



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Reference: Petitions presented before 26 September 2008

WEDNESDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2008

CANBERRA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Wednesday, 22 October 2008

Members: Mrs Irwin (*Chair*), Mr Broadbent (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Adams, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mr Hawke, Mr Neumann, Mr Simpkins, Mr Craig Thomson and Ms Vamvakinou

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mr Broadbent, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mr Hawke, Mrs Irwin, Mr Simpkins

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Petitions presented before 26 September 2008

WITNESSES

AYRES, Dr Russell, Branch Manager, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch, Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	2
CAMPISI, Mr Sam, National Manager, Multicultural Services, Centrelink	19
CLEARY, Ms Kim, Section Manager, Early Childhood Education Universal Access Section, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch, Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	2
CROSS, Ms Rebecca, Group Manager, Schools - Lifting Educational Outcomes Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	2
DUNNE, Ms Ellen, Executive General Manager, Public and Provider Services Division, Medicare Australia.....	19
GOLIGHTLY, Ms Malisa, Deputy Secretary, Employment, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.....	2
KESKI-NUMMI, Ms Arja, First Assistant Secretary, Refugee, Humanitarian and International Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship.....	8
KIMBER, Mr Murray, Branch Manager, Child Care Policy and Payments Branch, Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.....	2
MELLOR, Ms Rona, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Medicare Australia	19
MILLIKEN, Ms Marsha, Group Manager, Income Support and Stakeholder Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	2
MITCHELL, Ms Debbie, Branch Manager, Assurance and Student Payments Branch, Income Support and Stakeholder Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.....	2
MOLONEY, Mr Rick, Acting Assistant Secretary, Family and Income Support Delivery and Policy, Department of Human Services.....	19
POPE, Ms Kate, First Assistant Secretary, Citizenship, Settlement and Multicultural Affairs Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship.....	8
POPPE, Mr Jeff, Acting Deputy Secretary, Delivery Policy and Compliance, Department of Human Services.....	19
ROLLINGS, Ms Deb, Branch Manager, Schools Policy Grants and Reporting, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	2
TIDSWELL, Mr Grant, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Customer Service, Centrelink	19
TRABINGER, Mr David, First Assistant Secretary, Health and Customer Access, Department of Human Services.....	19
WARDOS, Mr Peter, PSM, First Assistant Secretary, Migration and Visa Policy Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship	8
WELSH, Ms Silvana, Acting Director, Student Payments, Review and Reporting, Assurance and Student Payments Branch, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.....	2
WITHNELL, Mr Mark, Area Manager, South-East Victoria, Centrelink	19

Committee met at 10.32 am

CHAIR (Mrs Irwin)—Good morning. I now declare open the third public hearing of the new Standing Committee on Petitions and welcome everyone in attendance. Under the standing orders the committee is able to examine matters relating to petitions, and, as a way of complementing the ministerial response process, the committee has decided to conduct public hearings on issues raised in petitions. We intend to invite relevant departments to provide advice on issues raised by petitioners so that petitioners of most if not all petitions are able to have the benefit of expert advice of the relevant department or departments.

The committee also intends to conduct similar meetings in states and territories with principal petitioners as a way of ensuring that petitioners can truly make their voice heard. This morning we welcome representatives of the departments of education, immigration and citizenship, and human services. The transcript of today's proceedings will be posted on the committee's website and the hearing is open to the public.

[10.33 am]

AYRES, Dr Russell, Branch Manager, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch, Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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ROLLINGS, Ms Deb, Branch Manager, Schools Policy Grants and Reporting, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

WELSH, Ms Silvana, Acting Director, Student Payments, Review and Reporting, Assurance and Student Payments Branch, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. I think we have a wonderful line-up from the department today. I will ask some questions before I hand it over to my colleagues.

I want to ask a question on a petition that was received from residents of Victoria requesting action on funding for students with a disability. In the minister's response she stated:

Consultation with key stakeholders is an important part of the process and is currently underway.

Can you give us an update on the consultation with the key stakeholders?

Ms Cross—The point the minister was referring to was consultation to improve data collection and transparency of information. A broad process is underway as part of the COAG negotiations around the new national education agreement. Within that context, the department is looking to get a better national definition of students with a disability so that if we have a consistent definition we are better able to identify where those students are and properly resource and support them. It is happening within the context of the COAG negotiations and there are a range of groups looking at data including through the Ministerial Council of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

CHAIR—I will go to another petition, regarding the approval of the doctor of physiotherapy course at Bond University. I would like to go to the minister's response to that of 3 September. I will just quote a little bit from what the minister has stated:

From 1 January 2008, Youth Allowance and Austudy assistance was extended to students undertaking Masters by coursework study, where the course is required for entry to a profession ...

She went on to state in the last paragraph:

The extension of student income support to professionally oriented coursework Masters programs does not extend to coursework Doctorates.

The question I would like to ask is: if Bond University renamed the course a masters from a doctorate, would students be eligible for the assistance?

Ms Golightly—That could be a contributing factor—yes. There is a particular process that the universities need to follow to get on the approved list, and basically they need to apply for consideration of their course to be on the determination under the legislation. When we have a look at that course we have a look at various things including whether it is a masters or a doctorate or some other thing and make a recommendation to the minister. If it is not a doctorate then it would probably help not to call it one. But there are a few other things that the guidelines look at as well. There is also the separate Australian qualifications framework, which looks at what can be used as a guide to decide whether something is a masters or a doctorate. At the moment from what we can see the university is claiming it is a doctorate, but the first step really is for the university to apply for it to be considered and then we can take all those sorts of things into account.

CHAIR—That is a good answer really for the principal petitioner—the people that actually signed that petition. I think their next avenue would be to talk to the university.

Ms Golightly—Yes, I think that would be a very good course of action.

CHAIR—That is good. I will just ask one more question on another petition before I hand over to my other colleagues. It was a petition on Commonwealth funding for public schools. The response from the minister on 20 August stated:

The Government will implement its election commitment to continue the existing funding arrangements for all schools for the next funding period (2009-2012) to provide funding certainty to schools. These arrangements will be reviewed with an open and transparent process anticipated to conclude in 2011.

Can you give the principal petitioner and people who signed that petition and the committee an update on the arrangements being reviewed?

Ms Rollings—The reference there is to the socioeconomic status funding arrangements for non-government schools. The government is committed to reviewing those arrangements. It will be a pretty broad-ranging review around the whole gamut of funding for schools. During the course of that review, there will obviously be widespread consultation and probably public forums so that people can express a view around the funding arrangements.

CHAIR—When you talk about widespread consultations what sorts of groups are you looking at?

Ms Rollings—We have not got terms of reference for the review but I would expect there would be opportunities for people to provide submissions to the committee or the reference group or steering committee whichever helped to set the review up.

Ms Cross—We would normally engage with all of the key stakeholders—principals organisations, teachers organisations, non-government authorities and parents organisations—as part of the review of that nature.

CHAIR—And when do you think you will get the terms of reference for this review?

Ms Rollings—I would expect we would start work on that next year in time to get some advice to government about what the nature of the review would look like.

CHAIR—Are you looking at early next year or—

Ms Rollings—I would not really like to commit at this point given whatever the priorities of the work plan are, but we will start—

CHAIR—But you are looking at virtually doing that in, say, 2009?

Ms Rollings—Yes.

Ms GEORGE—Is the report that was prepared by the department under the former government—which examined the SES model and drew attention to some of the inequities and the anomalies in it—a public document?

Ms Rollings—No, it is not. It was prepared on the basis of it going to cabinet at the time and that is how it is being treated. However, I do know that the *Sydney Morning Herald* leaked an earlier version of it. So it was up on the *Sydney Morning Herald* website for everyone to see but it was not a final version.

Mr ADAMS—And it is not a public document?

Ms Rollings—No.

Mr CHESTER—One of the points you raised was in regard to the petition about children with disabilities—I think you made a comment about properly resourcing and supporting them. Is there any national consistency at the moment on the type of support we offer the families and the children with disabilities? Is there any state doing better than others? You mentioned COAG and that type of thing. I am just wondering where we are at the moment. I know it is a huge issue in a lot of our regional areas about actually accessing the services that are available and whether skilled staff are available to help these children achieve their best possible outcomes.

Ms Cross—Certainly from the Australian government's point of view our funding is consistent. If it is provided through the normal recurrent funding arrangements we have a consistent amount per student for government schools and also for non-government schools depending on the socioeconomic status of the school, which is the funding arrangement Ms Rollings was referring to. In terms of supplementary assistance, again that is per capita based and it is exactly the same amount for each student depending on which sector of schooling they are enrolled in. From our point of view, if you are in a government school you would get the same funding rate across Australia. If you are in a non-government school, the general recurrent funding depends on the need of the school but the additional support for students with a disability again is consistent.

Mr CHESTER—And just on that extra point, is there any state in Australia doing it better than others that we can learn from—other programs that are state based that you have seen or am I pushing my luck a bit there?

Ms Cross—Again, the issue is that we do not have a consistent definition of what a student with a disability is. Until we get that consistent definition you cannot actually make comparisons between states so the first piece of work that we are embarking on is to try and get an agreed definition nationally on students with a disability. At the moment each state has quite different definitions so it is quite hard to compare what they are offering.

Mr CHESTER—The petition referred to portability and I think that we also refer to portability when they are transferring between states. Do these children make the transition between states well? What is your experience there?

Ms Cross—Because the definitions vary within states of what a student with a disability is, for some children they could be eligible for additional support in one state and if they moved interstate under that state's definition they might not be. In terms of the Commonwealth's funding we look at the definition that the state is applying and provide the funding on that basis.

Mr CHESTER—Just taking up that point, if a child has a certain level of funding in Victoria but there is a different definition in Western Australia, would their federal funding be affected as well?

Ms Cross—I will just get the basis on which we apply the funding because we are stuck by the use of the state definitions.

Mr ADAMS—Do you have the state definitions written down somewhere?

Ms Cross—I do not have them, but they would be available because the states use them in applying their policies.

Mr ADAMS—That would be very good, thank you.

Mr CHESTER—That's fine—I can refer to those if I can see them later on.

Mr ADAMS—How does the department go about getting who responds to the petition—do you have a structure so it goes to a relevant area?

Ms Golightly—Yes, the department is organised under the broad areas of outcomes that we deliver for the government: education, higher education, employment and workplace relations. We then have a structure underneath that as to which area would be best placed to respond to the particular petition.

Mr ADAMS—I want to come back to the disability area. The major issue is that there is no consistent definition of disabilities. I think my colleague mentioned that one state might have a different definition from another. Their funding would depend on that and, therefore, the child moving from one state to another has a difficulty in doing that. If the child goes to a private school, and if that school is seen to be at a certain level, there would be less funding, or no funding. It is a pretty complex process.

Ms Cross—Yes, it is a very complex process.

Mr ADAMS—Do you have any figures on how many students there are in the state and private systems in Australia? Do we have those sorts of statistics?

Ms Cross—Yes, we have statistics on the students that we provide the supplementary funding to and that is based on them requiring and being provided with additional support. In 2007 there were around 120,000 within the government school sector and in the non-government sector there were around 30,000.

CHAIR—We have got a petition that was lodged by the member for Page, Ms Saffin, on 17 September regarding preschools. We have not really had a response from the minister at this stage so once we have that ministerial response I know the department will come back to us over the next 12 months or the next couple of years. Once we get that response that is when I think I will ask questions on that particular petition.

Ms GEORGE—In terms of the new provisions for the childcare tax rebate, does the out-of-pocket expense for a preschool participant qualify for the rebate or not?

Mr Kimber—The increase from 30 to 50 per cent for childcare tax rebate which came into force on 1 July 2008 will be administered in the same way. The costs for preschools do not attract the childcare tax rebate.

Ms GEORGE—Currently?

Mr Kimber—Yes, currently.

CHAIR—As there are no more questions, we thank you very much for coming before the committee today.

[10.50 am]

KESKI-NUMMI, Ms Arja, First Assistant Secretary, Refugee, Humanitarian and International Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

POPE, Ms Kate, First Assistant Secretary, Citizenship, Settlement and Multicultural Affairs Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

VARDOS, Mr Peter, PSM, First Assistant Secretary, Migration and Visa Policy Division, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

As you would be aware, we have received a response from the minister regarding 410 visa holders seeking permanent residency. I would like to let you know that it will be tabled in the House of Representatives on Monday, 10 November at 8.30 pm. Is it the wish of the committee that that response be accepted as evidence? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

I am going to start off the first lot of questions on behalf of our principal petitioners before I pass it on to other committee members. I would like to go to a petition that was lodged regarding the review of Commonwealth immigration funding. A response was received from the minister on 24 August. Could you advise the committee on how regularly reviews of migration policy are conducted and if there is an ongoing monitoring and evaluation process?

Mr Vardos—I can certainly speak in relation to the migration program, which is distinct from what my colleagues do. Review of policy is an ongoing activity. There is no specific period where it stops and starts. Clearly, in preparation for cabinet's annual consideration of the migration program, it ramps up towards the end of the year as we go into the process that leads to the release of the budget. As it happens, we have a very active policy deliberation process at the moment under the guidance of the minister, in relation to the composition and planning cycles of the migration program, greater targeting of skilled migration, more responsiveness to labour market needs and that sort of thing. So there is a concerted effort at the moment. The key point is that assessment and analysis of migration policy is an ongoing activity. But there is a different focus from time to time, depending on what the minister of the day wishes to have done.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Can I add to that?

CHAIR—Please do.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Peter talks about the migration program. I have responsibility for the offshore refugee humanitarian program, which goes through a fairly similar process of an annual submission to cabinet and the government in relation to the program for the coming year. We track very closely throughout the year, in terms of outcomes and visa decisions, whether it

throws up any policy issues that we need to have a look at regarding the particular policy settings at any given time.

CHAIR—I just want to go now to a petition that was presented on 26 May to the House, regarding income support for asylum seekers. You would have the minister's reply of 24 August.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR—I am going to ask, virtually, a few questions in one. The minister stated in his reply to the petitions committee:

I have directed the Department to pursue the issue of work rights for asylum seekers as part of a broader, coherent Bridging visa policy.

He went on to state:

Formal consultations with the community sector and other agencies will be undertaken to determine the best approaches prior to a policy decision on this matter.

The question that I would like to ask the department is: what is the time frame, what consultations are involved, are public submissions being invited as well as the community sector agencies and what community groups are included in the consultations? That was a number of questions all in one.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Yes, sure. I did not write them down, so just remind me if I do not answer something.

CHAIR—I will check them off as you go.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Okay. In relation to the 45-day rule on bridging visas, the minister is currently considering some policy changes and options, and once he has made some decisions around that we will certainly commence consultations. We would expect those consultations to commence at the middle to the end of November. The sorts of groups that we envisage meeting with are some of the key stakeholders that we generally talk to about issues around asylum and protection. They include groups like the Refugee Council of Australia, the asylum seeker centres and resource centres and the various refugee advice and casework-type services, so that is a broad group of stakeholders and community organisations that have an interest either in the policy settings or in the provision of support to asylum seekers while they are in Australia. In terms of public submissions, I do not envisage that we would be calling for public submissions, but rather we would be developing a framework under which we would then go to consult with various organisations. Is there anything else? Did I miss something?

CHAIR—No, I think we have covered all of that. This will be really good for the principal petitioner, the Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne—it was their petition. I am sure that they would be able to put a submission—

Ms Keski-Nummi—They would, and we would certainly be consulting, because a lot of the church based groups are very interested in this and provide a lot of the support. They would be part of the stakeholder groups we would be talking to.

CHAIR—That is good.

Mr BROADBENT—You have already been talking to these groups of people. Why would you be consulting with them after you have made the decision on what the government will be doing? I happen to know there has been a lot of consultation with stakeholder groups on this issue already.

Ms Keski-Nummi—To my knowledge, not on the 45-day rule itself. We have been talking on a number of other different areas. This is not a decision that we have put into place. Whatever the minister considers would be a draft. He would want us then to go out and consult and come back to him with whatever other issues have been raised through those particular consultations, and it may then require some amendments or changes to the particular framework.

Mr CHESTER—My question probably crosses over a couple of the petitions. In a general sense, is there recognition of the particular assistance required when you are settling asylum seekers or immigrants into a regional environment? We have had the experience that it may be more difficult for them to fit into a smaller community; employment opportunities can be limited and there is the need to educate the receiving community about the culture of the people. It tends to have an impact on that community. I am just wondering where your responsibility or the department's responsibility starts and finishes once a group arrives, if you like.

Ms Keski-Nummi—On one point, I think you need to be aware that there are two different groups that you are talking about. Asylum seekers are in Australia. They have arrived by whatever means and are probably in regions or areas where they may already have contacts and so forth. The humanitarian program, which is where we resettle people from offshore, is quite different.

Ms Pope—It is that that I can talk about in some more detail if that would be helpful. The intake is around 13,000 every year, with the people who are onshore—the asylum seekers who get visas onshore—being subtracted from that total. That leaves us with a group that we can look to settle across Australia. More than two-thirds of the people who come have a relative or a friend, and they choose to settle where that relative or friend is. If that happens to be in a regional area then that would drive some regional settlement, but for the most part that is not the case, depending on the way you look at 'regional'. For example, if you consider Newcastle and Wollongong to be regional then there is some settlement there, at Geelong in Victoria, at Toowoomba in Queensland and so on.

As far as us deliberately driving settlement in regional areas, we have a pilot program that we set up in Shepparton where we have deliberately settled a group of Congolese families. That program started in 2005. We have current pilots in Ballarat in Victoria, and in Mount Gambier and Murray Bridge in South Australia. They are the only places where we deliberately send people who have freshly arrived from overseas. They settle first off in those locations. We carefully select the families that we send to those places, and the places themselves are chosen on the basis of consultations with state government, all of the relevant agencies and the

community itself. A pilot of that nature requires sign-off between the minister and the premier of the state before commencement. It covers things like access to education and medical services, the welcoming nature of the community, and the community's readiness to assist a group of people to settle.

In the case of Ballarat it is a group of Togolese entrants, and in Mount Gambier and Murray Bridge they are Burmese. The locations are chosen because there are employment opportunities and because there is housing available. So it is looking at a whole suite of services, such as public transport, and where those things do not add up we do not do it. Unless all those conditions are met we do not do it, even if the state government or the town itself really wants to have a settlement program. That is not to say that people do not spontaneously move to regional areas. A recent example of that is Castlemaine in Victoria, where there is a bacon factory. Fifty Sudanese and their families moved spontaneously to Castlemaine. We did not have a lot of settlement services in that area because it was not a high settlement place before, but we have funded a grant to help with their settlement.

So there are different ways it happens. Warrnambool in Victoria deliberately tried to attract humanitarian entrants who had settled in Melbourne to move to Warrnambool because they wanted them to work in the abattoirs. The meat industry actually drives a lot of employment in the refugee cohort at the moment. If you mapped where the abattoirs and meat-processing factories are and the regional settlement of refugees there would be quite a close correlation. Whilst we encourage people to settle in regional areas we do not push it but, in fact, the experience of those pilot locations is that it has worked better than in the cities. They get more personal attention: the churches, schools and community organisations really line up to help them. Shepparton has been a really great success in that regard. The families that have settled there are attending Catholic schools. The Catholic community has welcomed them very warmly and their settlement has been very successful. At least one head of all of the families, if not two, are working. Three of the young men who arrived with no English in 2005 started university this year at RMIT and Victoria University—doing architecture and engineering, I think—which is just incredible. So there are two sides to it, but where it is spontaneous and not supported it can be a struggle to start with. But, of course, people are free to move and live wherever they choose.

Mr CHESTER—Just on the question of the spontaneous ones, the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland had a strong population of Sudanese people who moved into the community. I think it has been largely positive. It is a question of whether resources are there on the ground. Once you realise this move is on, is it your responsibility to respond or is it the state government's responsibility?

Ms Pope—It is a combination. We have the Settlement Grants Program, an approximately \$34 million program each year, where grants are let to community organisations to assist people who have arrived in the past five years to settle. They are one-, two- and three-year grants. Each year we have about \$20 million to allocate. We do a needs survey across the country of where people are and what they need and what the gaps are. We are then able to address the gaps by calling for projects that meet those needs. Gippsland is one such area, as is the area around Moe. There is spontaneous movement out of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne to Moe which is driven partly by work opportunities and partly by cheaper housing. So we are aware of that movement.

We have a settlement database that tells us where people who arrive are intending to live, and we now have a data link with Medicare so that when they go to the doctor we get an updated address. So we do actually know now where movement is happening. So when people give us anecdotal reports such as, 'There are 50 people in Castlemaine,' we can now actually get a better sense of whether that is right or not and direct our resources where they are most needed. And \$34 million a year sounds like a lot but it is not actually, when you think of the number we are trying to help and the level of need.

CHAIR—It is a drop in the ocean really, isn't it?

Ms Pope—It is. We naturally advocate every year for more money for it and we reprioritise to the things that we think will make a difference. One of the things we are looking at now is help with housing. We have never supported people trying to learn about being good tenants before but, given the competition for rental properties, an African family with eight kids is not going to be at the top of the list for a house. We have quite a lot of innovative ideas about training people how to present themselves and so on. One of our service providers hires a handyman in Perth—you cannot get handymen in Perth—and the real estate agent will give him properties because they send the handyman in to fix the house when they arrive and they send him back in again when the family leaves. It is great for the real estate agent. There is lots of stuff like that, which is really very clever and cheap—it is run on the smell of an oily rag, really. They achieve an awful lot.

Mr CHESTER—This is not a resources bid.

Ms Pope—No.

Mr ADAMS—We do not have the money.

Ms Pope—The other side of it is that we have multicultural programs in the community, such as the Living in Harmony program. There are a lot of small grants in regional areas to deal with issues that might arise on social cohesion and communities getting along. Some of that involves getting along with the local Indigenous community in regional areas. It might be an Islander Indigenous issue or whatever it might be. The process works very similarly to the settlement grants. It is a yearly round and people put in bids for issues that they would like to try and address. That is an even smaller program—it is only \$1.5 million—but it does a lot of good with a lot of small grants.

Mr CHESTER—If we can get those children interested in football and netball they will be very popular in country towns.

Ms Pope—Yes. We have really focused a lot on the sporting side of things.

Mr CHESTER—That is often the way.

Ms Keski-Nummi—And the AFL is doing quite well with refugee kids too.

Mr BROADBENT—Cricket Australia is another one.

Ms Pope—We funded a partnership under Living in Harmony. We have the grants program but also a major partnerships program which we had with the then Australian Cricket Board, which was called Crick-Kids. It was aimed at involving kids from all sorts of backgrounds in cricket. That was a very successful program. We work with the AFL and the NRL. And we agree—when a person from Togo is an AFL star, the whole community has made it. It makes a huge difference.

CHAIR—You would have some future stars.

Ms Pope—We hope so.

CHAIR—It will be wonderful.

Mr SIMPKINS—With regard to asylum seekers, who is responsible for what, basically? Who looks after these guys once they are actually released?

Ms Keski-Nummi—Very few people are actually in detention. Most people who come to Australia have been on a visitor visa or have come in as a student. They have come in on particular types of visas and remained lawfully within the community or may have become unlawful and applied for asylum. Maybe there have been changes in the conditions of the country they came from. They then would apply for asylum in Australia, for a protection visa. I have not got the accurate number in my head, but last year we received around 3,900 protection visa applications. Most people would probably be living in the community or would have particular contacts, friends or family in the community as they are going through that particular protection visa process. There are some people who have no contacts and who have applied for protection when they have arrived in Australia. Depending on what their visa conditions were when they arrived in Australia, whether they had work conditions, whether they remained lawful and whether they applied within the 45-day period, they may then have those work conditions carry over.

For others, that is not necessarily the case. If they have been unlawful and they get a bridging visa E, they would not have work rights, because they have not applied within that 45-day period. In that instance, that is where the issues come up, particularly through the petitions, about people who have been in the community a long period of time. Normally, it is not people who are protection visa applicants themselves, because we have a 90-day requirement for making decisions. It is probably people who have been refused protection, may already have been through the Refugee Review Tribunal and are now either going through a judicial review process or a ministerial intervention. They do not have work rights, may have been in the community for quite a period of time and may be destitute. I think that is the group that we are essentially talking about regarding the 45-day rule and the issues that come up around that.

Some people will have access to the Asylum Seeker Assistance scheme, which is where we contract the Red Cross to provide support and assistance to people, but they have to meet particular conditions for eligibility. Apart from that—and this is where I think the petitions come from—we have church-based groups and Asylum Seeker Resource Centres. They provide support to individuals while they are going through that particular process. The short answer probably is that there is a small group where ASA is eligible for people. There is also a group of

individuals who community organisations normally pick up and support while they are going through the ministerial intervention and judicial review processes particularly.

Mr SIMPKINS—Of the 3,900 normal protection visa applicants, how many would be the subject of this petition? What sort of proportion would be in this sort of case, where—

Ms Keski-Nummi—There is a very small number of those who would actually be protection visa applicants. There would be a small number who applied after the 45 days. I would have to take it on notice and come back with more accurate statistics in relation to that.

CHAIR—It would be good if you could take that on notice and get back to the committee.

Mr ADAMS—On the changing nature of policy from time to time, do we change our policy on refugees if there is a need—if there are issues in the world and the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees rings up the minister or something?

Ms Keski-Nummi—Yes, that does happen if there are international appeals for resettlement. Would you like me to go through the normal planning process in terms of the humanitarian program?

Mr ADAMS—No, that is okay. Women and children are sometimes the most vulnerable in refugee camps in the world.

Ms Keski-Nummi—That is correct. We have a women at risk program and there is a targeted allocation that 10.5 per cent of the program should be for women at risk. Typically, we resettle or grant visas for around 13 per cent to 14 per cent each year so each year we actually overreach that particular target.

Mr ADAMS—I want to ask about labour market visas as well and the issue of cost to people arriving in Australia to take up work using a visa. Is there any monitoring of how much money they pay agents back in their own country?

Mr Vardos—The short answer is no, because it is difficult to do. The department's clear and unambiguous position is that where a client determines they have to use a migration agent, our strong advice is that they use one that is registered with the Migration Agents Registration Authority in Australia. Whether they practice onshore or offshore does not matter, as long as they are registered. They have a code of ethics for continuous professional development. But people do use unregistered agents. We have no way of controlling what they do offshore because our laws do not have any extraterritorial impact. So the short answer to your question is no, we cannot monitor how much they pay.

Mr ADAMS—What about the cost of airfares and settlement when somebody arrives in Australia? Is that met by the employer?

Mr Vardos—That can vary. If you come in as an independent skilled migrant under the general skilled migration program, the cost is yours. You have migrated to the country; you then set up your house and look for a job.

Mr ADAMS—That is the traditional migration program for how we built Australia, but under—

Mr Vardos—If they are sponsored by an employer, then it is up to the negotiation between the individual and the employer as to what conditions they get out of that. There is no format or template.

Mr ADAMS—There is nothing hooked on to the visa that says the person has some rights that their airfares are paid when they arrive?

Mr Vardos—That would be a contractual agreement between the client and their employer.

Mr ADAMS—The person might pay enormous amounts of money back out of the wages they earn in Australia to actually get here? That is a possibility?

Mr Vardos—It depends on which visa you are talking about. If they come out under the employer nominated scheme as a permanent migrant—

Mr ADAMS—I am not talking about that program, I am talking about—

Mr Vardos—Are you talking about 457s?

Mr ADAMS—Yes.

Mr Vardos—The temporary skilled visa. Our position is that there has to be a minimum salary level paid by the employer, depending on the skill level of the job. There is a schedule that goes with that. We do not support the deduction of, for example, board and lodgings from the pay before it is given to the employee. If the employer has something to offer by way of accommodation or whatever, again that is a matter for the employee to negotiate with the employer. We do not accept deductions from the minimum salary level before the weekly pay cheque goes out.

Mr ADAMS—You are in a bit of a weak position there with negotiations though, aren't you? If you come from overseas with a 457 visa, you are only here because of that visa, you are working for an employer and the employer seems to have most of the trumps. Would you say that was a reality—though not in every case of course?

Mr Vardos—I would not generalise it to that extent. At the moment there are 110,000 primary and secondary grants in the 457 visa category. That would span highly-educated people at the very top end of the skills spectrum who could be earning a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year through to boners and slicers on the production line of the meatworks. They have different levels of education and different levels of vulnerability because of the knowledge and their ability to stand their ground and negotiate. So the lower they are in the skill and education level, the greater the level of vulnerability to exploitation. They are some of the issues that are currently being reviewed as a part of the review of the 457 program. Indeed, Barbara Deegan, who is on leave from the Industrial Relations Commission and is an industrial relations expert, has been commissioned by the minister to conduct an integrity review which is looking at exactly these issues.

Mr ADAMS—That is good.

CHAIR—I will take the final questions as we only have about five minutes. Regarding the petition and the minister's response, which I will be tabling in the House on the 10 November, regarding retirement 410 visas, just for the record and for the principal petitioner and the people who signed that petition, what is the process for review of immigration decisions, and is the department aware of the number of people in a similar category to the petitioners?

Mr Vardos—On the review of immigration decisions, I assume where someone gets a negative decision they have a right of appeal, depending on the visa category, through the Refugee Review Tribunal or the Migration Review Tribunal. So there is an appeal process. Beyond the tribunals themselves legal action is possible. There are a number of actions in the Federal Court that are immigration related so there is access to an array of appeal mechanisms including up to, in some cases, the High Court of Australia depending on how serious the person is about the case.

In relation to 410 visa holders, yes, we do know how many 410 visa holders there are in Australia—it is part of our database. That visa class was shut down some time ago before I arrived in this job so the date does not instantly come to mind. We and the minister are certainly alert to the issue that has been put forward by the 410 visa holders in terms of wanting a pathway to permanent residence and we are actively looking at those issues under the minister's advice. The issues impact beyond our portfolio, of course—there are health cost considerations et cetera. We are engaged in dialogue with the usual suspects, such as the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Finance and Deregulation and others, looking at this issue. But, at the moment, other than some minor enhancements which I think relate to the rollover period of the visa, there is no immediate pathway to permanent residence for 410 visa holders but that issue is under active consideration.

CHAIR—So that we do know how many 410 retirement visa holders in Australia there are, you did not give us the amount. How many have we got here?

Mr Vardos—I might have to take that on notice because it is not immediately obvious to me and it is not a number that sticks in my head but I can get that fairly quickly.

CHAIR—It would be interesting for the principal petitioner and committee members to know that.

Mr SIMPKINS—I would like to clarify something in regard to that. Could we get that figure per electorate or state maybe?

Mr Vardos—We may have figures by jurisdiction of residence but not by electorate.

Mr SIMPKINS—Okay, whatever you can do.

Mr Vardos—There is actually a lobby group called British Expatriate Retirees in Australia, BERIA, who lobby on this issue.

CHAIR—I would like to note that the committee would wish to note for the record that in general it does not seek to intervene in personal cases where the department may already be involved with the petitioner.

Mr BROADBENT—We are dealing here with a petition where a group of people, in this case the Synod of the Anglican Church, are talking about a particular group of people who we treat appallingly as a nation and we have treated them appallingly in this process. That is what is being noted in this petition. You did mention that we give money to the Red Cross. We should be giving money to all of those people who are supporting these refugees in dire straits, probably with very little language and often with great skills that could be used very well.

We as a nation—I am not talking about you as a department—should be looking at these refugee advocacy groups and support groups and giving them the same money we are giving to the Red Cross. That money is now coming from these Anglicans here—and I should tell you that I am a member of the Synod and probably voted on that issue. But that is not my reason for saying this. We have a responsibility. I believe the current minister is looking at these issues and there is a review going on as to how we might work better as a nation with this group of people. You can understand that if the Synod and its people are pouring money into that group of people to support them that means they are not pouring money into others in the community that may be equally deserving but not as destitute. It is a responsibility of ours as a nation.

Kate, I do not want to blow your bubble. You are obviously very enthusiastic and very proud of the work that your department does. However, there is a lot of secondary migration and that is not being picked up by the department. It now behoves those who are working within regional communities to identify the address and the nationality of the person and let the department know where these people have moved to, so we can do two things: firstly, give the existing people that are looking after refugees in any area some of those grants of support, and, hopefully, the department can recommend to ministers that there are things that we can do. Secondly, identify where these people have moved to and get some support out of your resettlement money into those areas where there have been secondary responses.

Ms Pope—We have done that.

Mr BROADBENT—I know you have done that, but there is some more that can be done.

Ms Pope—There is always more.

Mr BROADBENT—We should never forget—and I hope the department never forgets—all of those people who have been working with these refugees for a long, long time. We need to support those people also. We do not move on from the past just because, ‘We’ve changed our policy; now we only do resettlement.’ There is a whole community out there. Darren, you would know that 23 per cent of families in our area of Gippsland are first generation, overseas born; second generation, 52 per cent. Let’s recognise who we are. We are a product of these people and we should treat them accordingly.

Mr Vardos—I have found some data which I can give you now. As of 8 March, there were 8,689 holders of 410 visas in the country from 68 countries. Fifty-nine per cent were from the

UK, seven per cent from Japan and five per cent from the USA, and approximately half of those visa holders have immediate family members in Australia.

CHAIR—I would just like to state that I have to agree with the comments of the deputy chair. I look forward to the outcome of the consultations and looking at the public submissions that will be coming before the department and the minister.

Mr CHESTER—I also want to associate myself with the deputy chair's remarks and to wish you well, Kate, with your resettlement work, because there really are some enormous problems, in regional areas in particular.

Ms Pope—It is challenging.

CHAIR—I think you can see that, this being a new committee, we have a wonderful team and it is a great bipartisan committee, at this stage. I hope it continues.

Mr Vardos—You do not need to do any conversion on this side of the table.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Can I thank you for those comments as well, because I think the minister and the department are acutely aware of some of the issues and are working fairly actively to address them and see how we can take this forward.

Mr ADAMS—We need to tap the goodwill that exists in our communities, especially our regional communities.

Ms Keski-Nummi—Yes.

CHAIR—You are so right, Mr Adams. I thank the department for coming before us today and I look forward to seeing you in the future.

Mr Vardos—I will get the statistics, by jurisdiction, to you if we have them.

[11.25 am]

CAMPISI, Mr Sam, National Manager, Multicultural Services, Centrelink

TIDSWELL, Mr Grant, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Customer Service, Centrelink

WITHNELL, Mr Mark, Area Manager, South-East Victoria, Centrelink

MOLONEY, Mr Rick, Acting Assistant Secretary, Family and Income Support Delivery and Policy, Department of Human Services

POPPLER, Mr Jeff, Acting Deputy Secretary, Delivery Policy and Compliance, Department of Human Services

TRABINGER, Mr David, First Assistant Secretary, Health and Customer Access, Department of Human Services

DUNNE, Ms Ellen, Executive General Manager, Public and Provider Services Division, Medicare Australia

MELLOR, Ms Rona, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Medicare Australia

Mr BROADBENT—Chair, can we get a whole lot of things done while they are all acting?

CHAIR—That is what I was wondering! I was just going to state for the record that I will hand over to the acting chair in about 10 minutes as I have to leave for a moment. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I have one or two questions regarding a petition about waiting times at the Booragoon Medicare office in Belmont in Western Australia.

Ms Mellor—Booragoon office is in the Garden City Shopping Centre in Western Australia.

CHAIR—I want to go to the minister's response, where he stated:

The presence of a Medicare office in Belmont is under active consideration by the Government.

I scratched my head when I saw 'active consideration by the government'. Can you tell the principal petitioner and the committee what that actually means?

Ms Mellor—Belmont, Western Australia was one of the offices nominated in the election campaign. At this point in time we are implementing a co-located service in Emerald in Queensland as one of the election commitments out of the most recent budget. There are a number of other announcements about new Medicare services to be offered in other locations that are under discussion in the context of the budget and the government's thinking about service delivery reform. There was \$10 million in the budget provided to the Department of

Human Services to look at where in the near, medium and long-term future Australians can appropriately access a range of services from within the Human Services portfolio. That consideration includes the commitments that were made in the election campaign and goes down, across the portfolio, to what the appropriate location of services are for all Australians.

CHAIR—How long does a process of active consideration take? Mr Popple, you are acting?

Mr Popple—I am acting.

CHAIR—Go for it!

Mr Popple—Usually the government makes these considerations and announces them in the budget context. So you would be looking towards the budget in May next year. Without wishing to speak on behalf of the government, but that is when these announcements are normally made.

Mr BROADBENT—Did somebody say they were going to build one before the election campaign?

Mr Popple—The government made a number of commitments in relation to several locations. As they announced in the budget they are funding the establishment of one at Emerald, as Ms Mellor pointed out. They are considering the timetable around the other election commitments.

Mr BROADBENT—Considering.

CHAIR—I want to go to another petition before I hand it over to the acting chair or other members. I want to go to a response from the minister on 5 May, regarding the Centrelink service provisions, particularly the Morwell Centrelink customer service centre. I want to quote from his response where he stated:

Although queue wait times at Morwell are generally within the Centrelink standard, delays were identified for several weeks towards the end of 2007 and at the beginning of 2008.

He went on to say:

This was a result of a seasonal peak in workload, arising from former students entering the labour force.

I will just ask, on behalf of the principal petitioner and the people who signed that petition, can the department assure the committee that changes put in place this year will avoid the same thing happening at the end of this year when similar reasons for peaks arise?

Mr Tidswell—I will answer that and then ask Mr Withnell, who is the manager for that area in Victoria, to provide some further comment. We were disappointed with what happened in late 2007 into early 2008. It certainly was not how we want to operate. It is a seasonal peak time, and we get students moving into the workforce and then setting up maybe to go back to study, so it is often a difficult busy period for us in our offices. But there was a combination of events there at Morwell that led to us having some problems. We have been putting a lot of effort into getting on top of our queues and our performance in a whole range of ways. We just did not handle the workload as well as we would have liked. Particularly over that period of time, the wait times

were difficult and problematic. Mr Withnell has put in place a number of processes and mechanisms, an intensive changeover in leadership team, really looked at the processes. We commissioned a value creation workshop that we run internally, where we draw in some customers to give us some feedback on our service and how we can approach our service better. We have been monitoring closely the performance there at Morwell. Mark runs probably one of the better areas in the country. This was not something that was a high water mark for Mark. He has put a lot of effort into improving our performance in that area. You might want to provide some further comment, Mark.

Mr BROADBENT—Please ignore that you have got your two local members sitting here.

Mr Withnell—I was prepared for that. We were very concerned in early December when the queues started to become a problem at Morwell, and we took some steps almost immediately to try and work out what was underpinning some of the issues there. By February we had pretty much re-engineered the whole office in terms of how it operated. There were a number of things that had happened in relation to people being able to go part-time and the schedule of their hours did not meet the demand that we had. We have addressed all of those issues. At this stage—there is some data I could give you—that at that time the queue wait times on average were around 15 minutes. Now they are down to 3½ minutes on average. That is for the reception queue. The sit down wait times have gone from 17 minutes down to just over eight minutes on average. Also in relation to recent customer satisfaction, the incidence of queue wait times over 10 minutes were reported by customers to have halved in that period. So there was significant intervention in terms of managing the demand much better. We are aware of the peak. We have a leadership team there that is now focused on making it the best Christmas Morwell CSC has had.

CHAIR—Do you feel that, for the principal petitioner and the petitioners who signed that petition, you are fairly confident that you cannot see this happening again this year?

Mr Withnell—We are confident that we have things in place that will prevent that from occurring. There will be some increase in traffic, as there is at that time of the year, so obviously we cannot guarantee that they will be as low as they have been in recent months, but they certainly will not blow out in the way that they have in the previous year.

CHAIR—I just have to leave for a minute. I will pass to the acting chair.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Broadbent)—Rona or Jeff, the previous status of Medicare was as a business enterprise. There did not seem to be a keenness by the former federal government to place more Medicare offices in locations that you would have expected them to be for the population that was there. Has there been any change of policy in regard to the placement? I will give you an example. Traralgon has an office, Morwell has an office, and there is a large population at Moe but no office. Obviously, Belmont want an office. I suppose everybody of a certain population size is going to want an office from you. Has there been a change?

Ms Mellor—I might answer that without going to whether there has been a change of policy. I think the location of a Medicare office in the past has always been driven by a number of factors, such as—obviously—population and demand for services. The highest demand service that Medicare has at present is cash claiming for patients. If there has been a change, it is a change that says the most convenient way for a patient to get access to their claim when they have been

billed, as opposed to bulk-billed by a doctor, is to get that claim sorted at the point of service. The big change that we have had is focused on convenience for cash claiming and to actually take it out of the office network. People go to the doctor. If they are bulk-billed that is all sorted by the doctor now. If they are patient-billed, which is the choice of the doctor, instead of having to troop down to a Medicare office or even find one or put it in the post—we do have teleclaiming; people can call and claim as well—that all gets sorted in the process of paying the bill at the doctors. Our strategy at the moment is to increase the availability of that service through medical practices. It is not an insignificant task; it is an enormous change of medical practices. It is a huge change for the community that has been very well served by Medicare for 30 years. Generally, it has faster queues than other places—people walk out with cash in their hand and a good feeling. Making this change will take time. There are a large number of practices already engaged in this; about 26 per cent of GP services that are patient-billed are currently sorted for claiming purposes at the doctors.

ACTING CHAIR—So what you are really telling us is that you want to move from one model—that is what you see as the 50s and 60s model—

Ms Mellor—The 70s and 80s perhaps.

ACTING CHAIR—Sorry, the 70s and 80s model up to—

Ms Mellor—The 21st century.

ACTING CHAIR—the way we are going to go about doing these things into the future, and this is therefore affecting regional communities, or communities such as Belmont. Is this the Belmont in Geelong?

Ms Mellor—Belmont is suburban.

Mr SIMPKINS—It is pretty inner suburban.

Ms Mellor—Yes, it is inner suburban.

ACTING CHAIR—And they want an office.

Ms Mellor—In saying that, I am not talking about the opening and closing of offices, just the cash-claiming proportion. There are, clearly, a range of other services—enrolments into the Medicare program, the safety net, new babies coming along and mums wanting to get them on the card et cetera—that Medicare obviously provides to the community through its office network. We also provide family assistance services and a range of services that might be deployed to us. We do LPG rebate, for example, as does Centrelink. So there are a range of things we do in an office not associated with cash claiming, but for Australians the most inconvenient thing that we do is have them troop to a Medicare office to get a claim when there is a potential that they could be getting it at the doctor's surgery—in the event that they are not bulk-billed. That is the focus.

ACTING CHAIR—Has government, as a department, ever thought of combining what Mark does in Gippsland, for instance, with what you do in Gippsland and just putting the two together? So we could walk into a Centrelink office—

Ms Mellor—There is an idea!

ACTING CHAIR—Instead of the Centrelink office doing all the welfare orientated work, the Medicare office might consider—and you have branch offices as well, as you know, Mark—doing some of that work. If those two were combined, especially in places such as Tasmania, parts of Victoria and rural Australia, there would be a less discriminatory entry into a Centrelink office.

Ms Mellor—You mean we could pull up their brand!

ACTING CHAIR—You are in trouble already and I am not going to be blamed for you getting into trouble! It would be a less discriminatory walk into the Centrelink office if there were other services provided by Centrelink, such as Medicare.

Mr Popple—In the past, Centrelink and Medicare have done a number of what they called service delivery trials. In four Medicare locations and in four Centrelink locations, they combined services on a trial basis and those eight sites have continued. Off the top of my head, there were some in Victoria at Box Hill and Hastings. There were eight of those trials and the government used the results of those trials to evaluate such combined service.

ACTING CHAIR—And nothing happened.

Mr Popple—That was under the previous government. In the budget context the current government has announced that it is funding the Department of Human Services to undertake a review of service delivery arrangements. We are currently doing that review process at the moment. The results of that will be considered by government in due course.

ACTING CHAIR—This is probably nothing to do with you people, but if you corral a business enterprise that may be offered for sale at some time, you therefore would not be encouraging its interaction with a major government service of another type.

Mr Popple—I do not correctly see what you are saying. I do not think the government has indicated any preference for selling either Medicare or Centrelink. I see them both as being part—

ACTING CHAIR—I am not suggesting so, and do not verbal me on selling Centrelink! If you have a business enterprise that is, perhaps, available to be privatised, and one that will never be privatised, that is a discouragement to join the two together in any area.

Mr Popple—I think the current thinking would see both Centrelink and Medicare remaining within the government framework, rather than privatisation.

ACTING CHAIR—And that may be a new opportunity for providing a service that otherwise was not provided.

Mr Popple—Yes. The reform process is looking at how to increase access to services and that might be in a combined model or it might be in some other model. I do not think the government has made a decision.

ACTING CHAIR—I just want to mention one other matter, and Dick and I spoke about this in the parliament the other day. I know this is not directly to do with this petition, but it is about the service that Centrelink provides. One of the things that Centrelink should be praised for throughout Gippsland was their response to the drought. If your response to the drought throughout Gippsland was the same across Australia, you can walk very proudly with the way that you handled some very difficult clients who were not your normal clients. It was very difficult for them to normally access Centrelink because of their personal position, and that was handled brilliantly—brilliantly—by Centrelink and the whole process that we went through over these years. I think you would probably agree with those sentiments.

Mr CHESTER—Yes, and if I could just pick up in relation to Mark and Grant in the Morwell Centrelink situation. I have had the opportunity to visit in the last couple of months, and have met with Erin Lord and the management team there. I think they are doing a great job. Their queue management system seems to be working and their work environment is very customer focused. I think it is a credit to whatever changes you have made, and Erin's good work in that regard. The difficulty we have, of course, in the Morwell region is that we have a higher than average unemployment rate. I do associate myself with the comments about the economic circumstances we are facing at the moment—I think Shane Crawshaw and the team in Sale have done a great job in that regard as well. We talked before about the seasonal peak in the queue and we are looking at an influx in job seekers if the unemployment forecasts are right. Do you have plans in place for what that might involve for Centrelink? Given the petitioners' concerns about the queue waiting times—and I do accept that they are progressing quite well at the moment—is that something that crosses your brief?

Mr Tidswell—Obviously, like anybody in the current circumstances, we are trying to think about what that might mean in terms of service delivery. If there is an increase in unemployment, and I do know that Morwell, or the region, has a higher percentage than the national average, we are looking at giving some money to Mark to trial some approaches and work with some of the longer-term unemployed people that come within the Morwell office catchment to see what more we can do to help people get engaged in Job Network and jobs.

We are in the process now of just going back, doing some modelling and looking closely at what the impact will be. What the impact is likely to be is that some regions will get more impacted than others and therefore we will not be able to have a one-brush approach to everything. We are looking at that kind of approach and direction. We will certainly take some advice up to government to say this is how we might handle this and what we might need to do for certain customers, who may not be the longer-term welfare dependent customer but may be the sort of individuals who are just temporarily out of work and need some help in that sense.

We are actively doing some thinking, some work and some planning to see what we need to do across the country. Clearly Morwell will be one of those sites that we will look closely at. Just to reinforce the sense that we take this seriously, every day I get a report on the queues across the country and I look closely to see if Morwell has popped up on our 'saints and sinners' list of who is going well and what-have-you. From an area manager's perspective, they know that the

executive is watching this and seeing what we can put in place. We put in a lot of new processes, and you would have experienced that in terms of the front-of-house operation getting better, to make sure that we can connect quickly with people, sort their business out, sit them down if necessary and say, 'Yes, this can be dealt with very quickly, thank you very much.' I would expect each area manager around the country to be monitoring claim rates, seeing what is going on, seeing volume and patterns and moving staff and capability around.

Mr Popple—I might add something to the answer Grant gave. Centrelink is also funded on the basis of customer numbers. If there is an increase in customer numbers from the unemployed then that is recognised in how they are funded too.

Mr ADAMS—I commend you for the work you have done in sorting out the issue there, but the original issue was that somebody petitioned the parliament because of the problem. So either somebody was not listening or somebody's communication—maybe the petitioners—did not quite get their message through to you, but I am glad somebody has listened. People can sit down, you are not offering coffee and biscuits yet, but I am sure your customers might be more satisfied. Coming to the issue about service delivery, there are some trials of joining offices together. I did not quite hear everything that you said, Mr Popple.

Mr Popple—I said that in the past there had been eight trial sites in four Medicare and four Centrelink locations. They did a combined service in those four locations of flexible service delivery trials. Now, as part of the broader service delivery reform process that this government has put in place, we are looking more generally across the network of Centrelink and Medicare and other agencies to see how we can deliver those services in a more flexible and accessible way.

Mr ADAMS—Any linkages with state government service delivery centres?

Mr Popple—The Prime Minister has indicated that he is interested in seeing how we can work more closely with state governments but, in the first instance, how Commonwealth services can be delivered in a better way.

Mr ADAMS—Using new technologies?

Mr Popple—Yes, we are always looking at new technologies as well as making best use of the existing footprints that we have too.

Mr ADAMS—There are some pilots in Tasmania along those lines. Service Tasmania is a state government delivery office that exists in most small regional centres to deliver Commonwealth programs. The Huon LINC program is a very popular process that has been piloted.

Mr Popple—I think Centrelink has got quite a good history of working closely with the Tasmanian government in a number of the trials down there.

Mr Tidswell—Across the country we have a number of co-location opportunities, often with state housing agencies. Housing is a big issue for our customer group so we are keen to work closely with state and territory governments on a shared customer basis.

Mr ADAMS—There is now an issue of trying to pull many agencies together to look at individuals as well who have ongoing issues with their dysfunctional life which use lots of resources from those areas, and Centrelink is the centre pivot to delivering the benefits. Some of those individuals probably involve our offices as well.

Mr SIMPKINS—First of all, Mr Tidswell, I would like to say that my local Centrelink guy is Leon Russo and I have always found him very responsive and very helpful in helping me out. My electorate is in the northern suburbs of Perth and is ringed by electorates with one or two Medicare offices in each of them. From the perspective of the people in my area, some of whom are not particularly mobile due to age or socioeconomic circumstances, I find that the service level could be greatly improved by having something in the centre of the Cowan electorate. The other aspect of that as well is that it is good for retail businesses to have another point of attraction within some of the shopping centres, but I am mainly talking about it for the sake of the people. Of course, I am aware of what has been said about trying to get money right over the counter or at least to take it immediately off the doctor's bill and the Easyclaim booths and stuff like that. But in the end they do not cut through particularly when the other services you mentioned are not available. I am not talking about the full, grand, money-losing Medicare office—I believe that most of them do lose money outright, that they are not great economic prospects—but are there any shopfront or any other service options where people can actually go and talk to someone? Are there such things?

Ms Mellor—I will start with the range of services. Yes, we are trying to get electronic claiming in at doctors' surgeries. It is not a gap system. It is that you would pay your bill and then the doctor would make the claim on your behalf. There are two systems under which they can do that. About 9,000 practices are connected to Medicare online already. Many practices are now starting to transmit their claims online and we have implemented an EFTPOS based system. It does not suit all doctors' surgeries and it does not suit all patients. There is a mix of services out there for doctors to do that. We are seeing take-up increase. Instead of people coming into the office, 25 per cent of people's GP claims are now being processed through their doctor's surgery. It does not suit everyone.

A lot of the other services that we offer are available in multiple channels too. One of the things that we all need to work harder at across Human Services is making sure that Australians know what channel they can use to do things. A lot of things that you can do in a Medicare office you can actually do online. Again, that does not suit all Australians, but we are registering citizens now at the rate of 750 a day to do our services online. At this time of the year we get a lot of requests in Medicare offices for a Medicare benefit tax statement because people want to fill out their tax returns using material from Medicare. We actually prepopulate the ATO's e-tax return with information now to save people the effort of coming to the office. When you fill out your e-tax you can just get information from Medicare straight into your return. When people know more about them, the telephone channel and the online services start to enable people to make a choice about whether they need to have that sort of human touch, face-to-face contact or whether they can do it their own way at their own time and not necessarily around the opening hours of a shopfront.

You mentioned the Easyclaim booths. We call them access points. They are probably one of the under-utilised goldmines in our service operations. The latest count around Australia is 997. They are booths that are located mostly in pharmacies around Australia. They are goldmines.

Mr SIMPKINS—I know where they are. I have been involved with—

Ms Mellor—Again, they could properly use a bit more promotion. If you have been to the doctor or you are off to the pharmacy, you can actually pick up the phone and make your Medicare claim with your receipt in front of you over the phone and pop it in the booth. I hear what you are saying about Medicare offices. Where you place them is hard. We have 238 Medicare offices around the country. Some of them have been where they are for a long time. There is no doubt that, as the population moves around and the population changes, we could be in other places. Mr Popple has alluded to the fact that, if there are opportunities for us to locate services within Centrelink's offices, the government is considering that where it is appropriate. If there are still gaps then that is also appropriate to put on the table in terms of the considerations that the government is making.

Mr SIMPKINS—So are there face-to-face opportunities without a shopfront type opportunity?

Ms Mellor—There are examples. We are looking at the moment just within Medicare about whether or not we could have visiting services in some locations. Where we do not have the real estate, if you like, but we know that there are Australians in a variety of circumstances who would benefit from our presence—without taking out the infrastructure that Centrelink was able to assist Australians with in the drought—could we look for a face-to-face service on a visiting basis rather than on a real estate basis?

Mr SIMPKINS—Well, there are plenty of opportunities where I am. I am going to ask for something, but I just want to know where, what I should be asking for and what is realistic.

CHAIR—The reason the department is here today is the petitions that have been tabled in the parliament and ministerial responses. I want to go back to a petition that was lodged in the parliament. We have received two ministerial responses. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship gave us a very good briefing. It is regarding a petition from the Synod of the Anglican diocese of Melbourne. We have got the response from the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, and now we have got the response from the Minister for Human Services. In his response of 1 October this year, he stated:

Whilst some asylum seekers have limited entitlements to Centrelink payments, they do have access to Centrelink Social Work services and Multicultural Services Officers.

Can you tell us a little bit about what services you provide?

Mr Campisi—The people that are the subject of the petition do not meet the definition under the Social Security Act for the purpose of being eligible for income support. But we work very closely with the agencies that provide support to those people to make sure that, if and when they are successful in getting a permanent protection visa that will attract a payment, there are close referral agencies. So that when they do get a visa, arrangements are expedited, so that they can come in to Centrelink with an appointment, and we are able to process their payment very quickly. Once they are on that permanent protection visa, they are treated like other newly arrived refugees. They are entitled to regular income support and all the support services that go

with that: Medicare, pharmaceutical benefits, access to English language classes and the other supports available to people on permanent resident visas.

Mr Tidswell—In many senses, what we provide is almost a sort of community support obligation, on behalf of the Commonwealth, to connect with these agencies and these people to help them throughout. We are aware of the policy issue that was discussed before we came in. But what we do with our network—not that we are funded to do it—is provide that linkage and connection. Then, when circumstances change, the ability is there to quickly move to get them established and sorted out.

CHAIR—I thank all of the departments that have come before the petitions committee today. I also thank committee members, the secretariat staff and Hansard.

Mr BROADBENT—Can you please pass on to the rest of the Public Service that coming before the petitions committee is not to be feared.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Broadbent**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at this roundtable meeting today, including publication on the parliamentary electronic database of the proof transcript.

Committee adjourned at 11.59 am