty-one per cent of 785 children referred to a paediatrician have been seen; 41 per cent of 812 children referred to an ENT specialist have been seen; 49 per cent of 603 children referred for tympanometry and audiometry have been seen; and 24 per cent of 2,500 children referred for dental have been seen. That data is of 6,752 children. As you are aware, we have just provided the number of total child health checks, so this is an analysis that obviously can pick up only the data that we have available. There are some time lags between service being provided and the data being deposited, if you like—

Ms Podesta—By the health service provider.

Ms Savage—and analysed.

Ms Podesta—We published in May the number of children and the types of conditions. In December we published the first analysis of the follow-up, the types of conditions, treatment pathways for those children, how they were going and some of the new challenges. We will continue to publish on a regular basis the de-identified data arising from the analysis of the child health checks. From our point of view it is a key accountability process and a commitment that we made to the partners—the Northern Territory government and the Aboriginal community controlled sector—when we commenced doing the child health checks that we would be very open about what was found and what was needed to be done. It is part of the reason why the significant change in primary health care is taking place in the Northern Territory and remote services—partially in response to a better understanding of the types of conditions that children have and the types of services that primary health care needs to be able to deliver.

Ms Savage—That is the latest data we have to the 16 January, so it is actually an update on the published data from December.

Senator SIEWERT—That is appreciated, thank you. You have said that 72 per cent of the population in the prescribed communities have been seen.

Ms Podesta—At least once.

Senator SIEWERT—What are the plans for the other 28 per cent?

Ms Savage—Of the data that has been analysed, 81 per cent of those children who have been referred to primary health care have been seen. In terms of child health checks, they continue to be available by the service provider on an annual basis or as required. Follow-up services, primary health care, and some of the secondary and tertiary services continue to be available and we continue to collect data on the extent to which that follow-up service has been provided.

Ms Podesta—A chart review of the child is undertaken by their healthcare provider, and there have been additional resources provided to the healthcare services to give them the capacity to undertake that. There are, in most cases, additional nurses who are undertaking that role, and they follow up with the children, with families, and they make sure that those services are available. You will appreciate, Senator, that we cannot compel people to bring their people back, so there is a component of working with families and children. People move around. But there is now a very strong system at the primary health care service level to enable the service to follow up through chart reviews and follow up with children and families. But I have to say that there is now a very comprehensive capacity to do so. The doctors and the treating nurses are very committed to making sure they follow through with those children. Certainly, from our point of view, the additional resources are being made available to the services to give them that capacity to do so.

Senator SIEWERT—I may have misunderstood the figures that you first gave me, Ms Podesta, in terms of the number of children in communities that have been seen. You said 72 per cent of children have had a preliminary health check—is that correct?

Ms Podesta—I apologise. Of the number of child health care checks conducted, 72 per cent of the population have had a child health check.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, that is what I thought.

Ms Podesta—Additional resources have been made available to primary health care services to provide child health checks to children, if the children and families want them. It is not mandatory, there is no compulsion, but there has been an educational process to encourage people. We have to say that a 72 per cent coverage for a voluntary check is almost unprecedented. It is a very, very, very high rate of presentation by people to have a check. In public health terms it is a very big effort and achievement.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. Thank you.

Senator SCULLION—Of that remaining 28 per cent, do you have a targeted program to ensure at least one presentation, given some of the motives behind intervention, particularly with children and the protection of children? I would certainly have some concerns that 28 per cent of a targeted demographic which we were trying to help does not have a presentation. I am not alluding to any mischief within that demographic, but do you have a targeted program at that 28 per cent to ensure that, at some stage in the future, we can have 100 per cent who have had some presentation and can get access to some of the primary health care that the others are having?

Ms Savage—I guess what does remain available to services is access to MBS item 708, which is the child health check, which preceded the NTER. In fact, that child health check was provided in a very rapid, major organised way in the first year. Services continue to be

able to access that. We have also provided funding to all primary health care services to increase their primary health care capacity and their ability to organise population health programs—that is, to actually audit the children within their clinics to see those who have not had child health checks and proactively follow those up and encourage them to have a child health check. So in some senses the services continue. We used to have daily uptakes on the numbers; now we get them monthly. Primarily that is through MBS.

Ms Podesta—There is a range of new initiatives. Under the recent Indigenous early childhood national partnership agreement there is a significant new focus on incentives to encourage Indigenous women or women pregnant with and Indigenous child to have a first trimester visit and to have more continuous care through their pregnancy. We are working very closely to ensure—and there has been an expansion through New Directions—of maternal and child health services. So there is a real effort and focus put within the primary health care services to reach out to make the linkages with mothers before their child is born and to encourage them to come back and use the service.

As Ms Savage explained, the significant improvement and reforms that are happening in primary health care services, which is essentially around regionalisation so services can provide a much broader spread of services now under the one roof—but delivered at different places—means that they will have much more comprehensive population health registers to be able to more comprehensively note where the children live, be able to visit and be able to follow up so that the suite of things such as immunisation is followed through. That is an important place to be able to make contact with children. There are incentives for families and there are incentives for health services to make sure the children have their immunisation. It is a good time during immunisation, if the child has not had a health check, to encourage mum or dad or grandma to also bring the child in for a more general health check. So there is certainly a range of communication and incentives at the health service level and that the population level and that the family level to encourage family. These things do not happen overnight, but this is a very significant platform on which to build.

Senator SCULLION—Ms Podesta, it sounds like it is a golden age in the future of health in Indigenous communities—

Ms Podesta—In the Northern Territory, you might well say that.

Senator SCULLION—That is fantastic. But many of the initiatives you are talking about will not capture of the demographic I am talking about: the 28 per cent of children who were not presented. They were not presented in an environment of a highly publicised, highly discussed campaign where across most communities 70 per cent of people came along. Clearly, under those circumstances, it does not matter what sort of initiatives are available or what sort of communications are available, it would seem to me to be extremely likely that the same 28 per cent will miss out for whatever reason. Perhaps, Ms Savage, you could enlighten me again. You made the statement that we are being more proactive about those 28 per cent. The first question is: do you know who they are? Secondly, what are you doing to ensure that at some stage we can say that not only do we have these wonderful plans in place for the future and the unborn and soon-to-be-born children in these communities but we also have dealt with this demographic so we know that 100 per cent of the people have in fact had the check, which was part of the motivation for the whole intervention?

Ms Savage—The actual coverage rate at a community level varies quite significantly. In some communities 100 per cent showed up for child health checks and in other communities it was not as high. I do not have information for each community. What I can tell you is that at a service level, a clinic level, where they have a child population register—in other words, a database or even a paper system—

Senator SCULLION—So how many communities wouldn't have that?

Ms Savage—All of them would have it; they may have varying systems. The point is that they would know the children that usually reside in their community. Is the data available to reconcile those who have had child health checks and those who have not had them? At the service level, yes. It is an ongoing and normal part of the practice of a primary healthcare service when trying to provide not just acute care for emergencies that occur but also the preventative primary health care, to assess how many children are on their register and how many have had child health checks. Programs like the one that Ms Podesta explained provide that more intensively and direct it to the attention of individuals and families, so that you are assisting to facilitate that individual and/or family's connection with the health service. The ones you are talking about that are perhaps more at risk—though not necessarily at risk—are those who usually do not access a health service, those that are not regular users of a health service. Possibly they move a lot as well, so there is a bit of tracking that needs to be done.

Senator SCULLION—I can see by the structure part of the reason for the disconnect. It is a matter of: they are on my list but they are not in my community and they are not here so I cannot do anything about it. They are not on the list in the community that they are in either, so that can be the reason. So is there someone who gets out of bed in your organisation every day and says, 'Here is the list of the 28 per cent. They are not here; where would they be?' In most Indigenous communities if they are registered to be in a community and they are not there, there will be people in the community who will tell you exactly where they are. It is an onerous task, but is there someone currently dealing with the 28 per cent demographic to ensure that they at least have had the opportunity? Often there are very complex circumstances surrounding presentation. Perhaps mum might not be looking after them or perhaps aunty is looking after them. I am not sure of the exact number or how many 28 per cent is, but I would have thought it would have been absolutely essential that we have some coordinating role across communities to ameliorate the circumstances that could well be there because of the process of identification with one community and not another.

Ms Podesta—You describe what is of course the complex environment in which health services operate. No, there is no one person assigned within the Australian government who looks after the follow-through of individual children. That is not our role.

Senator SCULLION—Whose role is that?

Ms Podesta—It is the role of their primary healthcare service to reach out and build a relationship between the parents and the child and their health service.

Senator SCULLION—But if they do not belong in that community, can you see the point—

Ms Podesta—The health service cannot prescribe or require services to be made available to people who do not wish to use them. However, Senator, this is an issue that is clearly of

importance to all governments. As part of the Council of Australian Governments' work in the national partnership agreement on Indigenous health, there is a commitment—and the Northern Territory government in fact initiated this project—to identify those children who have a high contact with different parts of government and to improve and coordinate better the information flow between different parts of government and health to ensure that children who because of the circumstances of their lives may fall through the cracks in different ways, are able to be followed through and that there is better case management of those children and their families. Part of the reform under the Council of Australian Governments—and it is called Making Health Everyone's Business—is to bring together those parts of the system that have contact with children where their families might not at this stage have a relationship with the health service.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you again, Ms Podesta, for providing me with an answer to a different question. It is very valuable in the context of my question, but I am really going to the same demographic—

CHAIR—Senator, many of these questions relate to closing the gap in terms of the health issue, in my opinion.

Senator SCULLION—They do indeed.

CHAIR—So we have moved on to that area.

Senator SCULLION—I had envisaged at the time of the Northern Territory intervention, with its vision of a 100 per cent examination of primary health, that the desiloisation of departments so everybody worked together was part of the overall nature of the intervention. It was my view that because it was an emergency intervention we would be able to ensure that everybody worked together on that. When you say that no such person gets out of bed at all or there is no one—

Ms Podesta—In Canberra?

Senator SCULLION—Well, perhaps not in Canberra, and I have asked questions before about our Northern Territory equivalent. We have a good working relationship. I can put you notice that at the next set of estimates I will be asking you the same question: how are we going with the remaining 28 per cent—are we making an advance or not? I would have thought it was an essential and not particularly difficult issue to ensure that someone actually follows these up. The health system says: 'I live in this particular community. These are the people who are supposed to live in the community, and I can deal with the ones who are here. The people who are not from my community I cannot identify because they are not on my list.' So I would have thought there should be a coordination role for someone who was outside of all of that and could follow up on where the people are. That may not be a health issue but one for some other department that may have those sorts of skills. I will be asking that question again and perhaps others associated with the Northern Territory emergency intervention will hear the question as well. But thank you, Ms Podesta, I understand the situation you are in, and perhaps you are not able to give me a full answer because the question involves a broader range of opportunities and departments.

Ms Podesta—We will be happy to provide further information. The only thing I would say is that there is a conscious decision by some families to choose not to present their child for a child health check. That is their right.

Senator HUMPHRIES—I want to put a question on notice about the way in which health issues have shown up in the later checks that are being conducted, as to whether there are changes in the patterns of health complaints or illnesses that are showing up in these trends. To be specific about what I am getting at, I am told that, for example, there has been an increase in the incidence of anaemia since the first round of checks. I am also told that there is a rule in place now that requires GPs under these arrangements to disclose all pregnancies in girls under 16 and that, as a result, there is some tendency for these girls to be coming forward later in their pregnancies. I do not want to get into an engagement about that now—

Ms Podesta—I am aware of the source of that information. We have certainly had some claims made with regard to some of those matters. The data is not available for the second half—

Senator HUMPHRIES—I do not want to go into that now, Ms Podesta. If you could give me, on notice, a picture of what trends are happening, that would be very useful.

Ms Podesta—We will provide the information that we have. I just need to make it clear that we will not have information and data from the second half of the child health checks. That information is not yet available, but it will be forthcoming. For the first group of child health checks and for the follow-up from part of the first child health checks the data is available. We will make a commitment to give you some analysis of the trend when the next group of data is available.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. When will that be?

Ms Savage—We have not set a particular date for it. As soon as there is sufficient additional data with AIHW to actually analyse, when the value is there in terms of seeing trends, that is when we produce a report. And we have produced two reports in less than 18 months.

Ms Podesta—The trouble is that the data is generated by the healthcare providers. So it really depends on when they enter the information and make it available to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and on when there is a broad enough cache of information to be analysable.

Ms Savage—In addition to that, we are evaluating the child health check and the follow-up services. That is under consideration. Indeed, those comparisons take into account not just data available through the child health check and the follow-up check but data from other sources. We will then make sense of that data—in synthesis and analysis—present that and ultimately publish that evaluation.

CHAIR—That completes coverage of the Northern Territory emergency response. Also, we have covered income management and Centrelink and welfare reform in earlier questions. I propose we now move to closing the gap. Questions on the school attendance trials will be picked up in the education component of that area. At this stage, the plan is—and this is to the best of my knowledge, Dr Harmer—to continue now until 12.30. Lunch will be from 12.30 to

1.30. We will then reconvene from 1.30 to 2.45, and the CLC will give evidence at 2.00. We will end at that stage. I feel we will not run out of questions, Dr Harmer! We will now move to closing the gap. I propose to start with early childhood. For information: school attendance trials will come into this area of education as well. Officers who are involved in that program are on notice.

Senator PAYNE—I want to ask some questions about reports particularly on bilingual education as well as in relation to some of the Deputy Prime Minister's comments on funding for remote Indigenous education. Can I first of all seek a response from the department about the federal department's view on compulsory daily English teaching in bilingual Indigenous schools in the Northern Territory.

Ms Smith—Senator, you asked about the Australian government's statements in relation to bilingual education. The Australian government minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, has made some comments publicly in relation to bilingual education in the Northern Territory. This was done in around November last year. In her statements that were reported in the press, she emphasised that it was important that students and schools were able to ensure that Indigenous students were able to speak, read and write fluently and proficiently in English. Then she emphasised that that was critical to accessing lifelong learning and employment opportunities.

Senator PAYNE—I think also the Deputy Prime Minister made some comments in February this year when she said, 'Every child has to come out of schooling able to read and write English.' Has the federal department taken any action to address this issue, to ensure all Territory schools are providing appropriate English teaching?

Ms Smith—As you understand, Senator, the curriculum offerings of schools is a matter for the state education authorities. So the precise nature of the teaching of English and any other subject is a matter for those jurisdictions.

Senator PAYNE—Has it been taken up with the jurisdictions to which you refer by the Commonwealth?

Ms Smith—Has the matter being taken up expressly?

Senator PAYNE—Yes—expressly, explicitly, any other way you like.

Ms Smith—No, it has not.

Senator PAYNE—It has not?

Ms Smith—It has not been taken up specifically around particular offerings in the nine bilingual schools. I think it is important to note that we are talking about nine schools that have had bilingual programs for many years.

Senator PAYNE—I am aware of that. Can you indicate why it has not been taken up?

Ms Smith—I would say that the issue of what the requirement is on how a school offers its programs is not a typical matter that the Australian government raises in respect of every single school in Australia. As you know, we do not run schools. The state education authorities, and the Catholics and the independents, run those schools. However, of course, we are engaged in significant bilateral agreement negotiations in respect of a range of matters

involved in the new national partnership agreements—so, in respect of low SES school communities, the teaching of literacy and numeracy, and quality teaching. In that context the expectation is very clear by the Australian government that literacy in English will be effectively taught in schools.

Senator PAYNE—Will it be taken up specifically with the relevant jurisdiction?

Ms Smith—It will need to be in the context of the implementation plans that the jurisdiction is currently preparing. There is a requirement for the Northern Territory to provide an implementation plan around the Low SES School Communities National Partnership, the teacher quality national partnership and the literacy and numeracy national partnership. So we would expect to see how the students in schools that are going to be involved in those partnerships would be being taught English.

Senator PAYNE—So when will that happen?

Ms Smith—The first draft of the bilateral agreement implementation plan is due to be lodged with the department next week.

Senator PAYNE—And, once that first draft of the bilateral implementation plan is lodged, then does it become a process of negotiation between the Commonwealth and the relevant jurisdictions?

Ms Smith—Yes. We are working on this in the context of a partnership. So we are making useful comments back to all jurisdictions in relation to their plans. We will need to be looking at the specifics. I was there in the Northern Territory last week, talking to the officials who were doing this work, and they will be looking at focusing a lot of their attention on the significant 15 communities of large populations in which several of those bilingual schools are located.

Senator PAYNE—Certainly. So, if I sought further advice on this matter in May or June—budget estimates, anyway—you would be able to give me better advice or more advice about it?

Ms Smith—That is right—about where the effort is going and what the scope is.

Senator PAYNE—All right. Thank you.

Senator MASON—I asked a question at the last estimates relating to the 35 integrated child and family care centres. That is correct, isn't it? I asked how many sites for the—I said 34 centres, but I was corrected: it was 35—centres have been chosen. And the answer I received from the department was that four locations for children and family centres had been identified. Is that correct?

Ms Wall—That is correct. To date, four locations have been identified.

Senator MASON—Four out of 35?

Ms Wall—That is correct.

Senator MASON—The actual locations of the other 31 have not yet been finalised—is that correct?

Ms Wall—No, they have not. This national partnership only came into effect on 1 January this year and currently each of the states and territories are considering the best sites and consulting with communities, because that is a requirement of the national partnership, and we expect to hear from them very soon about their options for locations.

Senator MASON—The national partnership may have come into existence in January. Did you say 1 January?

Ms Wall—That is correct.

Senator MASON—But it was flagged more than 12 months ago by the Prime Minister, wasn't it?

Ms Wall—Yes; but the partnership itself was agreed and has come into effect this year.

Senator MASON—That might be right but 12 months later we have four out of 35 promised integrated children and family centres. Is that right?

Ms Wall—We have four sites identified.

Senator MASON—Four sites, and the locations of the remaining 31 still have not been finalised. Is that right?

Ms Wall—I am just not sure that your reference to the government signalling these centres early last year was actually about these centres.

Senator MASON—Are you sure?

Ms Wall—I would need to check when these were first signalled.

Senator MASON—I have been known to be wrong, but not often. Isn't that right, Minister?

Senator Chris Evans—That is certainly my experience, Senator. Could you be more specific about the government's signal? Are you referring to a press release or something?

Senator MASON—I asked these questions in October last year.

Senator Chris Evans—I just want to make sure that we are on the same page.

Senator MASON—Sure. I asked about the 35 integrated children and family care centres in October last year. That related to the centres foreshadowed in the Prime Minister's apology speech in February last year. So it took from February last year to January this year—

Dr Harmer—I think there is a sequence. The Prime Minister has certainly identified early childhood centres as a priority.

Senator MASON—He did.

Dr Harmer—There were some discussions at COAG. The process is, I think, that COAG agreed to them and then national partnerships needed to be negotiated around funding and sites, and the start-up date, as Ms Wall has said, was 1 January.

Senator MASON—But it has been 11 months.

Dr Harmer—It is not my responsibility, or my department's, but I think the disconnect and the slowness that I think is implied in your question needs to be put against the actual process. I am not sure that we want to leave the impression that it has taken from February last year

until now to get four out of 35—in fact I am sure we do not because I am sure it has not. We need to get back to you more precisely about exactly when the commitment on numbers was made and the process.

Senator MASON—The Prime Minister foreshadowed it in the apology speech in February last year. We agree on that. But it took until January of this year for what—a program to be drawn up? That is a long time.

Dr Harmer—In negotiating with states and territories on sites, they probably need—

Senator MASON—What? 12 months?

Dr Harmer—more than just an indication that we are looking at funding.

Senator Chris Evans—Perhaps the best way to handle this is for the department to see what information they have and report to you straight after the lunch break; just so that we have it clear.

Senator MASON—We will see how we go, Minister.

Senator Chris Evans—Sure, but in terms of the answer to your question about the process for approvals, clearly the answer so far is not very comprehensive. So, to get you a proper answer, we will take that on notice and see if we can give you an answer after lunch. But we will see how we go on the other stuff.

Senator MASON—Okay. So let's move forward for a second, Ms Wall. What is the timetable now for selecting locations, construction of the sites and hiring staff? What is the timetable from hereon?

Ms Wall—As I said, we are expecting the states to come back to us in the near future about proposed—

Senator MASON—Is there a deadline?

Ms Wall—There is not a deadline per se, but each of the states and territories is actively pursuing this, obviously in consultation with communities. We are actually expecting to hear some of those within the next few weeks.

Senator MASON—So the Commonwealth program in a sense is reliant upon the timetable of the states?

Ms Wall—This is not a Commonwealth program; this is a COAG initiative.

Senator MASON—Okay, it is a partnership.

Ms Wall—It is a national partnership which will be implemented by the states.

Senator MASON—So it was foreshadowed in the apology speech last February, we had an agreement drawn up in January and we are waiting for the states to act—13 months after the apology speech.

Ms Wall—As I said, I am not sure that it was foreshadowed in the sorry speech, and that is something we are going to check.

Senator MASON—In my original question I said 'foreshadowed'. I remember reading it, but I could be wrong. I do not want to stand by that because I have been wrong in the past.

But there is no specific timetable that the Commonwealth is holding the states to in terms of selecting locations, constructing the sites and hiring staff. The Commonwealth has not dictated a time line.

Ms Wall—We have not dictated a timeline, but it is in everyone's interests that we move quickly on this, and the states are actively pursuing this at the moment.

Senator MASON—Actively pursuing it—is that right?

Ms Wall—Yes.

Senator MASON—Could you find out, then, about the time line and what happened from February last year—the sorry speech—until January this year.

Ms Wall—Yes, we will do that.

Senator MASON—That would be useful. So we do not have a timetable; we just hope the states act as soon as they can—is that right?

Ms Wall—We know that the states are actively working on this.

Senator MASON—As the minister knows, and I have pursued these problems in other departments, when you have partnership arrangements—and this is not even a particularly partisan issue—things can take a lot longer unless the Commonwealth ties funding to time lines. But, anyway, it has not been done, so let us cross our fingers for the moment.

Senator Chris Evans—Senator, I think—

Senator MASON—That is a fair comment, isn't it, Minister: you cannot always rely on states. We would agree on that.

Senator Chris Evans—Firstly, you have claimed that the Prime Minister in his sorry speech in February indicated his commitment to early education as part of this broad attempt to close the gap—and that is right. In terms of the initiation of the specific program, we will get you the details of that and we can take you through the process. Does it take time to negotiate partnerships with states? Absolutely.

Senator MASON—I know that!

Senator Chris Evans—I think ministers in the former of government could take you through chapter and verse the complexities of that process. But it is in train and the officers will come back to you after lunch and take you through how the process has gone.

Senator MASON—Sure, but it is the concern, I think, of this committee that we have four out of the 35 sites—what percentage is that? One in nine?—more than 12 months after they were initially flagged by the Prime Minister. That is not a great record.

Dr Harmer—If you are right about it. I am not at all sure that the Prime Minister was specific about this particular program in his general and significant comment about the influence of early childhood education.

Senator MASON—If you are right, that was not flagged in the department's answer to my question.

Dr Harmer—I am not sure; I am saying we should check that before we leave the impression that it has taken over a year to get four established.

Senator Chris Evans—You appreciate intellectual rigour, Senator.

Senator MASON—I do.

Senator Chris Evans—We will get you the information and then you can draw your conclusion when we have all the facts. At the moment I think we are not necessarily agreeing on the factual situation, but we will get the facts and then you can draw that conclusion if you think it is warranted.

Senator MASON—I should let you know, though, that in the answer to my question on notice no dispute was made at all in terms of my assumption. That is in black and white right here.

Senator Chris Evans—The department are probably like me. They probably took you as being infallible and just operated on that basis. But we will get you the facts and then we can have an argument or draw conclusions.

Senator MASON—The final question I asked in relation to that series of questions was: how will educational outcomes at the centres be monitored? The answer was: ‘The educational and health outcomes will be evaluated through a comprehensive national evaluation over the life of the national partnership.’ What does that mean?

Ms Wall—That means that an evaluation strategy or framework will be developed.

Senator MASON—So it has not been developed yet?

Ms Wall—It will be developed in the early stages of the project, because it is important to do that in the early days to ensure that we have a framework and to ensure that we have data. It has not been developed yet, because it is in the early stages and we will need firstly to know where the centres are and what each of the centres will look like because each centre will be different. But we would expect that, once those details are known, the next step would be to agree an evaluation framework so that we can gather the data as the program is rolled out.

Senator MASON—So you cannot tell me how the outcomes will be measured. Is it still too early to tell this committee how those outcomes will be measured?

Ms Wall—In the national partnership agreement there are a range of performance indicators, and it indicates that these will be measured. I can read them out to you, if you like.

Senator MASON—Just read out a couple.

CHAIR—Is it possible to have them tabled rather than read them out?

Senator MASON—That is fine.

Ms Wall—The actual NP is a public document; it is on the COAG website.

CHAIR—I do not think we need to have them all read out.

Senator MASON—I agree with that. You have listed there the outcomes that are being sought—is that right?

Ms Wall—Yes, the performance indicators that will be measured.

Senator MASON—So the performance indicators are being developed. When will they be released?

Ms Wall—The performance indicators have been agreed and they are articulated in the national partnership document. What we will be doing next is developing an evaluation framework which will go into the detail of how we measure each of those performance indicators.

Senator MASON—So it has not been developed. Minister, I have in front of me the apology speech. There is no page number from which I will quote but you will have to take my word for it. It says:

Let us resolve today to begin with the little children—a fitting place to start on this day of apology for the stolen generations. Let us resolve over the next five years to have every Indigenous four-year-old in a remote Aboriginal community enrolled in and attending a proper early childhood education centre or opportunity and engaged in proper preliteracy and prenumeracy programs.

That is last year's apology speech. Its intention is very clear there.

Ms Wall—Certainly the intention is very clear, and that has formed the basis of a universal access national partnership. That is not referring, however, to these children and family centres. These are complementary but they are a separate initiative. They were agreed at COAG last October. I do not believe that these are flagged—

Senator MASON—Are you saying that that is a different thing? Are you saying that my question relates to a different activity? I do not want to confuse the committee; that is not my intention.

Dr Harmer—I think what Ms Wall is saying is that the intent and the priority of the Prime Minister on early childhood education was quite clear in the apology speech, but the specific reference to negotiating the location of 35 early childhood centres with the states through a national partnership agreement agreed by COAG was something that came later.

Senator MASON—Will you check the interregnum over the break? Thank you, Ms Wall.

Senator SIEWERT—I want to go to the issue of bilingual education, if that is possible. I have only one or two questions, and then, as indicated earlier, I want to go to the truancy trials. We flicked over very quickly so I could not slip this question in and I apologise for bringing you back. You had a bit of a discussion with Senator Payne about bilingual education and I just want to check whether the message from the Commonwealth was about bilingual education. Is it the Commonwealth's opinion that those schools that we were talking about should not be taking a bilingual approach?

Ms Smith—I mentioned in my other answer that the Deputy Prime Minister has made public statements saying that it is important that all children have access to learning programs that allow them to have proficiency in English literacy; that is a matter that is supported by all education ministers in Australia. I also said that we would not typically specify how the program would work in individual schools. I wanted to say for the record that there are nine bilingual schools in the Northern Territory. At the same time, the Commonwealth very strongly supports, and the Deputy Prime Minister has said in her public statements that she supports, the teaching of languages and culture to support Indigenous people's wellbeing and their children's understanding of their own culture and their cultural identity. Her comments were about balancing those things. So, as I was trying to say, there is not an express view that you cannot teach in a bilingual mode. However, it is about finding the right balance so that

there is exposure to English. The context of course here is that these children typically have access to English only in the school grounds and nowhere else in their lives, so it is about finding the right balance to get them to be proficient in English literacy.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I wanted to be clear on that point—that is, being proficient in English does not exclude having a bilingual education.

Ms Smith—Absolutely not. And I mentioned, when we previously discussed this, that my understanding is that, through the large national partnership agreements—the low-SES school community agreement, the teacher quality agreement, and the literacy and numeracy agreement—the Northern Territory is preparing a bilateral implementation plan that is going to focus on the large school communities in their remote areas, several of which are these bilingual schools that have this history of teaching in a bilingual mode. So, while we have not gone into a lot of detail about what will happen in each of those schools, if they are the ones where the effort will be focused we will need to discuss how that will work in relation to the offerings in English and the offerings that support cultural identity and the preservation of languages and so on.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you very much for that clarification. I would like to go on to the SEAM trial now, please. First off, can I double-check some information. You would be aware that we started to talk about this in FaHCSIA estimates yesterday and we got to a certain point and said we would leave it for today. As I understand it, there has been no decision on what will be either the seventh or the eighth location for further trials of this program. Is that correct?

Mr Carters—There are six locations in the Northern Territory. The seventh location, which has been announced and which we have been working with the WA government on, is Cannington. Are you talking about that or an eighth one?

Senator SIEWERT—I am talking about an eighth one, but I will come back to Cannington.

Mr Carters—There has been no decision taken on an eighth one—that is correct.

Senator SIEWERT—Are there ongoing negotiations about the eighth location?

Mr Carters—There are no negotiations that we are involved in on the eighth one.

Senator SIEWERT—I understand from the discussion that we had yesterday on Cannington that the trial has not started in WA but you have received no formal correspondence from the WA government to say that it does not want to go ahead with the trial in Cannington. Is that correct?

Mr Carters—We are not aware of any correspondence having come back from the WA government to say either way whether they will or will not participate.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. In terms of the Northern Territory, I understand that the trial has commenced in the six nominated communities.

Mr Carters—It has commenced in four of the six communities.

Senator SIEWERT—Which ones has it commenced in?

Mr Carters—It has commenced in Katherine, Katherine town camps, Hermannsburg and Wallace Rockhole.

Senator SIEWERT—Why has it not commenced in the other two?

Ms Shannon—We are currently finalising the arrangements with the remaining two Northern Territory trial locations, which are the Tiwi Islands and Wadeye. Indeed, there are visits next week to work further through those trial arrangements with officials from the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training and representatives from the Tiwi Education Board and the Catholic Education Office. They are just rolling out a little later.

Senator SIEWERT—When is the trial anticipated to start in those places?

Ms Beath—We expect that the Tiwi Island customers will receive their letters from 2 March and the Wadeye community, from 9 March.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you for that. There are two components to the trial: enrolment and attendance. Is the trial rolling out in both of those areas? The material I have seen to date talks about enrolment. I realise it is the beginning of the school year, but are you going to be concentrating on both those areas?

Ms Beath—The first phase is the enrolment. All the dates I have just mentioned are really about the enrolment phase of this project.

Senator SIEWERT—When does the attendance side of the project roll out?

Ms Shannon—Essentially the arrangements will be agreed with the Northern Territory trial participants. They will notify Centrelink where they have identified families with a problem with a child's attendance. They have started to work with those families to try and address those issues. The attendance component does not have an exact implementation date. It is based on a rolling notification process to Centrelink as these issues arise. Efforts are made to try and address those problems at the local level and then at the systemic level with the relevant education authority. The notification to Centrelink becomes the third step, where it is viewed that the local actions to try to address the problem are not as effective as might be and that a referral to Centrelink could prove helpful in trying to resolve the situation.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you. I will come back to notification to Centrelink in a minute. Do the letters that have gone out deal with enrolment and attendance?

Ms Beath—Just enrolment.

Senator SIEWERT—So there will be another letter that goes out about attendance.

Ms Shannon—General information about the attendance component of the trial has already been provided in each of the communities through community engagement sessions, so there is not an intention to send a general letter out about attendance. If families are identified by, for example, the Northern Territory department of education as potentially subject to the SEAM trial, there will be notification to Centrelink, who will then contact the family to discuss the issue. So information about the attendance component can be provided at a number of stages throughout the trial process. As I said, there have been community engagement sessions in each of the four communities where the trial has actually commenced

which have included information about both the enrolment and attendance components of the trial.

Senator SIEWERT—But they have only received a letter about enrolment?

Ms Shannon—Correct. The letter is actually the request to provide the information about where the child is enrolled.

Senator SIEWERT—Have enrolments increased in these four schools as a result of this initiative?

Ms Shannon—We are still in the process of receiving the information about where the children are attending school, but we will be working with the Northern Territory government. Basically, the process that has been agreed is that parents will be asked to provide information about the enrolment details of their children and Centrelink will collect that information. We have secured the agreement of all of the trial parties that a 100 per cent sample of that information will be provided back to the Northern Territory Department of Education, and they will check that those details are correct.

Senator SIEWERT—So it is too early to tell whether you have increased enrolment already.

Ms Shannon—Correct.

Senator SIEWERT—I am conscious of what happened in Wadeye previously when students turned up to school and there were not enough facilities for them. Do each of those schools in the four areas involved have enough teachers and facilities for the children who may enrol?

Ms Shannon—A lot of work has been done for the preparation of this measure to exchange information to estimate or anticipate the increase in enrolments and attendance at the schools. For example, a public interest certificate was issued for the Commonwealth to be able to provide information to the Northern Territory education department about the number of children we expect would be living in the trial areas so that they could look at their own data on enrolment and attendance and estimate whether the resources would be sufficient. So there has been some preparation done certainly in terms of working with the Northern Territory department and also in working with the Catholic Education Office, in particular, to look at what we anticipate the increase in enrolments and attendance might be as a result of this measure, and that has been complemented by a number of other funding measures that were discussed this morning in relation to teachers and classrooms. That work is obviously ongoing, and we will be keeping a very close eye on it.

Senator SIEWERT—So you do not know at the moment? Has there been any report back from the Northern Territory government?

Ms Shannon—We have not been told of any anticipated shortfall in resources of that nature.

Senator SIEWERT—Has anybody been suspended yet through the non-enrolment of their child?

Ms Beath—No.

Senator SIEWERT—What is the time line for the transfer of the information that we have been talking about?

Ms Shannon—Legislatively parents have 14 days from the issue of the notice to provide the information to Centrelink, but the letter actually provides 21 days. So it is 21 days from the date of the letter. The process for delivering the letters is that in Katherine they were mailed out to affected families, but in the Katherine town camps and in remote communities they were hand delivered where it was at all possible to do so, and we found in a large number of cases that parents provided that information to Centrelink officers on the spot.

Senator SIEWERT—When were the letters delivered? The Katherine letters were mailed out, but when were the others delivered? I am trying to work out when the 21 days kicked in.

Ms Shannon—The Katherine letters were, I think, dated 28 January, so the 21-day period ended on 18 February. The last extraction of information as to the number of families that have provided this information was, as I have it here, 13 February, so we still do not have a full report to cover the full period of 21 days.

Senator SIEWERT—That is for Katherine, or does that include the other three locations?

Ms Shannon—It started later in each of those communities because it is being done on a rolling basis. At this stage there are still families in the three other communities that are not live in terms of the trial, and they still have time to respond in that notice period.

Senator SIEWERT—At the moment you are focusing on the enrolments and then, as the year progresses, the attendance process rolls in. If students are not attending, the schools will then notify the department, which will notify Centrelink; is that the process?

Ms Shannon—In the broad. The schools will notify the department. The department will then take action either at a central level within the department or they will request that the school take further action at the local level. Then after working with that family trying to put in place steps for the parent to address some of the issues that may be resulting in the child's poor attendance if the concern is that the parent is not taking reasonable steps to follow through on that plan, they may be cases that the Northern Territory department or the Catholic Education Office or the Tiwi Education Board feel warrant a notification to Centrelink.

Senator SIEWERT—How does a school know which children are on income support that are non-attending? Secondly, what additional resources are these schools being provided with to do the work at the intensity that is needed to deal with nonattendance?

Ms Shannon—To take the first question, the schools will not know which families include parents who are receiving welfare payments. We would be expecting that they would follow the processes set out within the school and in accordance with the Northern Territory law to deal first with the issue. However, if they refer that case to the Northern Territory department or to the Catholic Education Office, again we would expect that they would be pursuing strategies at that level. It is only at the point that there is consideration of whether that family should be referred to Centrelink that information would be passed to Centrelink. Centrelink would receive that information and check if the parent was indeed receiving an eligible income support payment. If that were the case, Centrelink would notify the education authority that that family was indeed within scope for the trial.

Senator SIEWERT—The point being there that if they are an income support recipient they get suspended and if they are not no further action is taken.

Ms Shannon—Suspension would not be applied at that point. The direct consequence of a notification is not a suspension. But it is the case that only families where the parent is receiving an income support payment would be paid subject to this trial.

Senator SIEWERT—So Centrelink will then go and check with the family further.

Ms Shannon—Once the notification is made to Centrelink and it is confirmed that that family is receiving an income support payment, Centrelink will contact that family and discuss the issue further, encourage them to engage with the school or engage with the education authority to try and address the issue before any further action need be taken.

Senator SIEWERT—On the issue around the NT carrying out its responsibilities in terms of getting children to attend schools, that has been the law for a long period of time and the point is they are not doing that. We certainly heard evidence during the committee inquiry that resources were not available to do that. My question remains as to, first, has the NT government made any progress in the overall attendance strategy which is recommended as part of the report I think it was 10 years ago? Have they done that broad arching strategy? Secondly, what additional resources is the NT putting into assisting schools to deal with this issue? A lack of resources has been the problem in the first place.

Ms Shannon—I cannot answer the first part of the question in relation to its response over the last decade. I do know that as part of this trial they are actually working on developing an intensive case management model for families that are referred from local schools to the Northern Territory department as a sort of centralised unit. We are still talking with them about what that case management model would look like, but it is essentially a decision for the Northern Territory education authority to look at how they resource that function. We certainly would be suggesting to them that if they set that model up they would only be referring families that have been through that process to Centrelink. So we are very keen to make sure that any referrals of families to Centrelink as part of this trial have been the subject of concerted additional effort at the systemic level, either by the Northern Territory department or the Catholic Education Office or the Tiwi Education Board.

Senator SIEWERT—I am concerned about the level of response. This should be dealt with at the school level before it gets up to the central department. From what I can gather from your answer, the schools have not been given any more resources—or you do not know. Sorry, I am not trying to verbal you. You do not know if the schools have had any more resources to deal with parents attending the schools?

Ms Shannon—I can only comment on the Australian government funded additional resources. I can seek to find out from my Northern Territory counterparts whether they have provided additional resources and the level of additional resources that they may have provided in relation to this, but essentially I can only comment on the additional Australian government resources that have been put in place.

Senator SIEWERT—And there is none for the specific schools for this trial?

Ms Shannon—Some of the additional classrooms and teachers and other programs will be in the communities that we are talking about.

Senator Chris Evans—Could I indicate that Senator Ludwig has agreed to cancel his appointments and delay his flight in order to be here this afternoon, and I will not be back after the break.

CHAIR—Thank you, Minister. We will return at 1.30 with Health, but I know that Senator Mason wants to follow up on the issue that he raised that people were getting some information about.

Senator SCULLION—Before we suspend, while the minister is still here, I have a very short question on the same matter. It is a matter that may go to policy and the minister may wish to take this on notice. One of the fundamental challenges facing the intervention was law and order, and it was a capacity issue in the Northern Territory—I make no comment about that. The Commonwealth decided across the board to offer assistance to the Territory by providing manning and transport in that area. Is there any consideration of attendance? The fundamental issue, the capacity of the Northern Territory to provide dedicated officers and transport, still appears to be one of the fundamental challenges. From a policy perspective, Minister—you may wish to take this on notice—is the Commonwealth considering providing assistance to the Northern Territory in the area of truancy officers and attendants in these areas?

Senator Chris Evans—I will have to take that on notice.

Proceedings suspended from 12.32 pm to 1.30 pm

CHAIR—We will resume. I want to particularly acknowledge the minister, who has had to change his plans to join us this afternoon. We deeply appreciate that, minister. I also want to acknowledge the Oxfam Straight Talk people, whom we have just tried to have lunch with but things went wrong. Their program is extraordinary and the women who are gathered there are talking great things for the future of our country. I know that Senator Mason wanted to follow up an issue on education. Was that followed up on in the break?

Ms Wall—Senator, we have checked that information during the break and we will be able to table a document in a moment. The PM did not refer to 35 children and family centres in his apology. The first announcement of the children and family centres was made by COAG at the October meeting. As I said before, the national partnership to establish the centres came into effect on 1 January.

Senator MASON—I quote what the Prime Minister said in the sorry speech:

Let us resolve over the next five years to have every Indigenous four-year-old in a remote Aboriginal community enrolled and attending a proper early childhood education centre or opportunity and engaged in proper preliteracy and prenumeracy programs.

Do you agree that he said that?

Ms Wall—That is correct.

Senator MASON—You are right: he did not mention 35—that I accept. He said that. So he mentioned the goal and he mentioned the means to achieve that goal, but he did mention the centres. It took eight months from the sorry speech to get to the 3 October COAG meeting

commitment of \$564 million, of which \$489 million is Commonwealth money. Then the partnership was announced. Then, five months after that, to February of this year, we have got only four locations sited—not opened but sited. It has been 12 months since he foreshadowed it. As I said originally, he did foreshadow it in the sorry speech—

Dr Harmer—Senator—

Senator MASON—and 12 months later we have four sites, Dr Harmer. I thought I was right in my recollection and I was. I am surprised you did not know that, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—Senator, I did know that. What you implied was that, in the Prime Minister's sorry speech, he foreshadowed 35 childcare centres.

Senator MASON—No, not the number.

Dr Harmer—All I was doing was making it clear that the Prime Minister made it very clear about the priority on early childhood education. The first agreement—which must be an agreement with the states, because they actually do the delivery of the centres—was in the October COAG. At that October COAG—and Ms Wall can correct me if I am wrong—there was an agreement between the Commonwealth and the states to negotiate individual partnership agreements, which came into effect—

Senator MASON—Eight months after sorry.

Dr Harmer—Sure—which came into effect on 1 January. Ms Wall said that, from 1 January to now, four out of the 35 centres have been sited, and I imagine there is a high priority on sorting out the other 31.

Ms Wall—Senator—

Senator MASON—Excuse me, Ms Wall, I agree with you that it was effected as a priority by the Prime Minister, a priority so much so that, 12 months on, there are four of these early childhood centres. That is the priority that the government has given to it. I have not had a go today at all at any aims or goals of the projects. It is, as usual, a go at the implementation—four after 12 months.

Dr Harmer—We can regard that as a comment; there is no question in that.

Senator MASON—It is a comment; you are right—an editorial on it, Ms Wall.

CHAIR—Senator, we have actually had the issue on notice before, so we have actually covered that period. We have restated your point. Is there any further evidence that the department wishes to give to Senator Mason's point?

Ms Wall—I think it is important to note that the Prime Minister's commitment to providing preschool for every four-year-old will be implemented in a number of ways. Certainly, the children and family centres are only one element of a suite of packages. For example, early last year, after the Prime Minister's apology speech, the government moved to provide \$10 million for targeted projects in each state and territory, to improve access to and the quality of preschool programs for Indigenous children. That is just one of a suite of programs that are being rolled out. The children and family centres are only one element. There is work already underway to realise those objectives.

Senator MASON—You may be right. The early childhood centres were mentioned in the apology speech and, 12 months later, we have four, without a concrete timetable for state implementation. That is the evidence you have given already. It is hardly a glorious outcome, is it?

[1.36 pm]

CHAIR—Thank you, Senator. We are now going to change the program slightly. We will go to Economic participation (employment).

Senator HUMPHRIES—I want to ask some questions about the Australian Employment Covenant. First of all, is the department aware of media reporting on 18 February of a letter from Andrew Forrest to the Prime Minister, in which Mr Forrest says, ‘Bureaucratic red tape is jeopardising this AEC program’—that is, the Australian Employment Covenant program?

Mr Carters—Yes, we are aware of that article.

Senator HUMPHRIES—So you would be aware that Mr Forrest holds departmental mishandling responsible for the delay in 10,000 Indigenous people commencing pre-employment training which, as a result, is preventing them from commencing paid employment. How does the government respond to those accusations and is it the case that action on this issue was stalling until the report appeared in the *Australian*, which led to some spur of activity on the part of the departments concerned to get this particular program on the road?

Mr Carters—The Minister for Employment Participation went across to Perth to visit Mr Forrest later that week. That meeting had already been arranged. He did not arrange that because of the article. As a result of that meeting, you may be aware that there has been no other publicity. There was some clarification sought in that meeting and, from the department’s perspective, we would put it down to a misunderstanding. Again, from our perspective, negotiations were continuing with the AEC officials to develop an agreement which would include Commonwealth funds through particular programs along the lines that we would undertake with any employer or employment related service. Those negotiations are still continuing.

Senator HUMPHRIES—To what do you attribute the delay in getting to the point where this misunderstanding has been sorted out?

Mr Carters—There is no delay of which we are aware.

Senator HUMPHRIES—In the letter that was published in the *Australian*, Mr Forrest writes:

DEEWR continues to assert that it has total responsibility for the supply side. This conflicts with the letter of the covenant.

DEEWR has not made any operational changes to training mechanisms. Again, this conflicts with the letter of the covenant.

Can you respond to those comments?

Mr Harvey—I suppose you could look at a number of things from letters in newspapers, Senator. There was an article in the newspaper and Minister O’Connor went to Perth and met

with Andrew Forrest. Then there was another newspaper article that said that everything was going very well and that everyone was on the same page. Let us look at what happened in Perth. Crown Ltd launched the first of the covenanted major job packages, which involved 300 jobs—200 full time and 100 part time. We worked very closely with the AEC and with Crown to deliver that and meet—

Senator HUMPHRIES—Mr Harvey, I am sorry to interrupt you, but we do not have a lot of time. I am not asking for a recitation of what is happening; my question was more specific than that. How do you respond to the contention by Mr Forrest that DEEWR is asserting certain things about the nature of the agreement that has been entered into, the letter of covenant, which are not the case, in Mr Forrest's view?

Mr Harvey—We do not believe there is an issue.

Senator HUMPHRIES—There was when he wrote the letter.

Mr Harvey—That is right, but we do not believe there is an issue and the minister has—

Senator HUMPHRIES—Has Mr Forrest resiled from those claims?

Mr Harvey—If you look at claims that were made in the newspaper a few days after that, he was making claims that things were coming together. I believe that things are coming together and that, basically, employment services and training providers, as employers come online, will meet the requirements of employers. I cited the example of Crown because that is an example of where we worked together with training providers, employment service providers, the AEC and the employer to achieve that. We are continuing to do that with a range of other employers that the AEC is negotiating with. So we are doing that.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Mr Forrest says:

... the AEC cannot accept the arrangements proposed by the DEEWR National Office during the meeting of 5 February 2009.

What arrangements was he referring to?

Mr Harvey—That was the discussion where we provided some additional funding to the Australian Employment Covenant. We are now in the process of negotiating some further arrangements and they will be concluded very shortly.

Senator HUMPHRIES—What were the arrangements? What specifically was he referring to?

Mr Harvey—We were basically negotiating about this private sector initiative and contributions from government to that. It is just a process of negotiation that we are going through. Things are going as well as they can go.

Senator HUMPHRIES—They are coming together, yes, I heard you say that.

Mr Carters—It is as I said earlier. It was just a negotiation like we have with any Indigenous employment program, particularly our structured training employment type program. We negotiate with an employer or another body about funding arrangements which will apply, and that was the process that we were in the middle of.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Would you agree, Mr Carters, that when parties are engaged in that sort of negotiation they do not usually step outside the negotiation to go and publish in a

national newspaper a letter severely criticising the lack of good faith on the part of the other party? That indicates something seriously amiss about the negotiation process which appears to be being used in this case—does it not?

Mr Harvey—That is an interpretation based on what is written in the newspaper. I do not think there is—

Senator HUMPHRIES—What was in the newspaper was Mr Forrest's letter.

Mr Harvey—I understand that.

Senator HUMPHRIES—It was not a report by a journalist; it was his letter.

Mr Harvey—I know that, but you also have what is written in newspapers. My only point is that there have been meetings between Mr Forrest and the minister and we are going through a negotiation process.

Senator HUMPHRIES—One other thing Mr Forrest says is:

At an operational level, key Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations staff were yet to support the concept and operation of the covenant, and required direct instructions from Mr Rudd and/or Minister O'Connor to do so.

Is there support from officers in this department to support the concept of the covenant fully?

Mr Harvey—There is complete support, and if we look across Australia at the development that has gone on, we see that workshops have been held across Australia in cooperation with the AEC; our computer systems are ready to take vacancies that come through the AEC; and our employment service providers are ready to work with the covenanted employers. From our perspective, there is full cooperation and full support, as there is from the government, for this very important initiative.

Senator HUMPHRIES—How much is being allocated to the AEC by the federal government?

Mr Harvey—In Western Australia, we have a team that deals directly with the Australian Employment Covenant, and that is headed by an SES officer. The person is our Indigenous leader and also our state manager. That unit was located in Western Australia because that is where they are based. That is a team of about four people in the national office.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Sorry, I did not ask how many people; I asked how much money.

Ms Cattermole—Initially, there was an allocation of \$425,000 when we started the process. Would you like me to tell you what it was for?

Senator HUMPHRIES—No, I just want the total figure. Is it still \$425,000?

Ms Cattermole—Yes, and we are in the process of negotiating some additional funding.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Which might be announced in the budget, presumably.

Ms Cattermole—I think it will be announced before then.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Thank you.

Ms Cattermole—Thank you.

CHAIR—We will now move to housing.

Senator SCULLION—I have some brief questions. Those of you who have been following the media might have seen some of the issues about housing. Earlier this week or last week, the Northern Territory government, as part of the response to Closing the Gap, said that they do not have any houses completed. Recently this week, our minister said it was about 80. Today, a media report said it was in fact 27. I am not even sure who is actually responsible for that in the main. Given that I know you will have these answers at hand, how many houses have been constructed in the Northern Territory communities since December 2007? Basically, that is the annualised 2008 period. If you could provide the specifics, that would be terrific.

Ms Cattermole—In the Northern Territory since the end of 2007, 80 houses have been completed or are nearing completion in remote communities.

Senator SCULLION—That is from the federal intervention. So the Northern Territory would not be saying that any of those were built?

Ms Cattermole—Yes, some of those will have been constructed by the Northern Territory and some through the Australian government.

Senator SCULLION—I hope that there is another cohort of houses but I should best speak to them about that. Although, for some clarity and given the extremely close working relationships in these matters that we have continued to reflect upon recently, could you seek, perhaps through the partnership approach, confirmation of how many they have built during that period of time? I expect you would have to take that on notice.

Ms Cattermole—Thank you, I will.

Senator SCULLION—Can you tell me in which communities these houses were built?

Mr Ryan—We have the information in relation to the Australian government constructed houses. We will be able to access the information about the ones the Northern Territory government have constructed, but we do not have that information at present.

Senator SCULLION—What I am keen to do in the short term is just to get the information with regard to your particular responsibilities. Thank you for taking that on notice. I appreciate that and I look forward to getting that information. But in the short order it is only 80 houses. We do not have a lot of communities in the Territory. I am very keen to get that information because I can then go and have a look at them next week and check those things out. I am sure it is absolutely accurate, but I have not actually seen one myself yet. That is why I was curious about exactly where they were. Are you able to tell me who occupies each house? For example, is it a government employee? Is it agents of the federal government or the Northern Territory government, such as schoolteachers, police officers or managers of government business? Would they be occupying those houses?

Mr Ryan—No.

Mr Harmer—Government business managers would not be occupying those houses. We are providing separate accommodation either in demountables or in containers—the demountables we brought up from Baxter detention centre. We are certainly not using the money provided to the Northern Territory for remote Indigenous housing for our government business managers.

Senator SCULLION—So what you are confirming to me, Mr Harmer, is that all of those houses have in fact been supplied as community housing in the spirit of the term ‘community housing’?

Mr Harmer—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—I do not want to become picky about that. Excellent. Given that the Prime Minister yesterday indicated that the grand vision is to provide over 4½ thousand houses over a period of time—I think it is five years—

Ms Cattermole—It is 10 years.

Senator SCULLION—how do you think we are tracking? We have apparently provided 80 houses in a period of time. Just from basic maths, that does seem to require a huge acceleration. I understand that these are complex environments, but I think this is very slow and a number of people will acknowledge that that is the case. Could you outline the principal reasons why you think that this is a particularly slow process and why you have hope that this will accelerate to meet the Prime Minister’s requirements as stated yesterday.

Mr Harmer—This is a very significant reform of a process that has been going on for a long time—an inefficient process in the delivery of Indigenous housing—on the back of the report that was commissioned by the previous government into the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program. PricewaterhouseCoopers did a very good report and recommended very substantial changes to the way we do remote Indigenous housing. What we are doing in the Northern Territory is implementing, basically to the letter, the new arrangements. I will get Mr Leeper to tell you a bit about them, but it is not surprising at all that it is slow to start because we are transforming the way we do it. We have gone to tender. We are hoping to get significant economies of scale in the production of housing by letting tenders to big contractors rather than building one or two in small towns and paying a large premium for it. We have training involved, because we have employment objectives as part of the housing construction, and a range of other things.

Mr Leeper—We have indicated in evidence previously to this committee that, given the scale of this program, which involves 4,200 new dwellings over 10 years and repairs, maintenance and upgrades of 4,800 dwellings over the same period, we wanted to take quite a different approach to tendering and managing the financial and delivery risks around the program. Principally, we want to ensure that there are a range of outcomes from the program, including accommodation which is appropriate to the needs of Indigenous people. Putting the program on the ground does require us to do, in each community, extensive consultations. We want to ensure that there are robust and enduring employment outcomes from the housing effort that is put into place. Again, that takes some care and attention. We also require that the houses that are constructed are constructed on land over which leasehold is granted. Again, those conversations can be quite long as we go through those processes with the communities.

We would contend that the program is broadly on track. We expect substantial acceleration through the second half of this year and especially through 2010. We expect, by the time we speak with you again at the end of May, to be able to point to actual and significant starts in a number of communities. I think I have indicated that we have kicked off land-leasing agreements in a number of communities, and the alliancing process will come into play after

that. The number of houses looks small at the present time. We believe it is broadly on track and there will be substantial acceleration through the second half of this year and especially through the course of 2010.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you, Mr Leeper. Dr Harmer, I am not sure of the geometric or arithmetic level of outcomes we are going to have, but they are quite measurable: there will be on the ground a house that is open. At the next estimates, could I expect that there will be a line with the number of houses and then at the next estimates another number? Then I could say, ‘We’re doing well,’ and ask, ‘How are we tracking?’ Now that you are at this point, are you going to be able to provide me over the next couple of years with quarterly benchmarks, where there will be a number above where houses are completed?

Dr Harmer—The short answer to that is yes.

Senator SCULLION—That will be terrific. Would you be able to provide that on notice?

Dr Harmer—We want to be able to do that as well.

Senator SCULLION—I know you do.

Dr Harmer—We are going to need that to keep the Northern Territory up to the mark as well.

Senator SCULLION—It is just useful to have that conversation with me every quarter.

Mr Ryan—To elaborate, Senator: the way it will be is that as the alliances of each package work they will provide that information. It will be an evolutionary process in terms of the numbers. It will not be that we can necessarily give hard numbers and hard dates for the entire program. But we will be able to give hard numbers and hard dates for the programs that are about to commence construction. It will increase as the program extends.

Dr Harmer—Senator, you will be able to make a judgment on whether we are falling far behind the projection. It will not be linear. If we are still at 80 in two years time then it will not take a Rhodes scholar to figure out that we are probably going to be behind time.

Senator SCULLION—Even I could nut that out! The motive for my questions is simply this—and I will not pull you into the conversation, Dr Harmer. There were a number of public servants standing next to Mal Brough and I at Wadeye while we discussed the fact that we were just going into a wet season. It was absolutely impossible to build these houses. We talked to the people. They already knew what houses they wanted and where they wanted them to go. He said: ‘Look, I’m not interested in the weather or any more talk. I want these houses built.’ And they were built. They are there now. They are a testament to what can be done with the right attitude and the right will.

All I am saying is that, having come from that background, it is extremely frustrating to have—and I know you are doing good work—people on the ground asking me, ‘When are these houses coming? You were all excited about telling us these houses were coming. Where are they?’ Notwithstanding the intricacies of consultation and planning, we have been building houses in the Northern Territory—and, yes, to a greater and larger degree successfully—for a very long time. It seems to me that there has been a hiatus for whatever reason and we have gone backwards. The normal provision seems to have stopped. That is the basis of our concern. So little action has taken place in these areas, and I suspect it is a

consequence of a more global involvement. Hopefully that investment will accelerate to make up for that shortfall.

Dr Harmer—Senator, I certainly do not want to prolong the debate. I agree with you. We are very careful, though, to avoid where we can—and I am sure the contractors will be—building in the wet. As you well know—and there is no point going back to it; we have done it in Senate estimates before—we pay quite a premium on the price of those dwellings if they are done in the wet. Over the long term, we would like to avoid that.

Mr Leeper—I will also add that, in a program where you add a few houses here and a few houses there, we go to procurement processes continuously. We have completed the procurement process for this whole exercise. Having selected alliancing partners, there is no more procurement work to go through. Speed to market from this point on should be quite noticeable.

Senator SCULLION—I will look forward to observing that. Thankyou.

CHAIR—As I indicated earlier, at two o'clock we will go to the Central Land Council.

Dr Harmer—Chair, can I just check this, given there are quite a lot of people here.

CHAIR—Yes. That is my understanding, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—If we are going to end at a quarter to three, can you give me an estimate for how long the Central Land Council might take and tell me who else we need here.

CHAIR—We need the Central Land Council and health, Dr Harmer.

Dr Harmer—Okay. Are they the only ones we need?

CHAIR—Yes. There are many, many on notice, but the other officers can go.

Dr Harmer—In that case, as I excuse my colleagues from other departments, can I just, on the record, note that it is Mr Bob Harvey's last day in the Australian Public Service today and that he has had a long and distinguished career in the employment part of the department. I would like to wish him well and I am sure senators will as well.

CHAIR—Thank you, Dr Harmer. And thank you, Mr Harvey. What better way to end your career, Mr Harvey, than at a Senate estimates program!

[2.00 pm]

Central Land Council

CHAIR—Good afternoon, gentlemen. Welcome. Senator Brandis will start.

Senator BRANDIS—I will direct these questions to you, Mr Ross, I think, but if there are others at the table who are able to offer an answer to them, then please feel free to respond. Mr Ross, the Central Land Council, at the last estimates round, took some questions on notice, and there were also some written questions placed on notice by my colleague Senator Scullion. Can I ask my assistant to show you the answers to two of those questions, question No. 113 and question No. 119. Would the secretary be kind enough to circulate those to the members of the committee.

Going to question No. 113 first—you will see the numbers are in the top right-hand corner—Senator Scullion asked:

Does the Central Land Council, CLC, administer the distribution of mining royalty payments to affected traditional owners?

Then he asked a subsequent subquestion. And the answer, so far as is relevant for me, is:

The CLC does administer the distribution of mining royalty payments. It distributes mining royalty payments in accordance with the agreements made pursuant to section 46 of the Land Rights Act.

Senator Scullion also then asked question No. 119:

Could a list of all payments made be provided for the 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 financial year?

And the answer is—well, it is a nonanswer, in fact, but the statement in response to the question is:

To provide a list of all payments for the previous three financial years would be a time and resource intensive process.

The CLC retains complete financial records.

Mr Ross, have you got a copy of the annual report of the Central Land Council—the most recent one, 2007-08?

Mr Ross—Not with me, Senator.

Senator BRANDIS—Perhaps the secretariat would be good enough to put one in front of you. You have certified that as a true and fair view of the accounts. You will see on page 110 that, on 23 September, you and Mr Nystrom and Mr Bookie certified that the financial statements attached to the annual report gave:

... a true and fair view of the matters required by the Finance Minister's Orders made under the Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act ...

and then there is a series of financial statements that follow.

Mr Harmer, you might be able to help us here as well. I have looked very carefully through these financial statements that you have certified. Perhaps it is merely my inability to follow the way the accounting of Aboriginal corporations works, but I cannot see anywhere in these financial statements any account of either the receipt or the distribution of mining royalties—which, as you have told us in your answers to written questions, you have received and have distributed and have retained financial records for. Could you or perhaps Mr Harmer, or anyone else, take me to where those receipts and payments are accounted for, please?

If it helps, there is a note to the accounts at page 126—note 5 to the accounts—which refers to something called 'the Aboriginal Benefits Account'. I am not sure whether this is right, but perhaps the account called the Aboriginal Benefits Account is an account which takes account of those payments. As well, on page 84—this is not part of the financial statements but part of the body of the report—under the heading 'distributions' you say, Mr Ross:

The CLC maintains a Land Use Trust Account to receive monies on behalf of associations of Aboriginal people and individuals in accordance with section 35 of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. These associations are all incorporated under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (CATSI Act).

I do not see in the financial statements a reference to the Land Use Trust Account. It is not clear to me from note 5 on page 126 that the Aboriginal Benefits Account is the same thing as the Land Use Trust Account. Maybe it is; maybe it is not. In any event, it is not clear to me from these financial statements where one goes to find an account of the receipts and distribution of the mining royalty payments to which you refer in your answers to the written questions. Could you explain to me, please, where I might find that information?

Mr Ross—It is note 15 on page 140.

Senator BRANDIS—That is the Land Use Trust Account. That is a different thing from the Aboriginal Benefits Account, is it?

Mr Ross—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—Is that the account that is maintained under the CATSI Act—the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 Act? Where, in either note 15 or the details in sub notes (a) and (b), can I find specific payments from the fund to specific Aboriginal corporations? Is that note 15(b), is it? Is it 15(a) and 15(b)?

Mr Avery—Note 15(a) has royalty amounts.

Senator BRANDIS—What that tells me is that in 2007-08 there was a distribution of something a little short of \$7½ million, although there were receipts, accounted for in note 15, of some \$23½ million. Do I read this account correctly as telling me that in 2007-08 some \$16 million of the \$23½ million—or roughly three-quarters—of the royalties received were retained and not distributed?

Mr Nystrom—With respect to note 15, the land use trust account is an ancillary note to the financial statements of the council. It is not prepared under the C(ATSI) Act—they are two separate things.

Senator BRANDIS—Just pausing there, am I right in understanding that the fullest accounting of these receipts and distributions is what is accounted for in note 15?

Mr Nystrom—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—Thank you. Go on.

Mr Nystrom—In note 15 you will see there are receipts under ‘Subsection 64(3) statutory royalty equivalents’, which comes via the Aboriginal benefits account, of \$7.116 million. Five lines down you will see ‘Deduct payments—Section 35(2) statutory royalty equivalents’, with the same figure.

Senator BRANDIS—That is the same figure as appears at the foot of note 15(a).

Mr Nystrom—Yes. Note 15(a) is the note that refers to mining royalties. The amount received equals the amount disbursed.

Senator BRANDIS—What about ‘Section 35(3) negotiated payments’, which is a little more than \$14 million, and ‘Section 35(4) rental and lease monies’, which is about \$2.3 million? Those are receipts. Why have they been retained, not distributed?

Mr Nystrom—There is of course a financial process that needs to occur. If you look at the right hand of the page there is a column titled ‘2007’. There is a closing balance of \$4.1

million. The closing balance for 2008 is almost \$3.7 million. It is just the ebb and flow of the account in due process to get moneys received distributed.

Senator BRANDIS—Hang on a second. That is only the case if the section 35(3) and section 35(4) payments were distributed. Where is that accounted for?

Mr Nystrom—I am afraid I do not understand the question.

Senator BRANDIS—It says ‘Section 35(2) statutory royalty equivalents’. They have all been disbursed in accordance with note 15(a). Is that right?

Mr Nystrom—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—Where do we find the explanation of the payees of the 35(3) and 35(4) moneys?

Mr Nystrom—These accounts are prepared under the terms of the CAC Act, the FMA Act and accounting standards. The notes do not go to nominating specific recipients.

Senator BRANDIS—That is what I would like to know. Before you answer that, I assume that the recipients referred to in notes 15(a) and 15(b) are all of the recipients of the amounts paid out in those categories. But where is the disclosure of the recipients of the payments made under sections 35(3) and 35(4) and, for that matter, other payments?

Mr Nystrom—There is no disclosure in these accounts because—

Senator BRANDIS—Where does the parliament go to be informed about where these payments were made?

Mr Nystrom—I presume the parliament would ask the question.

Senator BRANDIS—I am asking now. You see, Senator Scullion asked the question with question on notice 119 and the CLC declined to give him an answer. So let me ask it again.

Mr Nystrom—With respect, Senator, that question asked about a list of all payments. We could not interpret the question to decide what sort of payments or what category of payments the senator was interested in.

Senator BRANDIS—That is not the ground given, I might say, for declining to answer, but let us not quibble about that. Just answer my question. Now you have directed me to note 15 and in particular the second, third and fourth items, categories of payments, 35(3), 35(4) and other payments, I would like to know who the payees of those sums were. Would you like to take that on notice?

Mr Nystrom—Yes, please.

Senator BRANDIS—Have I made myself perfectly clear now on what I am looking for in terms of these payments?

Mr Nystrom—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—All right. Thank you. That will do. That is very helpful. There is one other matter I wanted to raise with you. I want to come back to something I asked about last time. If you go to page 112, the balance sheet, you will see that among the financial assets, the third line of the balance sheet, the financial assets include investments which are valued at four dollars. If we go to the notes to the balance sheet note 6(b) on page 133, we learn that

that four dollars represents the nominal value of four one-dollar shares three of which are in a company called Centrecorp Aboriginal Investment Corporation Pty Ltd. I do not want to go over an argument that we had last time, Mr Ross, and which is the ground of some objections taken in the answers provided to questions on notice. But we know that you, Mr Ross, are a director of Centrecorp. That is right, isn't it?

Mr Ross—That is correct, Senator, yes.

Senator BRANDIS—And you are familiar with its financial affairs. You must be if you are a director and you are complying with your obligations under the Corporations Act.

Mr Ross—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—So you are compliant with your obligations and you have been diligent and you are familiar with the financial affairs of Centrecorp, are you?

Mr Ross—Yes.

Senator BRANDIS—All right. Because the Central Land Council is the holder of three of the five shares in Centrecorp, and you are also a director of the Central Land Council, I am sure you will agree with me that the financial position of Centrecorp is a matter of interest to you as a director of the Central Land Council.

Mr Ross—No, Senator.

Senator BRANDIS—You would not agree that the financial position of any corporation which appears on the balance sheet of the Central Land Council is a matter of concern to the Central Land Council?

Mr Ross—Not to the extent that the shareholding exists, no.

Senator BRANDIS—I am sorry, I do not understand that answer. The shareholding does exist. You have reported it. You have certified the accounts. We know that there are only five issued shares in Centrecorp and the Central Land Council holds three of them. Anyway, rather than go around the point, let me come to what I want to know. I am speaking to you in your capacity as a director of the Central Land Council, which counts among its assets its investment in Centrecorp. I want to know what, in your opinion, is that net worth of Centrecorp.

Mr Ross—Three dollars.

Senator BRANDIS—I take you to note 6(b) at the foot of page 133. Halfway down that note you will see a sentence that says:

The profits of Centrecorp will be distributed according to its charitable trust deed for the benefit of Aboriginal people in the Central Australian region ...

Do you say that the net worth of Centrecorp is the nominal value of its shares—\$3—because Centrecorp acts only as a trustee so that trust funds under its administration are not its assets and therefore do not form part of its net worth? Is that the position? That would be a perfectly respectable position to take, I might say, but is that your answer?

Mr Ross—That is pretty much a position.

Senator BRANDIS—You may need to take this on notice, Mr Ross, but what is the name of the trust administered by Centrecorp?

Mr Ross—There are two trusts: Centrecorp Aboriginal Investment Corporation. Hang on. There is the Central Aboriginal Charitable Trust—sorry I only have one. Then there is the Central Australian Aboriginal Charitable Trust.

Senator BRANDIS—All right. Is Centrecorp the sole trustee of those two trusts?

Mr Ross—My understanding is yes.

Senator BRANDIS—Is the administration of those two trusts the only business of Centrecorp?

Mr Ross—It is really Centrecorp's business.

Senator BRANDIS—So that is all it does. It does not do anything other than to administer those two trusts?

Mr Ross—I think they are probably questions that you need to put to Centrecorp.

Senator BRANDIS—As I said a little while ago, because you count your investment in Centrecorp as a Central Land Council asset, then speaking on behalf of the Central Land Council, and since you have a legal obligation to it to make yourself familiar with its financial affairs, and that includes its asset position, I think I am at liberty to ask you about these matters, especially given that you have elaborated on the very point in note 6(b) to your own accounts. It is not a hard question. Is it the case that all Centrecorp does is administer those two trusts?

Mr Ross—As I said, those are the two trusts of Centrecorp and it is their business how they operate those trusts.

Senator BRANDIS—I could perfectly well understand why in the Central Land Council's financial statements the nominal share value of its investment in Centrecorp would be written down at \$3 if it had no business other than to act as a trustee. I would find it more difficult to understand how its value could be written down as the nominal value of its shares if it did things other than act as a trustee. So the answer to this question really goes to the accuracy of the treatment of Centrecorp in the Central Land Council's financial statements. If the best of your understanding is that Centrecorp does nothing else but act as a trustee of the two trusts you have named then that satisfies me. It would be a perfectly complete answer and a perfectly good explanation of the treatment of Centrecorp in the Central Land Council's books. So could I have the answer please?

Mr Ross—It is a trustee only.

Senator BRANDIS—The only thing it does is administer those two trusts—is that right?

Mr Ross—That is it.

Senator BRANDIS—Thank you. What are the names of the mining companies from which the Central Land Council receives royalties on behalf of Aboriginal people?

Mr Avery—Royalties from mining operations on Aboriginal land in the Central Land Council area are received from Newmont; the Mereenie joint venturers, which are Santos and

Magellan primarily; and the Palm Valley joint venturers, which are Magellan and Santos primarily—one has a majority in one and the other has a majority in the other.

Senator BRANDIS—Going back to page 140 of the annual report, can you assure the Senate that the \$7,116,795 that you identify as having been received as statutory royalty equivalents and, in the next item on the account, as paid out under section 35(2) of the land rights act is the entirety of the royalty income from those three sources received by the Central Land Council in the 2008 financial year?

Mr Avery—No, that is an entirely different figure.

Senator BRANDIS—What is that figure?

Mr Avery—That is sourced under ABA, which is a mining royalty equivalent payment from consolidated revenue into ABA.

Senator BRANDIS—ABA being the Aboriginal benefit account.

Mr Avery—Yes, established under part VI of the land rights act.

Senator BRANDIS—What is the aggregate amount of royalties from those three sources received by the Central Land Council in the 2008 financial year, and where do I find that figure in the financial statements of the Central Land Council?

Mr Avery—The figure is aggregated into the line where you have 35(3) negotiated payments, which is the line below. I would assume—and I am only expressing an assumption—that, because it is a royalty equivalent, it equals the same amount. But there has to be a qualification to that, in that the royalty equivalents are based on a profit based royalty under the Mineral Royalty Act of the Northern Territory or the Petroleum Act of the Northern Territory, whereas the negotiated royalties, particularly of the Goldmine at the Granites, are ad valorem, so they will not be strictly equal. But that is where the figure is.

Senator BRANDIS—In any event, although it will include other matters as well, are you able to assure me that all of the royalty payments received by the Central Land Council in the 2008 financial year are within that figure of \$23,521,868?

Mr Nystrom—Absolutely.

Senator BRANDIS—In the 2008 financial year—

Mr Nystrom—Sorry, Senator: the total receipts, yes, were \$23,521,000.

Senator BRANDIS—Okay. In the 2008 financial year, did the Central Land Council pay any moneys into the Warlpiri trust?

Mr Avery—I do not know what the Warlpiri trust is. Perhaps you could explain.

Senator BRANDIS—The Warlpiri trust is a trust, as I understand it, created for the benefit of the Warlpiri people. You might take that on notice.

Mr Avery—We will have to take that one on notice.

Senator BRANDIS—In the 2008 financial year, did the Central Land Council make any payments or distribute any moneys to General Motors Acceptance Corporation?

Mr Nystrom—Did the Central Land Council make such a payment?

Senator BRANDIS—Yes.

Mr Nystrom—To my knowledge, no.

Senator BRANDIS—Were any moneys payable to the Central Land Council in respect of royalties owed to it from Newmont Mining diverted to payments to General Motors Acceptance Corporation?

Mr Nystrom—To my knowledge, no.

Senator BRANDIS—You might take those two questions on notice, please. The other questions—now that you understand what Senator Scullion was getting at with his question No. 119, as I have explained to you—you have taken on notice already.

Mr Ross—Just a clarification: we assume your mention was of the Warlpiri?

Senator BRANDIS—W-A-L-P-U-R-I? Have I got the pronunciation wrong perhaps?

Mr Avery—May I clarify the acronym GMAAC?

Senator BRANDIS—Yes.

Mr Avery—It is not General Motors Acceptance Corporation; it is Granite Mines Affected Areas Corporation, which is a recipient of affected areas money received by the Central Land Council from ABA and distributed without deduction to that Aboriginal corporation. I suspect there may have been a misunderstanding of the acronym wherever it was used.

Senator BRANDIS—I see in note 15(a) there was some \$5,320,043 paid under section 35(2) to Granite Mines Affected Areas Aboriginal Corporation. That is what you are referring to?

Mr Avery—It is sometimes referred to as GMAAC, which may have given rise to a misunderstanding of that reference.

Senator BRANDIS—Thank you for clarifying that.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, the questions that have been put on notice to you will be provided to you in writing by the secretariat, so that will be very clear for you. Thank you very much of your attendance.

[2.34 pm]

CHAIR—We will now move to health.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Thank you, Ms Podesta, for returning to the table. I want to ask about the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program, particularly the time frame for the development of the quality framework to set the standards for that program.

Ms Podesta—Senator, I apologise that, whilst we have people from many outcomes in the portfolio here today, we do not have people here from aged care, so I will need to take it on notice. I apologise.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. All these questions relate to aged care, so I will have to put them on notice.

Ms Podesta—I am sorry, Senator; we did not know that there were aged-care questions.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. That is me done.

Senator SIEWERT—A number of my health questions were actually aged care related as well, so I will also put those on notice. I apologise; I thought I had listed that I wanted to ask questions on aged care as well.

Ms Podesta—We would have got people from a large number of the other outcomes!

CHAIR—Just about everything else, Ms Podesta!

Senator HUMPHRIES—I want to ask about the trachoma initiative that was announced by the Prime Minister yesterday. Can you tell me about how that is going to work, please.

Ms Podesta—Certainly. Would you like me to briefly outline the whole package or just the trachoma components of that?

Senator HUMPHRIES—I think, in light of the time, I might leave the rest for later.

Ms Podesta—Okay. We convened a clinical roundtable last year and brought together all of the experts in trachoma control measures from across jurisdictions. You will appreciate this is a matter that is generally undertaken by staff based within public health units within state and territory governments, but there are a number of very experienced practitioners—indeed, people who worked with Fred Hollows—in the country, and we brought together all of the people who have experience and a view about the best way to tackle trachoma. From the information and advice provided at that meeting, the government has made a decision to roll out a substantial program. That program will be based on a number of the successful models, one of which was funded through NTER, the Northern Territory emergency response.

We will be bringing together teams of people in areas, in the first instance, with higher prevalence rates of trachoma, but we will be using the regionally based teams to identify areas where there needs to be additional screening of families and family members, and contacts with those people who are found to have trachoma. We will be using the SAFE guidelines, the Surgery Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness and Environmental improvement guidelines, and following the agreed Communicable Diseases Network Australia guidelines. Professor Hugh Taylor is a key member of that group—I spoke to him again yesterday—and he will be bringing together that clinical roundtable to define the best ways to go about that.

This is another program that needs active participation by our partners in state and territory governments and in our Aboriginal health services. But I was very heartened by the roundtable we had late last year. This is an area where, at different times, there have been disagreements about priorities, and that seems to have changed. There is a very strong view about working together to significantly reduce trachoma and, as much as we can, eliminate blinding trachoma.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. You mentioned that the Northern Territory teams might be employed to roll out those screening programs and so on—

Ms Podesta—It will be more than screening, yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES—For areas outside the Northern Territory, what kind of rollout will be used?

Ms Podesta—I cited Northern Territory as an example of one of them, but we also have teams currently in WA and South Australia. But Northern Territory has probably been more active recently, so we will be expanding the presence within those states. We will also be working with the states who currently do not report through the survey any prevalence rates or incidence of trachoma but in which we believe it is possible that there may well be trachoma. Queensland is an example where, at the moment, there is no reported trachoma. One of the things that we will do through the strategy is identify areas where there is potentially—because of environmental factors—a possibility there is trachoma and identify and treat it there as well.

Senator HUMPHRIES—How is trachoma treated, as a rule? Is it with medicine?

Ms Podesta—May I bring my medical officer to the table?

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. I do not want a gory description!

Ms Podesta—It is slightly gory.

Senator HUMPHRIES—No pictures please!

Ms Podesta—It is the actual identification, which is lid-flipping, which is slightly gory.

Dr Isaac-Toua—To detect trachoma, you first of all have to screen the person, so it means checking the eye, the eyelid. There can be different stages of trachoma, but active trachoma is the first. You have follicles or you have some inflammation. Once that has been identified, you can use a single dose of an antibiotic to treat the person. It is usually seen in younger children, aged from five to nine, one to four or 10 to 14. The issue is that, because it is quite infectious and can be transmitted—particularly in Indigenous communities where there is overcrowding and it is dry and dusty—we also look at giving prophylaxis to prevent further transmission, particularly within groups of children. If you can identify that there is a cluster related to one particular case—say within a household—then we would only treat or give prophylaxis to that particular household. But, if you cannot identify a cluster, then you will treat the community, the children.

Ms Podesta—All of the potential contacts with the person who was identified to have trachoma. It is actually quite a difficult syndrome to manage effectively within the environments we are talking about because of the movement of people and because of the need to encourage people to come forward and be treated.

Senator HUMPHRIES—So we are not just talking about identifying people who are suffering from it and then, say, getting GPs to administer these sorts of medicines; we are talking about an ongoing program of monitoring and intervention in places where there might not be GPs around.

Dr Isaac-Toua—It is important to continue monitoring when you have high rates of trachoma, because of transmission as well as recurrence. So part of your program needs to take into account ongoing sustainability of screening and treatment.

Ms Podesta—And that is why I cited the Northern Territory approach in very recent times. They have taken a very proactive approach, which is to go forward and talk to members in communities and get agreement that people will be screened. It is a little bit painful. The lid-flipping is not just looking into your eyes; you literally have to flip someone's lid up. For

babies it is not fun. Even if you are non-symptomatic, you need to be treated if there are a high number of people with symptoms and you are in contact with them. So you need to get a lot of agreement that this is something that is important. We will need to work together as a population to do it. I guess that is one of the reasons why it has been a challenge.

Senator HUMPHRIES—Okay. I am happy with that. Thank you.

Senator CROSSIN—A very good outcome.

Ms Podesta—Senator, I think you have asked questions about trachoma at every estimates that I have been in. We will not name it the Senator Crossin program, but I think we named the guidelines—

Senator CROSSIN—I have to admit publicly that I did have a cool drink last night in celebration, quietly.

Ms Podesta—We did name the guidelines after Senator Crossin originally—it is true.

Senator CROSSIN—It is a very good outcome and you have all worked really hard to achieve it, so I want to acknowledge that.

CHAIR—It being almost 2.45, I want to adjourn today's hearings. Thank you, Dr Harmer and, through you, all the staff from all the departments who have come today. I appreciate the effort. I know the changed timetable took some arrangements, so thank you very much. We do appreciate it. Thank you, Minister, for coming to join us this afternoon, and thank you, Hansard and the secretariat.

Committee adjourned at 2.44 pm