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SENATE

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Consideration of Budget Estimates

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SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE
Tuesday, 4 June 2002

Members: Senator Knowles (*Chair*), Senator Allison (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Bishop, Denman, Herron and Tchen

Senators in attendance: Senators Mark Bishop, Denman, Herron, Knowles and Tchen

Committee met at 2.37 p.m.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES PORTFOLIO

Consideration resumed from 3 June.

In Attendance

Senator Vanstone, Minister for Family and Community Services

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Professor Ann Sanson, Deputy Director (Research)

Mr David Stanton, Director

Dr Adam Tomison, Senior Research Fellow, National Child Protection Clearinghouse

CHAIR—I declare open this reconvened meeting of the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee to consider the estimates for the Australian Institute of Family Studies, as part of the Family and Community Services portfolio. I welcome the minister in her absence; she is on her way, I understand. I also welcome officers of the institute. I thank the minister and the officers for making their time available at such short notice. The estimates for the AIFS commence at page 261 of the portfolio budget statements. As the minister was not here to hear my welcome, I thank her for enabling the committee to reconvene this afternoon. Are there any questions?

Senator MARK BISHOP—Thank you. I also welcome the officers of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Thank you for making yourselves available at short notice after 9.30 a.m. It is appreciated. Could you turn to page 268 of the current year PBS. The top part of that table shows the range of indicators you use to measure your outputs in terms of what the agency is doing. Who puts those indicators together? Is it a job of the AIFS, the department or the government?

Mr Stanton—Thank you for the opportunity to be here this afternoon. The indicators in the PBS have been prepared by the institute as indicators of how we measure our outputs. In a research environment, it is often difficult to come up with unambiguous indicators of outputs and outcomes. We are trying to progressively enhance our measures of outputs and outcomes and we comment against these in the context of each of our annual reports. These indicators have been prepared within the institute and provided for the PBS.

Senator MARK BISHOP—When that process is done, do you just provide it as a matter of course to the department for inclusion in the public documents? Or is there then a negotiation process?

Mr Stanton—As it receives its own appropriation, the institute is entirely independent of the Department of Family and Community Services, but forms part of the portfolio of Family and Community Services reporting to the minister. So we are entirely separate from the

department, have our own independent appropriation and are not answerable to the department as such. But of course, we work very closely with them and provide material to them.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I understand; you are making the point that you are an independently funded agency and have your own responsibilities and the like.

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—How often do you review those indicators of outputs? Is that done annually or do they remain static from year to year?

Mr Stanton—We review our indicators on an annual basis. We review them in the course of the preparation of the portfolio budget statements and we are seeking to progressively enhance our reporting to the parliament through our annual report. So it is in the context of our annual report through the minister to the parliament that we provide comment against our output indicators.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Without taking me through minor amendments from year to year, how long have your indicators had substantially that content?

Mr Stanton—I am unable to provide you with a long historical assessment. I have been at the institute since May 1999, when I was appointed, initially on a temporary basis, by the then government. After my appointment this was one of the areas that we did look at in terms of our indicators, and they have probably remained similar over the period since June 1999.

Senator MARK BISHOP—How long has the AIFS been established?

Mr Stanton—The institute was established in 1980, and initially it was established as part of the Family Law Act 1975. It did not actually come into existence until 1980, so it has been in existence for 22 years.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is it fair to say that in the first part of this government's period in office, from 1996 to 1999, the institute had a significant advisory role to government? Would that be a fair comment?

Mr Stanton—The institute would aspire to providing research evidence and policy-relevant research material to advisers to the government—be that the department or others.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You obviously do a lot of research and you receive contracts from government and private organisations from time to time, and they go out into the public domain. I understand that aspect of your work. I am asking you if it is fair to say that, in that period 1996 until the time you took over as chief officer, a strong focus of the agency was providing advice to government.

Mr Stanton—I think the institute's role has remained very similar through its entire history since 1980, and that is to independently undertake research and prepare evidence for the Australian community generally on the Australian family, the wellbeing of the Australian family and trends in divorce, and to widely publish this. Indeed, the Family Law Act gives the institute a dissemination role. So it is not just a research role; it is to encourage understanding of the family in the Australian community.

When you talk about advice, I have worked within government for many years and have spent a lot of time advising ministers and being a policy adviser. We are not a policy adviser to our minister on a day-to-day basis but certainly, in the many areas that the minister is advised on, the department would come to us and say, 'What do you have? What are the latest

statistics on trends in divorce? What is the impact on children?' We can assist in the preparation of briefing material for the minister, as well as provide material which is research based and evidence based for the community as a whole.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is it fair to say that you are now receiving a large amount of contracted research from government?

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is that a change from the time when you took over?

Mr Stanton—In the long history of the institute, they have gone through periods where they have had a great deal of contracted research. There is a difference that could be drawn at this point in time and that is that the institute is, on behalf of the Department of Family and Community Services, undertaking a couple of very large contracted research tasks. One of them is the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, which is funded over a nine-year period. This is a very significant resource input. The institute in this case is the lead agency in a consortium of research organisations and academic organisations to undertake the study. As well, we have been funded directly from the department—but not exclusively from the department—to undertake research in a whole range of areas.

Senator MARK BISHOP—How much of your contracted research work would come, firstly, from the department and, secondly, from government generally?

Mr Stanton—If you look at it in relation to the amount of moneys, then at the moment overwhelmingly those funds would be coming to the institute through the Department of Family and Community Services. But we have done work for the Department of Health and Ageing. For example, we did the evaluation of the government's National Youth Suicide Prevention Program, a major project over a number of years. And we have done work with the Attorney-General's Department over the years.

Senator MARK BISHOP—But, at the moment, overwhelmingly your contracted work is the bulk of your work, and the bulk of it comes from the department?

Mr Stanton—That is in financial terms. There are a diversity of projects—

Senator MARK BISHOP—The reason I ask is that I was looking at the range of indicators, and the last paragraph refers to 'contract research and other contract work completed according to contracted deliverables'—so it is obviously an indicator. But if, for example, 80 or 85 per cent of your work by income relates to direct contract work from the department then perhaps that really is getting to the stage where it is almost the sole indicator of outputs. I just raise that and ask you to consider it in due course.

Mr Stanton—I could add to my answer. When it comes to specific contracts that the institute would enter into with departments, they are formal contracts and within those contracts there are specified a range of performance indicators and milestones. In relation to the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a key component of the contract is an extended listing of milestones and achievables which predict payments. The department has to be satisfied that we have delivered and have met our contracted obligations before we are paid. Many of these forms of indicators are contained in a large contract. In a smaller contract, people would be interested in a final product and would want to be satisfied with the quality of the final product you produce, be it a report or a summary of a statistical survey.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is fair comment. I am sure that large contracts—or probably a lot of contracts—have a series of steps that you have to satisfy the payer that you

have delivered on to warrant further payment. It is standard commercial practice. My only point is that, if the overwhelming amount of your work is contract work, and it is from DFACS, the priority—or the order, or the list of indicators—may not be as accurate as it once was. I just invite you to review that. That is all.

Mr Stanton—Thank you.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I want to turn to last year's PBS. In last year's PBS, the budget estimates for revenue from government were \$3,709,000 and the final estimates for the year 2001 were \$3,448,000. So there appeared to have been a shortfall in the order of \$260,000 from the estimates to what was finally referred to in the financial performance statements. Could you explain why that difference occurred? In this year's financial performance statements, the final estimates and the budget estimates are the same. Do you know the reason for that? I can give you a copy of the document, if you like.

Mr Stanton—I do not have last year's estimates before me.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I will get a copy for you.

Mr Stanton—In the financial year ended 30 June 2001, there would not have been any allowances for contract revenue for the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. That is coming into effect in the coming financial year—

Senator MARK BISHOP—Would that be under the heading 'Revenue from government' or 'Sales of goods and services'?

Mr Stanton—I would have to take that on notice.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Wait until you have the sheet in front of you, and then we will both know what we are talking about. It would not be fair to do it otherwise.

Mr Stanton—In the budget statements the appropriation bill receipts are usually shown separately from other departmental receipts. In the coming year, the appropriation bill provides for \$3.701 million.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is right.

Mr Stanton—That is the standing appropriation, which has been around that figure for some time.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is a standing appropriation. Does that mean there is a baseline figure agreement between the agency and the government that you get every year?

Mr Stanton—This figure has remained of this order, subject to the usual variations in respect of the indicators that apply to appropriations, for a number of years. There is no formal agreement about breaking this down by various components or anything like that.

Senator MARK BISHOP—We will come back to that in a moment. The document that has been provided to you by the committee secretary is page 274 of the portfolio budget statements for the Department of Family and Community Services for the year 2001-02. The heading is 'Table 3.1: AIFS budgeted statement of financial performance'. On the revenue side, you will note that the budget estimates were \$3,709,000 and the final estimates, as it turned out, were \$3,448,000 for the year. Was there a reduction in funding from the government? What is the reason for the difference?

Mr Stanton—There was no reduction in governmental funding. I would need to look at this in more detail and take it on notice, for the difference between those two figures in the last year.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Perhaps you could take that on notice, thanks.

Mr Stanton—Overall, these variations from year to year relate to matters that are subject to discussion with the department of finance. It can relate to things like the reimbursement of moneys for the contribution we might make to Comcover; there has been some discussion between us and Finance about that. There have been some discussions about ongoing items, but there is no substantial variation in the baseline estimate. I can take that on notice.

Senator MARK BISHOP—If you could take that on notice and provide us with written advice, that would be appreciated. If you look at page 270 of this year's PBS, you will note the budget estimates of \$3.7 million for 'Revenue from government' and, for 'Sales of goods and services', \$6,787,000. Can you explain what comes under that category of 'Sales of goods and services'?

Mr Stanton—Essentially the overwhelming number of items by financial value included under 'Sales of goods and services' would be specific contracts entered into by the institute.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That figure—\$6,787,000—is very specific. When you were putting your budget together you obviously had advance detail of all of the contracts on the table. Do you mind providing us with a line break-up of the composition of that \$6,787,000 for each of the contracts and amounts, as well as when it is due and payable?

Mr Stanton—Yes. There would also be other items in there, but of a minor nature, such as fees for service or a speaking fee—

Senator MARK BISHOP—Hosting a conference—

Mr Stanton—Yes, things like that; or it can be moneys that we would disburse to others. We might be a primary contractor undertaking a study, as we have in the past, and we might be doing that jointly with other researchers. We have been doing some work with the National Health and Medical Research Council on issues of drug addiction amongst older males and whether some of this may have been predicted by early behaviours. We do this jointly with other distinguished academics, and then the funds come through the institute and are disbursed. So that is part of the figure.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I understand. The 'Revenue from government' and 'Sales of goods and services' amount to almost \$10.5 million of your \$10.58 million. Can you tell me, off the top of your head, how much of that \$10.5 million in the first two lines is coming from government? Do you have an answer to that?

Mr Stanton—I do not have a figure, but it would overwhelmingly be moneys from the Commonwealth government.

Senator MARK BISHOP—When you say 'overwhelmingly', are we talking 60 per cent or 90 per cent?

Mr Stanton—No. It would be 95 per cent or higher.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I will take that as an indication. Perhaps you could take that on notice and provide me with the exact figure. For the other five per cent, could you also provide the total value and the source of funding for all non-government revenue, obviously excluding interest.

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—How many people are on the board of management?

Mr Stanton—I have firstly to inform the committee with great sadness that the presiding member of our board, known as the chair of the board, the Hon. Ann Henderson died this morning. It was with great sadness that I received that news on arriving in Canberra.

Senator MARK BISHOP—We regret to hear that.

Mr Stanton—The board comprises a presiding member and, in addition, Professor Donald Chalmers, who is from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tasmania; Dianne Gibson, who is the National Director of Relationships Australia; Professor Alan Hayes, who is Dean and Head of Division at the Australian Centre for Educational Studies at Macquarie University; Ms Robyn McKay, Executive Director of Family Capabilities, Department of Family and Community Services; Professor Frank Oberklaid, who is from the Centre for Community Child Health, University of Melbourne and Royal Children's Hospital; Ms Louise Staley, an industrial analyst; and me.

Senator MARK BISHOP—So six ordinary members, you and the chair; is that right?

Mr Stanton—The act provides:

The Board shall consist of the Director and 4 or more other members ... appointed by the Governor-General.

Senator MARK BISHOP—So we currently have six, plus the director, plus the chair.

Mr Stanton—That is right.

Senator MARK BISHOP—What are the terms of appointment?

Mr Stanton—The terms of appointment are a matter for the government. In my case, my term of appointment was for a three-year period. Ann Henderson's appointment was for a three-year period. Professor Chalmers had already been a member of the board for two years and was then reappointed for a further two years. Ms Gibson has a three-year appointment; Professor Hayes, three years; Robyn McKay, three years; and Frank Oberklaid, three years. Louise Staley had previously been a member of the board, and her appointment was renewed for a further two years. So some appointments were renewed for two years and some were renewed for three years.

Senator MARK BISHOP—This is probably a question for you, Minister. Are those appointments a decision of the minister, or do they have to go to cabinet?

Senator Vanstone—I would want to check. From memory, I do not know that I have done appointments in my time. Have I done any of these appointments?

Mr Stanton—No.

Senator Vanstone—But if they are made by the Governor-General, then they would go to cabinet; that would be the general rule. That would normally be the case.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes.

Senator Vanstone—I would want to check that I have not done them, but Governor-General's appointments usually do go to cabinet.

Senator MARK BISHOP—As a matter of course they go through cabinet?

Senator Vanstone—Yes, usually. There may be some exceptions; I do not know. Can we leave it that, if I am incorrect or there are exceptions, I will get back to you with advice?

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes; that is fine.

Senator Vanstone—Otherwise, the answer stands.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is fair enough.

Senator DENMAN—Just on that issue—I know Don Chalmers, so I know he is a Tasmanian—are states taken into consideration when these appointments are looked at, or is it just that the best person available at the time is appointed? Do you know?

Senator Vanstone—I do not know. I think that is one of those insoluble questions in relation to not only the Institute of Family Studies but every government appointment and, frankly, a whole lot of other more private sector things. We would like to say that it is only the best person but, of course, if you say that, New South Wales will say, ‘Well, that will mean that they all come from us,’ and Tasmania will get nothing—

Senator DENMAN—I realise that, Minister. We are very lucky.

Senator Vanstone—or they will all come from another state. So I think there is probably a balance. It is often very hard to say that one person is so far, clear and away, better than another that you should ignore a regional balance. That does sometimes happen, but more often than not it is a personal choice. If you ranked people from one to four, it would not matter if you put the fourth-ranked person in the position because there is so little between them, and 10 different people would probably rank them differently anyway.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Mr Stanton, you are appointed by the government of the day for a contract term, and the board members have varying contract terms by appointment of the government of the day. Is the role of board members set out in any legislation or regulations?

Mr Stanton—There are both legislation and regulations. This, in a general sense, indicates the governance structure of the institute, and it has remained that way for many years.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is that instrument the Family Law Act?

Mr Stanton—The Family Law Act is the primary legislative provision and there are regulations to that.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Let us assume I was appointed to the institute as a board member and I wanted to familiarise myself with my duties and obligations as a board member. Where would I go to find that information, if I just wanted to find out and not necessarily receive a briefing from you or the government?

Mr Stanton—You would firstly read the Family Law Act and the regulations. You would have due regard to the CAC Act.

Senator MARK BISHOP—CAC Act?

Mr Stanton—Because it is a CAC Act agency—the Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act.

Senator Vanstone—There might be a better acronym we can get than the ‘CAC’ act! ‘CAC’ is what you say when you put your fingers in something you did not want to.

Mr Stanton—True. That act provides for the roles and responsibilities of directors.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes, but you are a non-profit, aren’t you?

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Correct me if I am wrong, but the Corporations Act applies to registered for-profit entities.

Mr Stanton—We come within the CAC Act as distinct to the FMA Act, which applies to departments.

Senator MARK BISHOP—The CAC Act expressly binds the Institute of Family Studies?

Mr Stanton—It is a broadly based act that relates to responsibilities for governance in those authorities that it applies to. It is an important act for the members of our board so they are made familiar with their responsibilities and obligations as directors within that act. Indeed, there is very useful reference material provided by the Auditor-General following his review of such agencies, which we have made available to all our board members. Of course, the institute has a whole array of other briefing materials that are accessible to its board members, such as its research plan and strategic plan publications.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I am looking to find a codified set of instructions that gives direction to board members as to their duties and how they carry them out, and you say, ‘See the Family Law Act, regulations and the CAC Act.’

Mr Stanton—And of course the staff of the institute are employed under the Public Service Act. And other acts are pertinent, as they would be to any other federal agency, like the Audit Act or the finance act.

Senator MARK BISHOP—To paraphrase you, you said at the outset that you are an independent agency at arm’s length from department and government. Apart from coming to estimates and being examined by people like me and making your annual report, are there any other reporting obligations upon you or the board to the department or government?

Mr Stanton—There would be other obligations to report, as would apply to other agencies of government, such as issues like workplace diversity and matters of that kind. We have to have risk assessments of our activities and things like that, so this would apply to any statutory authority or indeed any governmental agency. Our primary basis for reporting to the minister, and through the minister to the parliament, is through our annual report, but we have an extensive array of publications which we make available to members of parliament. Our flagship journal *Family Matters*, produced three times a year, is distributed to all members and senators.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes, I have seen your work; I understand. That has answered those questions thank you, Mr Stanton. I want to turn now to the early childhood research program. You mentioned in your annual report that AIFS hosted a workshop of children’s health and development experts in February. Can you provide an update of the outcomes of this meeting, and the current status of the proposal for a national research partnership for developmental health and wellbeing?

Mr Stanton—I will comment in general terms and then I will ask for assistance from Associate Professor Ann Sanson, who is the deputy director of the institute. One of the responsibilities of the institute, in addition to undertaking its own research, is to seek to encourage research activities in the area of the family. We seek to do that by providing opportunities for conferences and meetings of the academic community and others who would be interested in the various issues that we would be dealing with. That applies across the full array of our activities. We have had meetings between, say, government advisers, academics, state authorities and people in the voluntary sector in areas like relationship education and how you assess the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and how you develop indicators.

The area you have referred to is a special conference that we held to seek to address some of the emerging research issues in the area of early childhood development. This drew together academics from a quite diverse set of disciplinary backgrounds of the core disciplines of psychology, sociology, medicine and, indeed, economics. They came together and a series of papers were prepared for the purpose of that conference. In part, we were looking at what additional research needs to be undertaken in this field, how it might best be undertaken and by whom it might best be undertaken. The Department of Family and Community Services was also involved in that meeting. One of the key areas of discussion we spent a good deal of time on in that meeting was longitudinal studies and the need for Australia to have the sorts of longitudinal studies that have existed in other countries, such as New Zealand and Canada, for many years.

We intend to publish the results of the workshop, and we anticipate having a publication from the papers that were presented at the workshop within the next month. You may well find that of interest. Partly as a result of discussions at that workshop, which we hosted, further steps have been taken for the formation of a research alliance in the general area of children and youth. This comes within the broad umbrella of interest of the provisional chair, Fiona Stanley, and the institute is one of the organisations involved.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is that Fiona Stanley from Western Australia?

Mr Stanton—Yes. That is a general summary, and perhaps the deputy director of the institute might be able to add to that.

Prof. Sanson—Perhaps I can add a little detail; I think David has given the general outline. There were two broad questions that the February 2001 meeting addressed: one was whether there was a need for an interdisciplinary grouping to pursue the development of a research agenda in early childhood; and the other was addressing the issue of longitudinal studies and ways in which we could work together towards a longitudinal study on children. The conclusion of the meeting was very much that there was a need and a willingness for the key researchers to whom David Stanton referred to work together towards developing a research partnership addressing the needs for developmental health and wellbeing of children in Australia. Also, there was a willingness for a group of researchers from that meeting to work together to put in an expression of interest for the longitudinal study of Australian children, as the call for expressions of interest had come out at that stage from the Department of Family and Community Services.

In terms of what we are at this stage calling a national research partnership for development, health and wellbeing, there has been a lot of activity under the leadership of Professor Fiona Stanley from the Institute of Child Health Research in Western Australia and an interim steering committee of which I am a member. There was a presentation to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council in June or July last year. There was another large meeting in November last year with policy makers, service providers and researchers about what this sort of alliance might look like. There has also been some funding provided from a variety of sources towards seeding money for establishing such a partnership, which has now adopted the name of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. I am certainly enthusiastic about it.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Where will it be based?

Prof. Sanson—We are being very much influenced by the experience of the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research, an institute without walls, so we are very much thinking about

not constraining the alliance to one particular location. There would be a secretariat which would most likely be based in Western Australia but possibly in offices elsewhere. That is still in the development stage.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Professor Stanley will be the chair, and she is based in the west.

Prof. Sanson—That is the expectation.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You have done the formative work, you have the alliance, you have some seed funding and you are now considering geographic location, which may be in the netherworld but likely to have a secretariat in the west. Is that right?

Prof. Sanson—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—The Australian research alliance will then tender for and compete for research work?

Prof. Sanson—That is not what is being seen as its prime focus. The way the alliance is thinking about its function is particularly to be helping set a research agenda which might then lead to there being allocated funding throughout other research bodies like the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council around the issues of early development. So its function would not necessarily be specifically to tender for research itself.

Senator MARK BISHOP—It is more to set the agenda for other agencies to follow.

Prof. Sanson—Yes, and also to form some communication functions. We are very aware that there is a large amount of data out there that is being underexploited at the moment so we are very keen to find ways to make that data more widely available to a larger group of researchers so it can be exploited for policy relevant research and also to build networks across researchers to allow them to work across disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You will obviously seek funding in due course from various arms of government or agencies; would you also be seeking funding from some of the philanthropic or non-profit institutes?

Prof. Sanson—Yes, in fact there has already been a lot of interest and support from philanthropy. Funding has been provided by at least one, possibly two—I would need to check where things are at—philanthropic bodies to date to establish seed funding. They are seeing the possibility of improving children's early developmental outcomes as being a very effective way for them to pursue their goals.

Senator MARK BISHOP—What sort of figures are we talking about for the seed funding—if it is not private to your organisation?

Mr Stanton—The institute's role here is one of participating in a broader group. It is not the institute that is running the group. We are seeing it as an important opportunity to share research knowledge and understanding and improve our communications with the research community. I think it is probably not appropriate for us to be getting into the detail of their funding, as such.

Senator MARK BISHOP—It is a body which is being established in which you are participating through your officers?

Mr Stanton—Yes, as you would with another group who might take a research interest in a particular area of endeavour.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Okay, I take that point. Has AIFS been involved in funding this new Australian research alliance?

Mr Stanton—We have provided no direct financial input in terms of a grant or anything like that. But we have sought to facilitate the operations of the alliance by providing meeting space, by publishing some relevant research papers—

Senator MARK BISHOP—In kind support?

Mr Stanton—That type of thing.

Senator MARK BISHOP—What will be the nature of the ongoing relationship between the AIFS and the ARA?

Mr Stanton—I expect the relationship would be that we would continue to work with other members within that broad grouping on a cooperative basis.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You do not see it as a subordinate entity that you have established that would take direction?

Mr Stanton—Not at all. I would see it as a very important development in Australia where people from quite diverse backgrounds come together to discuss these really important issues of child development and issues to do with youth. When we bear in mind there are such narrow pillars of interest in different areas of government academia, this is a good development to see them coming together to review the research evidence that is available.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Do you provide some detail in your annual report as to your participation in, or affiliation or involvement with, these other organisations or entities?

Mr Stanton—Yes. Indeed, we see it as a key strategic objective of the institute to operate in a more collaborative partnership fashion with a diversity of other groups and organisations, so we have been working closely with, for example, the Melbourne Institute at the University of Melbourne—

Senator MARK BISHOP—No, my point was do you identify those other relationships in your annual report?

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Thank you. If we now turn to some of your activities in the children and parenting program area, in program A, Children and parenting, you run a number of projects as well as the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. In relation to the non-clearinghouse projects, can you provide us with copies of reports from projects in this area in the last two years and can you provide an outline of the research projects being undertaken in this program area in the next two years? Obviously you can take both of those on notice—unless you have got them in your back pocket.

Mr Stanton—All the projects that we have undertaken are outlined in some detail in our annual report. In addition, the projects that we have currently under way are listed in our web site in quite comprehensive and detailed fashion. Most of our research papers and research reports are available online through our web site, but certainly we can provide you with paper based copies of reports, if that is what you would like.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is the request, Mr Stanton.

Mr Stanton—In terms of the forthcoming period, the institute, through the activities of its board, operates on a triennium research planning basis. We have been operating against a research plan; that plan is generally available. That is coming to an end now and we are

actively in the process of developing the research plan for the next three years. Some of the research projects that we would expect to see would be a continuation of others that have been under way and that have developed over the last couple of years. We have also indicated in our *Family Matters* journal, in the issue before last, the general nature of our research plan for the coming period. We have yet to bring that research plan into a document, but once we do, which I expect will be in the next month, we will be distributing it widely to seek reaction and comment from others.

Senator MARK BISHOP—If you could take that on notice and provide it in due course, it would be appreciated. Turning to this area of child-care research, the institute was quite active in the recent debate over research from Melbourne University about the benefits or otherwise of long periods of child care for younger children. Has the institute undertaken any specific child-care research in this area?

Prof. Sanson—Over the years the institute has been very involved in child-care research. There has been a variety of projects, many of which pre-date my time, with people like Gay Ochiltree being involved in research. We currently have two major child-care projects under way, one of which is looking at the match between child care and the home environment and is obtaining detailed measures of the quality of the child care that the child is receiving as well as characteristics of the family. That is a very detailed observational study that is developing observational data as well as questionnaire data and tracking children. The second one we are doing in collaboration with researchers at Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University and the Office of Child Care in New South Wales. Again that is getting very detailed measures of quality of child-care experiences. Our particular interest there is on whether it makes a difference for children if their child-care arrangements are stable or changeable over time or at any one period in time. They might have a day or two in long day care, a day or two with granny and so on.

Senator MARK BISHOP—At what stage are both those projects?

Prof. Sanson—They are both at the data collection stage. Dissemination has started from the context study—the first one I told you about. Already a couple of papers have come out on that. I think one is available in print and others are very much in the pipeline.

Senator MARK BISHOP—When will the work be concluded?

Prof. Sanson—The child care in context study will be concluded, I would think, by about the middle of next year. The changeable child-care study is a longitudinal study so we have funding through an ARC linkage grant for that which goes for three years.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Three years starting when?

Prof. Sanson—Starting at the beginning of this year. It has just started. There will be progressive dissemination from that study. It is tracking children over time so we can look at the impact over time of different child-care arrangements.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Around the issue of quality of child care, do you identify a need for further empirical or analytical research in Australia, or is it pretty well covered?

Prof. Sanson—There is still a continuing need for research. A great deal has not been done in the Australian context and we know that the Australian context is very different from overseas. For example, the quality of our child care tends to be on average higher than the quality of child care in the United States, where the bulk of the research comes from. We have accreditation guidelines and processes. There is a lack of regulation in the United States. We

really need to know about child care in the current context. It is a focus of the longitudinal study of Australian children. That is one of the four core themes that is going to be focused on in that longitudinal study.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is really work in progress.

Prof. Sanson—That is very much work in progress. Part of the need is that there are studies that look at just one element, as in the one you were referring to, which looked simply at time in care without any measures of quality of care. They do not give us very reliable estimates of what the impact on children is.

Senator MARK BISHOP—In the child-care advisory report *Child care beyond 2001* there are a number of recommendations for further research and analysis as well as some for other activities that the government should be taking advice on. Were you consulted on this report? What is your analysis of its findings?

Mr Stanton—We will take that on notice. We did do some research under a very tight time scale for a committee that was looking at child-care issues for the government. We were asked to gather together groups of parents and have a discussion with them about what they saw as some of the emerging issues.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Was your involvement relatively minor as opposed to—

Mr Stanton—It would have been by the provision of research evidence to members of the IDC at the time; not as a direct participant.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I see. In that case, it is probably best if you take on notice what your role was in that report and what contributions you made.

Mr Stanton—Generally speaking, we would not be a member of an interdepartmental committee which is drafting policy considerations directly for ministers. But if it is a research type issue where the committee has been given a real challenge and is not entirely sure about the directions it might go in, they will call on the institute. For example, in the area of family law pathways—which, as you would appreciate, has been a very controversial and very difficult area—we undertook some research for one of the standing committees on what we were aware of in the area of family law pathways and the difficulties that were faced by families in finding their way through the Family Law Act.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes, I understand.

Mr Stanton—You see, it is a research contribution to those discussions. They may lead to some provisional or suggested policy directions, but largely those more direct forms of policy advice are given to a minister by others.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Okay. In supplementing that stuff on notice, if you could just detail for us the level of your involvement and the level of consultation, if any, that you were giving to government. I turn now to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, and this is probably for you, Professor Sanson. Can you give us an overview of the role of the clearinghouse?

Mr Stanton—We have with us Dr Adam Tomison today. Adam is a senior research fellow at the institute and is directly associated with the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. If you would like to hear a brief summary of the role and responsibilities of the clearinghouse, it would be appropriate for him to speak on that.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is very useful. Dr Tomison, if you could, firstly, give us an overview of the role of the clearinghouse and its day-to-day function.

Dr Tomison—Certainly. The clearinghouse is basically an information, advisory and research unit that focuses on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. As a result of being a Commonwealth body funded by the Commonwealth government, the focus has been generally on primary and secondary prevention. By that I mean attempts to prevent child abuse across the whole community and also targeting special at-risk groups, if you want to call them that.

Senator MARK BISHOP—At risk offenders or at risk offendees?

Dr Tomison—At risk families—in other words, families that have been identified as having a higher level of risk in general, because of particular circumstances that they are under. For example, maybe there are parents affected by substance abuse issues.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Understood.

Dr Tomison—However, because we also have a strong relationship with the various state and territory child protection departments, the human services departments, we also deal with what is known as the tertiary sector—the child protection services, the statutory child protection role that is played by the state and territory governments. So we cover pretty much the gamut from primary through to tertiary prevention issues. We have a number of main roles. The first is as a repository; we have a very large collection of materials that relate to the prevention of child abuse and neglect and issues of child abuse and associated violence.

We also have an advisory role which is fulfilled, firstly, by an advisory or help desk set up in our library—the family information centre at the institute—and that is also supplemented by the work of me and two other researchers under my direction, who provide specialist advice to all who need it, from government ministers all the way down to local community members across the country. We also have a networking outreach function—in other words, we go and present papers, we provide information and we educate the public, professionals and government, where necessary. We also fulfil that role by producing research papers and newsletters; we have two newsletters per year and two issues or discussion papers per year. Finally, we also have a research role. We undertake primary and secondary research, often by contract, at varying times as need arises and as we have time to fulfil that role.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That information is useful. What sort of involvement is there with state and territory governments that oversee child protection legislation?

Dr Tomison—It is quite extensive. It varies from time to time, as you might imagine. I have been with the institute since 1995 and the Clearinghouse has been with the Institute of Family Studies since the latter part of 1994, so I have a fairly good feel for how things have gone over time. It varies in terms of which states will come to us for information, advice or support and what their needs are. Basically, we have covered most of the Australian states, providing them with information or responding to requests over time, quite regularly.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is your role with the various state agencies to provide information and advice?

Dr Tomison—I can specify, if you would like.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes, if you do not mind.

Dr Tomison—It varies. It can be as simple as doing a literature search on available holdings that we or others have, around some issue of child protection. As an example, we

may do a search on the latest information on structured risk assessment tools and then provide that back to an organisation, whether it be a government or non-government agency. It may be to help inform policy development: for example, we may do a seminar, contribute to a discussion or provide previous papers we have already written that may inform the debate—those sorts of things. At times we have taken on specific contract research tasks to prepare a series of briefs for a particular government who may be looking at changing their child protection system or some element of it.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Would you be involved in, for example, reviewing legislation or the role of departments in giving effect to legislative direction?

Dr Tomison—No, I do not think we have been involved in that. As for the level of advice, I will give two examples. The first one would be that a state has decided to change the way it assesses child protection reports. We may make comment or be involved in a discussion around those sorts of issues. The second way in which we may give advice is to be asked to write a document to inform policy development. For example, in 1996 the South Australian Department of Human Services approached us and asked that we present documents looking at the prevention of child abuse and neglect as a whole and some key policy directions. That was then used to inform their state-specific prevention strategy for preventing child abuse.

Mr Stanton—It is important in relation to the Clearinghouse system to keep in mind that this is a contract with the Department of Family and Community Services. It is a contracted activity at the institute, and so it is fully funded by the Department of Family and Community Services for a certain amount of money. That contract goes for a period of three years, and then it is reviewable. We are required to provide these sorts of functions as part of that contract. They might say, 'We expect you to provide two issues papers.' We recently produced an issues paper on child protection and the Internet—the difficulties associated with controlling the Internet. We are dealing now with issues associated with reporting of child abuse in the media. These are broad issues papers, as well as discussion papers. We also have a web site which attracts a great deal of interest. Most of the documentation is available through that web site, and people can access and download it.

Senator MARK BISHOP—What does your research tell you are the critical issues in the child abuse area at the moment, Dr Tomison?

Dr Tomison—That is an interesting question, Senator. Broadly speaking, there has been a major issue across the Western world in terms of responding to child abuse concerns. One is that there is a growing demand for services. There is a growing demand for reports, and governments have to respond to that demand. That is not always easy, because—

Senator MARK BISHOP—Are there growing levels of abuse or is it just becoming more public now than it was, say, 20 years ago?

Dr Tomison—I think it is probably both.

Senator Vanstone—That is the age-old question with things like domestic violence, sexual assault—

Senator MARK BISHOP—It is just everywhere these days, isn't it?

Senator Vanstone—Everybody makes educated guesses. How do you really know?

Senator HERRON—There is a seven per cent increase in Queensland last year.

Senator Vanstone—In reporting?

Senator HERRON—Yes.

Senator Vanstone—But his question is, does that reflect an increase in abuse or an increase in the willingness to report.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Do you have a view on that, Dr Tomison?

Dr Tomison—I agree with the minister. I would also add, though, that our definitions of what child abuse is have changed and expanded over the years since 1960, when child abuse became a societal-level concern. That means, again, that we are going to get increases in reports, because what we consider to be abusive or neglectful has changed. I will give an example: emotional abuse does not leave injuries that you can see, unless the child has been extremely traumatised over a period of time; but it is being seen now as one of the core issues of child abuse and neglect which faces our society.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is it? Does that mean deprivation of love and supervision?

Dr Tomison—It is usually a pattern of behaviour. It can range from things like severe verbal abuse towards a child, scapegoating, rejecting a child, not showing love and affection, abandonment, all the way up to terrorising and threatening a child.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Dysfunctional families.

Dr Tomison—I think you could make an argument that that sort of level of abuse would occur in dysfunctional families of some sort.

Senator Vanstone—Where it occurs, the family is dysfunctional. It is axiomatic, I would have thought. I would like to meet the member of parliament who thinks a family where a child is being abused is a functional family. That is a definition we cannot wear.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That discussion was in the context of a wider definition.

Senator Vanstone—A broader dysfunction; I understand. I just did not want to sit here and let my silence be construed as agreement with a broader proposition which I do not think you were making. Someone reading this transcript, who is not a part of the whole conversation, could easily misconstrue it.

Senator MARK BISHOP—We are getting into some interesting theoretical areas; I am not so sure they are policy areas. Your research agenda is set out in the contract between the clearing house and the department, isn't it?

Mr Stanton—The contract provides for certain ongoing functions and then for the opportunity to negotiate particular research tasks. We also are able to take on additional tasks, should the department wish us to do so under a code of costs. They may come to us and say, 'We would like you to do some specific research in this particular area, additional to what you are doing already, for the price that you have outlined to us in your contract.'

Senator MARK BISHOP—I am with you. Going back to you, Dr Tomison, could you enumerate perhaps the three key areas in the child abuse area at the moment?

Dr Tomison—In the child protection area, or the prevention of child abuse? They are a little different. Which would you prefer me to answer?

Senator MARK BISHOP—I do not follow the point.

Dr Tomison—If you are talking about child protection systems, that is one particular point to answer.

Senator MARK BISHOP—No; I am talking about child abuse.

Dr Tomison—As a whole?

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes.

Dr Tomison—One of the key areas at the moment is that there much more a focus on prevention, rather than waiting until abuse or neglect has already happened and trying to intervene and address the situation then. There is some research around now which shows that it is socially and economically cheaper to intervene early and try to prevent abuse or neglect from occurring in the first place.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I'll bet it is. So, identifying likely families where this problem could arise?

Dr Tomison—A number of families are identified as being perhaps more at risk than the general population of a variety of social ills—and I will look at the child abuse and neglect issue—such as families where there is a substance abuse issue, families where there may be a parent with a mental illness or disability, and families who are socially isolated. There is a whole range of indicators—or risk factors, as they are called—which may indicate such a family.

Senator MARK BISHOP—We are getting into a little more detail than I wanted. You are saying that identifying high risk areas is a key issue. What are two or three other key issues?

Dr Tomison—Early intervention and high risk areas. There is an ongoing concern about ensuring that our child protection systems run by the states and territories are as effective as they can be. That is probably the third big one. If you want to go into more detail, we can.

Senator MARK BISHOP—No, that is fine. There is a litany of constant complaint on that third one.

Senator DENMAN—The identification: where does that come from?

Dr Tomison—As a rough guide, pretty much half would come from professional sources and half would come from family, friends, neighbours—or non-professionals, if you want to call them that—and community members. That is a rough guide. It varies a bit across the states.

Senator MARK BISHOP—There certainly is a lot of discussion in the press about child abuse. Every time you go to a social function, like a party or a dinner party, it is one of those issues that seems to be creeping onto the table increasingly. Whether that derives from people watching the press or whether it is just more prevalent, I do not know. What are the major barriers to preventing child abuse? Is it just the age-old argument about education, funding and awareness?

Dr Tomison—No one thing is going to prevent child abuse and neglect. What we tend to advocate for these days—and I mean in the field as a whole—is some sort of comprehensive strategy that has a variety of components within it. Education is one of those key components. Another key component at present that is used quite a lot is the idea of intergenerational prevention—in other words, getting in with our young people now, before they become parents themselves, and teaching them appropriate social skills and appropriate parenting skills. That is another one which comes up. A whole variety of things are identified as key parts of an overall strategy. That varies, according to whom you wish to talk to. I could certainly provide information about that which we have written in the past, if that would be useful.

Senator HERRON—Is that available on the Internet? Have you got that on your web site?

Dr Tomison—Yes, Senator. There are a number of reports, some that I have written myself, which are available which look at issues around developing a strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect.

Senator MARK BISHOP—If we turn now to the activities in the family and marriage program area. In program B, Family and marriage, the AIFS has two projects I want to discuss. The first is overlapping jurisdictions in the child protection area. I think you identified that as a non-core project. That was due for completion at the end of last year. Can you give us an overview of the project and its outcomes? And with particular reference to implications for the federal government, if any.

Mr Stanton—Senator, we do not have with us today experts in program B, Family and marriage, but my understanding is that this was a project that was undertaken partly in the context of the Family Law Council. It was a project that was handled collaboratively between a number of academics interested, together with the institute, to look at the overlaps of jurisdiction on child protection. The people who were undertaking this research are not with the institute anymore, so I have not had recent discussions with its finalisation. Are you able to comment, Adam?

Dr Tomison—I can probably talk generally. Senator, I will address the question very generally. Basically the findings of the research showed there was quite a lot of overlap between cases in the Family Court and cases identified in the various state and territory child protection jurisdictions in the children's courts. That research has been part of a drive, I think, led by the Family Court to try to streamline the processes in both courts to ensure that families are not being left to fall through cracks and that they are getting the appropriate level of service which is not traumatising and gives them the best outcome. I am aware, for example, the Family Court of Australia has set up a practice approach, called either Columbus or Magellan. One is WA and one is in the rest of Australia; I am just trying to think which one it is.

Senator Vanstone—What about da Gama!

Dr Tomison—I am pretty sure it was called the Columbus Project for the whole of Australia with the exception of WA. WA set up their own particular project called Magellan. They have slightly different aims, but the aim is to basically deal in a more effective manner between the two court systems for child abuse and neglect allegations or other violence, because witnessing domestic violence falls within both spheres as well—it is a form of child abuse.

Senator MARK BISHOP—When was the project concluded?

Dr Tomison—I cannot tell you precisely. I can indicate that a journal publication was reviewed by me in about the middle of last year, from memory. I can take that on notice, if you like, and confirm it.

Mr Stanton—As I recall, this was not finalised in the form of a published research report of the institute. It was a fairly complex area of law that was examined. My recollection was that a report was finalised and was put forward for the *Journal of Family Law*.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Was it more of a legal research project?

Mr Stanton—Yes. If you would like more details, I can undertake to follow that up.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Seeing that you have not got your experts with you, and on the basis that it was commissioned by another agency, can you give us an overview of the

project and its outcomes, with particular reference to any implications for the Commonwealth? Would you also provide a summary of the findings? Turning to the children's contact services, which I think you have listed as a new collaborative project, can you give an overview of what is involved in this project and what some of the initial findings are, if any, to date?

Dr Tomison—I am representing the institute on that project. At this point in time the project is only just getting going; it is in its early stages. Materials such as questionnaires and structured interviews have been piloted and the project team, which is based at Griffith University in Queensland, is now beginning to roll out a series of interviews with key personnel and families who are using the contact services. There have not been any findings at this point at all.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Who are the collaboration partners?

Dr Tomison—Griffith University, the University of Melbourne and the Institute of Family Studies—and Attorney-General's as well.

Mr Stanton—This is an example of what I referred to earlier, of the institute seeking to be involved more collaboratively with others. So this is not a project that the institute is taking the key running on, but it represents an application by Griffith University for a grant from the Australian Research Council. We are not eligible to receive grants from the council, but Griffith University would come to the Institute of Family Studies and say, 'You have got some expertise here; would you like to partner us in this study? We will be applying for these funds from the ARC. We will have an industry partner—the industry partner in this case is the Attorney-General's Department, which is keen to see research undertaken—and we would provide expertise to assist in the design of the research study and the assessment of the findings.'

Senator MARK BISHOP—What is it about? I am intrigued that the A-G's is involved.

Dr Tomison—Basically it is about identifying families who are using these contact centres, particularly those families where there may be issues of violence, and seeing what response is being made, their experience with the centres, looking at different models of centres and doing comparisons between them, effectively. The information is being collected from auspicing bodies like managing agencies, from some peak bodies that also oversee all of the contact centres, from the managers of a number of contact centres in both Victoria and Queensland, as well as from a sample of families who are identified via the contact centres.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You might take this on notice, Mr Stanton, because I do not think that you will have the information at hand. Yesterday in Senate estimates, one of the officers of the department indicated that, through your contractual arrangements, the department is able to, 'Pick up the phone and ask for advice in a number of areas.' Can you provide details on whether the department has used this level of consultation in considering the following matters: the recent decision to freeze special needs subsidy scheme funding, the decision to reallocate existing family day care and outside school hours care places, funding the Australian research alliance and changing the focus of the Australian Council for Children and Parenting to focus more on early childhood matters. Could you advise us on those issues.

Mr Stanton—I was not here at the hearings yesterday, so I do not have a context. I would look to the *Hansard* to see the context. Generally speaking, the institute seeks to be of support and assistance to the diversity of federal government departments that we deal with. We have a very close and, I believe, a very effective working relationship with the Department of

Family and Community Services, but equally with Health and Ageing, Attorney-General's and the whole array of portfolios that we are dealing with.

Under the current ministerial arrangements with this grouping of Family and Community Services, it is inevitable that there is a close alignment of interests of the institute and interests of the department. If the department were, as they say, to pick up the phone and seek advice, my expectation would be that the minister might have asked for a brief on something and someone in the department would say, 'Do you have any statistics about that?', or 'Do you have any knowledge of research evidence that applies in other countries?' or 'Do you have any knowledge from the historical perspective that you are able to bring to bear that might assist in briefing the minister?'

We would be very keen to support the department in giving the best advice it can to the minister or to ministers. But I would not wish you to think that someone would pick up the phone and ask us what we would think about the freezing of child-care subsidies. I would be most surprised. I have certainly not received such an approach by phone, and I would be surprised if others were to receive such an approach.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I would similarly be surprised. I have asked you a question, and you will consider that in your wisdom and provide us with a written response.

Senator Vanstone—I heard the things you asked about, and I am not referring to them specifically. I just want to generally make the point that it is possible, as I am sure you do know, to ring a library or an institute and ask for information when you full know the purpose to which you intend putting that information, but there is not a need for you to communicate to the person you are getting it from what you want it for.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Of course.

Senator Vanstone—So in relation to a whole range of things you might ask about, presumably including those, the answer could be no. It could be no because they were the wrong people to go to. It could be no because they have no knowledge of why they were asked particular questions.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I understand that point.

Mr Stanton—The institute prides itself on being a repository of information about the family.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Not only that. You told us you have a contract with the department to provide, inter alia, advice on a range of matters. So to the extent that people ring you and ask you for advice on a range of matters within a portfolio of the department, I do not regard it as anything other than a statement of fact. Do not read too much into it.

Mr Stanton—No, I am not. But I think it is important to note that the institute receives 1.6 million requests through the web site for information. Our Family Information Centre, I believe, is quite outstanding. It has been there for many years—well before I was at the institute—and is a fundamental source of information on the family in Australia for a diversity of people, be they members of parliament, advisers to members of parliament, ministers, departments or journalists—a full array of people. So we receive very many inquiries every day from a great diversity of sources.

Senator MARK BISHOP—All right. I ask you to take that on notice and give consideration to providing the committee with a copy of the contract between AIFS and government.

Mr Stanton—The contract for the National Child Protection Clearing House?

Senator MARK BISHOP—What is the overarching contract?

Mr Stanton—There is no overarching contract. If you wish to see the objectives required by statute of the institute, it was developed after a great deal of debate in the parliament and it was associated with the passage of the Family Law Act in 1975, which was—as you may well recall—a very controversial piece of legislation. It was in that context that it was decided that there should be an institute to undertake research in this controversial and complex area in an independent, authoritative and professional manner. That is what we are doing.

When you say you would like to see a contract that we would have as an overarching contract with the department, we would have a contract with the department in relation to contractual arrangements for particular items that they wish to purchase. So, we have an \$18 million contract with the department to undertake—as a lead agency, together with a consortium—a longitudinal survey of Australian children. We have a contract with the department to assist, as part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, by running a stronger families learning exchange website and associated research activities.

We have done research with the department, as I have outlined, in relation to the National Child Protection Clearing House. My own view would be that, should you wish to access or receive a contract that the department, as the purchaser, has requested of us, as the provider, the inquiry would be best put to the department. They are the people who have formed the contract.

Senator MARK BISHOP—They are one party to the contract.

Mr Stanton—They are a party to the contract.

Senator MARK BISHOP—You are the other party to the contract. You have identified four or five separate contracts. I will ask you to provide them on notice to the committee, and I will also ask the department to similarly provide contracts from their angle. I know there will have to be some discussion as to whether they are appropriate matters to be provided to the committee, and so I will take written advice in due course. Also on notice, Mr Stanton, could you take it on notice to provide us with a list of the discrete research projects, workshops and clearinghouse functions that the government and the AIFS have contracted to do or have carried out in the past 12 months?

Mr Stanton—In relation to that, if a minister were to direct the institute to undertake particular activities or a particular project, then we would inform parliament of such in our annual report. We have received no such specific direction but, of course, we would be seeking to ensure that our research and our research activities were policy relevant and of interest and concern to the government of the day.

Senator MARK BISHOP—That is okay. You have got the request, and we will consider that in due course. Turning to the Special Needs Subsidy Scheme, has the institute done any work on the needs of disabled or special needs children in relation to child care?

Mr Stanton—Not to my knowledge.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Has the institute done any work on the issue of respite care for parents of these children?

Mr Stanton—No. Dr Tomison has had a passing involvement in that area and would like to provide some information for the benefit of the committee.

Dr Tomison—Senator, I wrote a paper back in 1996 which is called ‘Child maltreatment and disability’. As part of that, we addressed the needs of families where either a parent or a child had a disability, and respite was one preventative strategy that was incorporated as part of that document. That is as far as it has gone.

Senator VANSTONE—Just as a matter of interest, on the issue of mistreatment of the disabled—and it would apply to children as well as adults—we set up a hotline last year, which we are continuing, for people to ring up and make a complaint about what they think has happened. The complaints will be sent to whichever government is responsible for the service—it will apply to accommodation and employment services. We do not have a lot of power in this respect, but it is my view that such a hotline gives people a venue to go to rather than going direct to the institution—which, for understandable reasons, people are often reluctant to do. If someone makes a complaint that they think their child, their brother or their mother is being abused, they are then worried about whether the person who is in the institution has given the wrong information and has caused ‘trouble’ and whether that will have a consequence for their future treatment. In however minor a way, that distracts some people from reporting.

Giving people the opportunity to report something in a more distant way, with confidentiality maintained, allows each of the state ministers to get a report on the allegations of what has happened, then to do what they will with it within their constitutional responsibilities and be accountable for that—not to the Commonwealth, but in the sense that they know the Commonwealth will be reporting annually on the level of complaint and to whom the reports have gone. It is too early to say whether it will catch on and people will use it, but it did seem to me to be a sensible thing to provide.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Have many people taken advantage of the hotline to register complaints?

Senator Vanstone—No. It is only very new. I think we have launched it. I just had my mind on a million other things but, when I heard that answer, I thought you might be interested in that. Let me get you the detail of when it started and, if it has not, when it is going to.

Senator MARK BISHOP—And the level of contact.

Senator Vanstone—I think it would be quite small at the moment, because we have not done much advertising of it.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I cannot recall that I have seen anything about it.

Senator Vanstone—We will have to further advertise it being available, otherwise it is not worth having, if no-one knows the number is there—that is obvious. I thought it was a useful sort of service that we could provide without interfering in someone else’s jurisdiction. All you are doing is providing them with information, and I know of no minister who would say, ‘I am unhappy to be told about complaints that you have received about mistreatment of disabled people in the areas that I am responsible for.’ I do not think there is anyone that exists like that. You do not want to create the impression that you suspect that there is a higher level of abuse happening than there is. It is a case of trying to tread a bit more softly rather than beating a big trumpet about it. If it is advertised amongst the disabled communities and the families of disabled people, that is who it is for; it is not for everyone else. Do you know what I mean?

Senator MARK BISHOP—Yes. It is limited, as you say, to the disabled community.

Senator Vanstone—Having said that, do not let me give you the impression that I am satisfied that enough people within those communities know what is going on. I hope someone in my office is listening—and, if you are, please get me an update immediately—but, if not, I will get it to you very soon about where we are with it. I thought it was a good idea.

Senator DENMAN—Could I have that information too, please?

Senator Vanstone—Do you think it is a good idea?

Senator DENMAN—Yes, I do.

Senator MARK BISHOP—In the area of child abuse and child protection—and there is an increasing press for Commonwealth involvement across the board, without getting too party political—who is the Commonwealth head of power to give authority to allocate funding? Funding allocations are always rooted, in the final analysis, in a head of power under the Constitution. What does child abuse come under? Is that under divorce power? That is where the Family Law Act is pegged.

Senator Vanstone—I would probably want to consider that to find out which one people technically consider it is.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I thought you might know. I know it is pretty wide.

Senator Vanstone—As you know, you can have long argument and write long essays about these matters. You could pick any item. You could pick the Corporations Law and say to some people, ‘Is it all under corporations power?’

Senator MARK BISHOP—You will take that on notice, and it is not urgent. The final thing I want to talk about is the longitudinal study of Australian children—to come back to why we are here. How much funding, and over what period of time, has been provided to this project?

Mr Stanton—The longitudinal study of Australian children is being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies as a lead agency for a consortium. We can provide to you a list of the consortium members, but it would include the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU, the Charles Sturt University, the Queensland University of Technology, the TVW Research Institute for Child Health Research in Western Australia, the Royal Children’s Hospital and the University of Melbourne. So it is a quite broad consortium of agencies who are involved.

We have signed a contract with the Department of Family and Community Services. The initial contract is for a three-year period. Then the contract provides that that contract is reviewable and renewable for two further three-year periods. The total contract is for an amount of some \$17 million; that is over a nine-year period. Of course, overwhelmingly the resources associated with this study will go into the collection of data from the families concerned and the maintenance of that data collection over time. So it is a major investment by government in research in this area of early childhood development.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I presume the expert staff that are involved in this lengthy project are provided from various participating institutions?

Mr Stanton—Yes, there will be—

Senator MARK BISHOP—Or is there a separate secretariat established to do it?

Mr Stanton—We have within the Australian Institute of Family Studies a small project operations team that is headed up by Associate Professor Ann Sanson. Assisting her will be two assistant directors, one of whom will be primarily concerned with issues of survey design and the other with issues of data collection and maintenance. One of those staff has been selected. The second is about to be selected. So it is a small team within the institute, and they deal through a variety of advisory groups and consultative bodies with others—firstly with our consortium partners. Those consortium partners will have a role to play with this study because, as you would appreciate from the agencies that I have specified, these are agencies that are Australia's leading research agencies in this area. Some of them will have a role in the development of the questionnaires and the project design, and they will be funded from this contract for such activities. But the consortium may also, as required, involve other experts in Australia.

We will also be receiving advice and guidance from a distinguished panel of experts in this field internationally. We would intend, as we do with our research generally, to try and benchmark our research internationally. So we are going to have an advisory board or group comprised of very distinguished academics from around the world, particularly bearing in mind that others have experience of undertaking these studies, whereas within Australia the experience is not as great with studies of this magnitude.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Is the funding solely from government?

Mr Stanton—At this stage, the funding for this project is entirely from government. But were the department to wish to explore this further, it would be a matter for them. We are contracted to provide a range of services. It is not for us to seek further funding.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Just thinking out loud, if you have got a distinguished panel overseeing the project team and you are seeking to have international consultation and correlation of your work, it is going to involve some sort of travel and forums to bring people together in due course.

Mr Stanton—Yes.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Would you get funding from some of the philanthropic organisations for that, or is that part and parcel of the contract amount?

Mr Stanton—Part and parcel of the contract is to provide suitable forums to engage people in these discussions. But a lot of the discussion to date has been possible through teleconferencing rather than face-to-face workshops, which, as we all appreciate, are very expensive. So we are in regular teleconference contact with our consortium partners. Of course, with an international advisory group I would not be expecting them to come to meetings on a regular basis, so we would have to deal with it in other ways.

Senator MARK BISHOP—How long will it be before some initial results are going to be made available?

Prof. Sanson—There is a series of deliverables over time. For example, a discussion paper which is outlining the research questions and how we intend to address them is due for release very shortly. That gives a background on the study. In terms of the actual data, this is a major undertaking, and putting the time in at the front end for a longitudinal study is absolutely essential. So data collection will start with a pilot study in February next year and with a main sample in May next year.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Would you be looking to have original data as a part of the work, or are you relying on existing source data?

Prof. Sanson—No. This is a new longitudinal study where we will be recruiting two large representative cohorts of children across Australia—one of babies and one of four-year-olds. There will be 5,000 in each cohort. We will follow them from the start in 2003 until 2010.

Senator MARK BISHOP—So completely new data over the period.

Prof. Sanson—Absolutely. We are anticipating the first wave of data being available in 2004.

Senator MARK BISHOP—We have an overview of the project. What outcomes are being sought?

Prof. Sanson—It is a very broad based study. The research questions were set out in the requested proposal from the department. In brief, it is intending to understand the pathways to both good and poor developmental outcomes for children. We now know that early childhood is a critical time for development for a whole range of outcomes, and so we are looking at being able to establish what leads to children having a high readiness to learn once they reach school age. We are going to be looking at what sorts of child-care arrangements seem to be optimal for children in terms of their development. We are going to be looking at literacy and numeracy outcomes as the children develop. We are going to be looking at their emotional, behavioural and social adjustments over time. We are going to be looking at their physical health outcomes, and particularly at critical issues like obesity and asthma, which are of increasing prevalence in Australia.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Did you say you are going to be looking at 4,000 children?

Prof. Sanson—It will be 10,000 in total. There will be two cohorts of 5,000 children each.

Senator MARK BISHOP—So you are looking at essentially 10,000 families, are you?

Prof. Sanson—That is right.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Are you going to be looking at all family types?

Prof. Sanson—Yes; it will be representative of the Australian population.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Within those family types, will you be looking at all those families who choose the different forms of child care, from mums staying at home to mums working 40 hours a week, the whole lot of them?

Prof. Sanson—Absolutely. We will be recruiting our sample based on the age of the children, so there will be 5,000 families who have babies aged less than 12 months and 5,000 families with four-year-olds. We will be tracking those children through and gathering comprehensive data on their child-care experiences and we will be able to see what the impact of that is on their later development.

Senator MARK BISHOP—This is a child-care developmental thing. Are you attaching any other research areas to that, apart from child-care development?

Prof. Sanson—We are looking at the children's development in all the major contexts of their life. We are gathering a lot of detail on family functioning and the processes that occur within families. We will be looking at all family types, and particularly at children from separated families and single-parent families across the spectrum, as they are represented in the Australian population. We will be trying to get data from non-resident parents when the family has broken up. We will be getting data from the primary caregiver, who will normally

be the mother, but also from the secondary caregiver and, if there is a non-resident parent, also from them. We also get it from the child-care context and the preschool and school context once the children are of the right age. We will be getting data across those main contexts in which children develop. It is based on an understanding that children's development is influenced by a whole lot of different factors and that we really need to have a holistic approach to understand the complexities.

Senator MARK BISHOP—I will keep an eye on that. That is interesting.

Senator DENMAN—From what you have just said, you will be looking at these children across urban, rural and remote areas; all of those sorts of areas, because it will obviously vary.

Prof. Sanson—We are anticipating that we will be excluding remote families, because we are intending to go to the home to gather data, and the costs per child if we were to include remotes would have too great an impact on the number of children overall that we could have in the sample.

Senator MARK BISHOP—Do you know whether the Commonwealth survey scheduled for May of this year has been completed? When will the results of that be available?

Prof. Sanson—Which survey are you referring to?

Senator Vanstone—There have been lots of Commonwealth surveys. It does not ring a bell with me.

Senator MARK BISHOP—It is to do with child care. Do not worry if you do not have the details; that is okay. I thank the officers of the Australian Institute of Family Studies for attending at short notice. Thank you for your contribution to the discussion; it has been most useful. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I thank the minister as well and, of course, our faithful Hansard and secretariat.

Senator Vanstone—I thank the committee, Hansard and the institute.

Committee adjourned at 4.21 p.m.