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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

**Reference: Adoption of children from overseas**

WEDNESDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2005

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES**

**Wednesday, 12 October 2005**

**Members:** Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

**Members in attendance:** Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Cadman, Ms George, Mrs Irwin, Mrs Markus and Mr Quick

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or have adopted children from overseas countries (intercountry placement adoptions) with particular reference to:

1. Any inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions; and
2. Any inconsistencies between the benefits and entitlements provided to families with their own birth children and those provided to families who have adopted children from overseas.

**WITNESSES**

**DAWSON, Ms Sue, Deputy Director-General, Communities and Policy Division, New South  
Wales Department of Community Services ..... 1**

**GRIFFIN, Ms Mary Frances, Director, Adoption and Permanent Care Services, New South  
Wales Department of Community Services ..... 1**



**Committee met at 10.36 am**

**DAWSON, Ms Sue, Deputy Director-General, Communities and Policy Division, New South Wales Department of Community Services**

**GRIFFIN, Ms Mary Frances, Director, Adoption and Permanent Care Services, New South Wales Department of Community Services**

**CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services. This inquiry has attracted considerable national attention. We have received over 200 submissions, the vast majority from parents and couples who wish to start to grow their families and help orphaned or abandoned children from overseas. The committee has already taken evidence in several states and has visited an adoption unit while moving around the country, and expects to continue this evidence gathering process in the immediate future.

This public hearing allows the committee to meet with state government representatives involved in intercountry adoptions. Today we welcome the New South Wales government. Copies of their submission and others are available on the committee's web site. This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be made available on the committee's web site.

*Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—*

**CHAIR**—We have your submission. Before I ask you to make an opening statement, which I hope you are going to do, Mr Cadman has to go to another meeting but he is quite anxious to ask a couple of questions.

**Mr CADMAN**—I think they will be out of the way quickly. I am sorry I will not be here for the rest of your submission but I look forward to reading the *Hansard*. If it costs \$9,700 per child for overseas adoption in New South Wales, it seems strange to me that at such a high price three-quarters of your adoptions are from overseas. Is there an explanation for that?

**Ms Dawson**—The cost to which you referred is the cost of an intercountry adoption. We have had an external, independent review by KPMG of all of the elements of the cost of providing intercountry adoption services, and our costs are derived from that very detailed work. We have a differential cost for intercountry adoption as opposed to local adoption.

**Mr CADMAN**—What does local adoption cost?

**Ms Dawson**—The costs are in the order of \$3,000 for a local adoption.

**Mr CADMAN**—Why are parents going overseas to adopt?

**Ms Dawson**—They may well wish to express their humanitarian interest, they may well have a particular interest in children from particular countries because of their own cultural interests or they may well perceive that they would prefer to go through the process of intercountry adoption rather than that of local adoption. You find that there are quite different children

available, depending on which course of action you take. I can only assume that they make that choice based on their personal interests.

**Mr CADMAN**—The evidence the committee has received indicates that parents tend to first look at local adoption and then, when that is unavailable, they look overseas. Is that the case in New South Wales? Do you track inquiries? It ought to be possible to assess whether somebody has approached you for a local adoption, found that not possible and then decided to go overseas. Do you have any information on that?

**Ms Dawson**—Our approach is to articulate to any applicant the full range of options. We explain to them the intercountry adoption process and the local adoption process. We do not impose any particular channel on them. We simply explain to them the consequences of the channel that they might wish to choose in terms of the time it might take and the sorts of children who might be available. So it is a case of giving them full information on which they can make their own choice.

**CHAIR**—Could we have your opening statement, and then we will probably pick up on some of those issues.

**Ms Dawson**—Thank you. New South Wales welcomes the opportunity to appear before this committee. There are some extremely important issues in the intercountry adoptions context, and we wish to discuss with the committee some of our ideas on how we might enhance the system. New South Wales has been interested to note a consistent theme that has emerged throughout the records of this inquiry. That theme seems to us to be that the arrangements that apply to intercountry adoptions are quite unusual and confused, and that there are some considerable difficulties that prospective adoptive parents experience as a result of the current system.

On their face, and from the formal documents, the arrangements that should apply to intercountry adoption seem, to us, to be perfectly clear. The Australian government signed the Hague convention in 1994, and it ratified it in 1998. An intergovernmental agreement was then negotiated and signed to support the implementation of the convention. That agreement is very clear in that there are to be strictly delineated rules for the Commonwealth central authority, which is the Australian Attorney-General's Department, and for the state central authorities. The Commonwealth central authority is further defined by regulation, which is also recognised and reflected in the intergovernmental agreement.

That regulation is patently clear that it is the job of the Commonwealth central authority to cooperate with central authorities outside Australia on matters related to the administration and implementation of the convention. The Commonwealth is also assigned a central role in the negotiation of bilateral agreements with non-Hague countries because of Australia's ratification of the Hague convention and the entering into of the intergovernmental agreement. As committee members will have noted throughout the inquiry hearings, the negotiation and management of these intercountry adoptions agreements is, at its essence, a high-level immigration policy and diplomacy task. It is business to be conducted between sovereign entities.

If you applied first principles and constitutional principles and looked at the management regime contemplated in the instruments that flowed from the Hague convention ratification, you



would reasonably expect that the Commonwealth would be taking primary responsibility in aspects such as selecting countries with whom agreements should be initiated, setting the parameters for the negotiation of those agreements, leading the negotiation of the agreements so there is some consistency between them and coherence within them and reviewing those agreements to ensure the overall efficiency of the system.

In relation to the role of the states, we are operating in our child protection jurisdiction and we would see ourselves as having responsibility for involvement with and giving support to children and parents in cases where a risk of harm is posed to any child who has been adopted, irrespective of whether they were adopted locally or via an intercountry adoption process. We know that the current practice of intercountry adoption varies dramatically from what we would expect to be an orderly and sound distribution of roles and responsibilities.

As you would now be aware, the system is run through what is known as a central authorities meeting, which is held twice a year. As far as we understand, there are no current protocols for the operation of the central authorities meeting. The meeting reports to no other body. It seems to operate on its own authority. Essentially, because of its make-up, it applies social work principle to the design of the entire intercountry adoption system. We need to stress that the central authorities meeting is not a meeting of senior immigration officials and officers with responsibility for designing the overall child protection system and the immigration system; it is more in the nature of an assembly of adoption practitioners. I should clarify at this point that these practitioners from the states and territories are highly skilled caseworkers and senior social workers. They are highly valued by the jurisdictions for the work they do in this difficult practice area, but they are not diplomats and we are asking them to do a diplomatic task. They are not responsible for setting the overall child protection policy; they are practitioners—and, as I say, very skilled practitioners—understandably bringing social work and casework solutions to what is actually an immigration policy task.

Over time the responsibility for the high-level negotiation and leadership tasks associated with building the intercountry adoptions system has been devolved to these state and territory practitioners—apparently without reference to the principles of the intergovernmental agreement that I referred to earlier, without reference to the regulation, without reference to ministers and without placing adoptions functions into the wider national and state policy and administrative context. As a result, intercountry adoption appears to be managed as a meta social work task, to which we apply intensive case management, assessment and planning principles. The problem is that this solution is unsustainable. The system does not match the needs that arise in a global environment, where there are ever-intensifying humanitarian and other pressures. The volume of demand for intercountry adoption is too great for the system to apply suitably the rigours of perfect social work practice to every application that we receive.

From the perspective of a child protection agency, it is quite ironic that prospective adoptive parents in an intercountry adoption context are subject to far more rigorous assessment than any other parent would be, even parents in a child protection context—and that is of concern to us. The rules set down in the individual agreements that are negotiated are set to respond to the expectations and concerns of the source country. There is no uniform or harmonious policy, about the age, the marital status or other personal attributes of adoptive parents, which we seek to institute. Application processes vary: some have quotas, some have batches and some receive unlimited applications at any time. This system has become very incoherent and the rules of

engagement are very unwieldy—not just for administrators but, more importantly, for an adoptive parent.

The simple questions of a prospective adoptive parent are: on what terms can I adopt a child from another country; what are the processes; and what are the limits of the opportunities available to me? We cannot answer those questions clearly and we need to be able to. We do not have a system that is designed to respond well enough to those needs.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I am sorry to interrupt, but do you find that the other states feel the same way about the system in that they do not have that mechanism?

**CHAIR**—Let us leave that question until the conclusion of these opening remarks.

**Ms Dawson**—That is why New South Wales is advocating a change of approach—just to preempt the response I will give you.

**Mrs IRWIN**—That is an example; thank you.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes. We would like a system that is consistent with the principles contemplated in the intergovernmental agreement, the regulations and the Hague convention. We are searching for a system where there is Commonwealth leadership and responsibility for what at its heart, from our perspective, is a major immigration policy and humanitarian task. New South Wales has used its best endeavours to contribute. Through the Department of Community Services, we have assumed responsibility for relations with Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Taiwan and Korea; this has been at considerable cost to us. In New South Wales, we wish to return to a situation where the primary focus of our social work resources is on assessing and supporting the 105,000 children who are the subject of 216,000 risk of harm reports every year in New South Wales. That is what we need to focus on and it is very important that we do.

We have an obvious role in intercountry adoption where there is failure of placement and a need to protect a child at risk, as with any other child. New South Wales does not consider it to be appropriate to deploy scarce casework resources to negotiate and administer a plethora of intercountry adoption agreements, when the Commonwealth parliament and the ministers of the day in 1998 squarely assigned these roles to the Commonwealth.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. This is a strictly New South Wales point of view, because the other states do not seem to share your concern on that issue. Have you found that in your meetings?

**Ms Dawson**—It is interesting that this is partly a function of the problem that I have touched on in my introductory statement. I am not sure who has represented the perspectives of the other states and territories, but there is a deep passion amongst intercountry adoption practitioners to engage with the detail of this system. They are steeped in the detail of it, in order to deliver results for the prospective adoptive parents with whom they work on a day-to-day basis. I am interested in stepping out of some of the day-to-day complexities and asking the simple question: is there a better way to do this? We think there is.

**CHAIR**—I do not necessarily disagree with a lot of what you have had to say but I have to say to you, as Director-General of the department, that we have had many people query why you

would have adoption issues within a department that, in your own terms, is dealing with dysfunctional families and very often dysfunctional children—and that is not what adoptive parents purport to be. Therefore, there is almost a tension before we start. Some of the submissions we have received talk about how individuals have been dealt with by DOCS. The attitude that you have displayed just now I read in their submissions—and you really do not want to know about them.

**Ms Dawson**—Let me then clarify where I think this has come from and how I see the way forward. The New South Wales Department of Community Services has become involved in the intercountry adoptions system because it has very specialised expertise in permanency planning and adoption placements. It has always had that. We have it because it is an important part of our out-of-home care service delivery and our child protection system.

**Mr QUICK**—How many intercountry adoptions did you do last year?

**Ms Dawson**—Perhaps I could continue on my trajectory. There is a principle here that is very important to articulate and then perhaps I could come back to your question.

**CHAIR**—Let her finish, please.

**Ms Dawson**—So we have expertise and we have been willing to make it available to support the Commonwealth in running an intercountry adoption system, because there are some specialised casework practices around that are brought to bear. That is why the New South Wales Department of Community Services is involved in intercountry adoptions. With hindsight, it is problematic for the reasons that you imply in your question. We wish to see a system where those who choose an intercountry adoptions path are facilitated to do that, because they want to be parents. That is the system that we need to design and deliver here and, through Commonwealth leadership, we can get that system. Taking intercountry adoptions through a system that can and should be designed to deal with child protection issues is problematic.

**CHAIR**—Tasmania, from whom we took evidence, seem to have overcome some of the problems by having a person who is committed to the principle involved in developing their unit dealing with adoptions. We took evidence that, before this metamorphosis took place, they were pretty dysfunctional too. So it does seem to be a question of leadership within the group, whichever portfolio it fits with. Having said that, I do not necessarily disagree with many of the things that you have said. The dichotomy for us is that overseas adoptions are about citizenship and immigration, but the law that relates to a child becoming a child of parents is state jurisdiction. That is where we have to work in both ways.

**Ms Dawson**—In concert, yes.

**CHAIR**—It is your courts that will determine whether or not that child is adopted. I will ask you one thing, which comes from way out of left field: does New South Wales give a birth certificate to children who are adopted from China?

**Ms Dawson**—My advice is that the answer to that question is: no, they receive a birth certificate in China.

**CHAIR**—No, that is a certificate of abandonment. It is a problem for which we are trying to find a solution. I just wanted to get that on the record.

**Mr QUICK**—If there is no birth certificate from China and there is this certificate of abandonment, does New South Wales give them a birth certificate?

**Ms Dawson**—I will ask Ms Griffin to answer that question.

**Ms Griffin**—No, we do not. That arrangement with China was set up in such a way that the adoption needed to be finalised in China, because the Chinese officials required that. They get three different types of certificates: an adoption certificate and two notary certificates. One talks about abandonment, another talks about their innate parents being unknown and there is an adoption one also—and obviously they get a passport. So there is a range of documents.

**Mr QUICK**—Why doesn't New South Wales give them a birth certificate, when that certificate of abandonment, which states that they are born on a particular day and are of a certain age, is accepted by the Australian government for a passport?

**Ms Dawson**—You are touching on the critical issue here. The agreement-by-agreement negotiations about how all of that documentation works and what documentation you do get and do not get is problematic. There ought to be a common principle that the child comes with the relevant documentation and then perhaps receives a local birth certificate. This is a function of the differences and inconsistencies between individual agreements.

**Mr QUICK**—A state minister could put forward legislation on the recommendations of the department that this should be done. When the parent of an adoptive child with a certificate of abandonment goes to a New South Wales public school—say, to Bankstown Primary School—that parent has to provide a birth certificate, and they have to say, 'I don't have one. I have a certificate of abandonment.' The local school principal has no bloody idea what that means and there is a sense of embarrassment.

**CHAIR**—I think we are getting a recognition from Ms Dawson that it is a question of interpretation, I would say, of the agreement between the Commonwealth and China, and it is one we have to resolve.

**Mr QUICK**—Another example of the states and the Commonwealth buck-passing.

**CHAIR**—I think it has taken this inquiry to identify that there is a real problem, and it is up to us to find a solution. I think you have made the point very well.

**Ms GEORGE**—I do not disagree with a lot of what you said in your introductory remarks about the appropriate role of the national government. However, I do not think that absolves New South Wales of some responsibility for its actual performance on the ground by comparison with other states. There are two issues of concern to me. The first is that, in submissions that have come before the committee, there has been a suggestion that the culture within the department is not conducive to the principle of intercountry adoption and that it is much more promotive of foster parenting. I would like your comment about the culture. And, is it possible that that culture might in turn then reflect the very low number of intercountry adoptions that

occur in your state per head of population by comparison to all others? Why is it that there are 66 adoptions in New South Wales, compared to 86 in Victoria and 72 in South Australia? It is disproportionately small. The other issue that was raised by submission is the cost of adoption. The cost and the fee structure in New South Wales is so high that it is a means of disincentive for intercountry adoptions. I think it is important to have your response on the record to criticisms that have come before the committee.

**Ms Dawson**—I am happy to respond. I have observed that a great deal has been said about the purported anti-adoption culture of jurisdictions throughout the course of the hearing. I think that there is some confusion in the observations that are made about the complexity of the child protection system and some confusion about local adoption in the context of child protection and adoption in the context of intercountry adoption. Let me comment on the perspective of our department in a child protection context. It is not an anti-adoption culture. It is a culture that respects and values what we would describe as a balanced permanency planning system. I would like to elaborate on that. For a child who has been subject to a risk of harm, there is a range of possible responses that we as a child protection agency would make, depending on the circumstances. Just as it is not always appropriate to restore a child to its birth parents, so too it is not always appropriate to remove a child from its birth family on an irreversible basis through the adoption process.

Jurisdictions overseas have tried to press the issue of adoption more forcefully in the child protection context. In England, for instance, an adoptions target has been set, but that target has not been met and there are some very good reasons for that. It has not been met because adoption will not always be the best solution. It is not always the best solution to permanently remove a child from its roots. The best solution will depend on the age of the child, the nature of the harm experienced, the capacity of the parents and the viability of other alternatives. We have a permanency planning system that looks at a range of possible alternatives to deal with any given child. We may wish to undertake some intensive work to restore that child to the care of their birth parents, and we have some very successful intensive restoration practices. We may wish to place that child with kin, under our kinship care arrangements. They may be placed in foster care with an authorised carer or we may facilitate an adoption for that child. Those are all perfectly reasonable, legitimate and appropriate casework responses in a child protection context.

**Mr QUICK**—To better explain all this, you are talking about in-country adoption—

**Ms Dawson**—I preface my remarks by saying I think there has been some cross-over in the observations. The question is whether the New South Wales Department of Community Services has an anti-adoption culture. I am seeking to articulate—

**Mr QUICK**—Okay, I understand that. But for me to understand what you are articulating, I would like to know how many children were adopted in-country last year.

**Ms Dawson**—Sixty-six.

**Mr QUICK**—No, domestic.

**Ms Dawson**—Twenty-four.

**CHAIR**—How many were fostered?

**Ms Dawson**—We have 10,337 children in out-of-home care in New South Wales. Of those, roughly 36 per cent are in foster care.

**Mrs MARKUS**—How many are in permanent care?

**Ms Dawson**—Orders?

**Mrs MARKUS**—Of the children whom the department would have in its care as a result of those children being notified as at risk, with a court order for their placement in short-term care or whatever, how many are in permanent care?

**Ms Dawson**—Each of the 10,337 will have orders of various kinds. I cannot, off the top of my head, advise the proportion of those who are permanent or temporary.

**CHAIR**—You might want to take that on notice.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, we can provide you with some more information on that.

**Mr QUICK**—Surely if you have 10,337 children in care and only 24 are adopted, greater emphasis would be placed on dealing with the 10,313 compared to the 24 who are being adopted. It might contribute to the perception that there is an anti-adoption policy when only a very small percentage are adopted—24 compared to 10,313 in care in some form.

**Ms Dawson**—As I said in my introductory comments, we wish to refocus our casework effort on permanency planning and adoption for the 10,337 children in care.

**CHAIR**—What we have found is that domestically—and all the words you have said are not at odds with this—there is an anti-adoption culture. The pendulum seems to have swung from what happened in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s right over here, and gone to an anti-adoption stance.

**Mrs IRWIN**—And that is not only in New South Wales; it is in the other states.

**CHAIR**—It is right across the country. That anti-adoption culture spills into the overseas adoptions in attitudes to why indeed these parents want to adopt. There is a big debate in this country about there being so few children adopted, and what has happened to all the children. We know the answer—they are in foster care. What happens to this child? Where has that child gone? This is the one who was found in the street with both its parents out cold from drug injections, one with a needle hanging out of the arm. Is that child given back to those parents?

**Ms Dawson**—We could go through the 10,337—

**CHAIR**—But I only know about these ones. There is a pregnant mother who is an addict—

**Ms Dawson**—This story repeats itself 10,337 times. What I am saying—

**CHAIR**—We sometimes end up with a dead child.

**Ms Dawson**—is we have a service system that endeavours to respond to that full spectrum of children. Some of them are suited to returning to their parents with intensive casework. For others, we need to do—

**CHAIR**—You're playing God—

**Ms Dawson**—a better job. We're running a child protection system that is competent and big—

**CHAIR**—There are too many kids who are falling through the cracks, who end up dead.

**Ms Dawson**—That is why we have a reform program in New South Wales that the government has invested \$1.2 billion in; it will go over five years. One element of that reform program is to improve our performance in asking the question: could we place this child in a more stable family earlier, particularly younger children? We know those are questions. We are concerned to address them.

**CHAIR**—Firstly, I asked the parents who wanted to come as adopting parents, 'Did you consider adopting an Australian born child?' They said, 'Yes, but it is virtually impossible.' Secondly, I asked, 'Did you consider fostering?' They said, 'Yes, but I couldn't cope with having to give up the child that I loved.' One other parent said, 'With an overseas adoption, we are truly the parents.' That is not to deny that they take the children back to their country of origin and they find relatives, but they are the parents. Under all the systems that seem to be offered in Australia—although fortunately in two jurisdictions, the ACT and Tasmania, we seem to be seeing a change of attitude, which is very refreshing—the attitude is that biological parents must be kept in touch with at all times, no matter how bad they are. Some of the examples are pretty awful. That is why I ask you, 'What is the future for that child?' A child like that could have the possibility of being adopted, having a proper family situation and being brought up in a way that would give that child an opportunity.

**Ms Dawson**—You have answered your own question. You have said there are some children that may be able to be—

**CHAIR**—It has to be more than 24 out of 10,337.

**Ms Dawson**—We agree. That is why part of the reform program is to improve our performance in getting earlier decisions about the permanent and stable placement of children.

**CHAIR**—But that means without the automatic right of interference of biological parents. We have had put to us a proposition, which operates in other jurisdictions overseas, that biological parents could be given a certain number of years, it could be two or three years, to get their act together or they are out of that child's life forever. Have you considered that?

**Mrs IRWIN**—Before Sue answers that, I have jotted something down, and I think it is similar to what the chair was saying. I am not quite sure what year this was, but Faye Lo Po, the minister and previous member for Penrith, had a permanency plan for children in out-of-home

care, and that was three strikes and you are out. I have not heard much more about that. Is that the sort of reform you are looking at in New South Wales?

**Ms Dawson**—We are conducting a review of our legislation at the moment around precisely this question. The sort of reform that we are looking at is to set down in the legislation for caseworkers, in relation to every one of the cases that they are dealing with, a certain period of time—we have not yet settled on that period; there are some complex issues around that—in which to have asked and answered the question: ‘Is it practicable, is it reasonable, to assume that this child could be restored to its birth parents or are these family relationships, whatever they may be, so fractured that really we should draw a conclusion from a case management perspective that there is no reasonable prospect of the child being restored, in which case we need to redouble our efforts to make a decision about where that child may be better permanently placed?’

**CHAIR**—So is the answer to my question ‘yes’?

**Ms Dawson**—The answer to your question is yes. That is exactly what our policy reform is all about—to try and get better and more stable outcomes, particularly for younger children.

**Ms GEORGE**—I do not think Ms Dawson was given the opportunity to respond to the two parts of my question. It was about the number relative to other states and the cost. I think it is important to get the department’s view on the record.

**Ms Dawson**—There are a number of reasons why the number of intercountry adoptions might vary between jurisdictions. I can tell you that New South Wales does not have a closed quota system. We process every application that we get. So in a sense we do not attempt to manage demand, if you like; we take demand and we respond to it.

**CHAIR**—How many parents are waiting?

**Ms Dawson**—At the moment we are dealing with around 820 active cases. They are at different stages of being processed.

**Mrs IRWIN**—That is for overseas adoption.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, for overseas adoption. They may be people who have inquired, people who are being trained, people who are in the assessment process or people who are waiting for children to be allocated by the overseas country. So there is no demand management that goes on. I think that is important to recognise. You also asked about fees.

**Ms GEORGE**—Why they are so high by comparison to other states.

**Ms Dawson**—I do not know what work other jurisdictions have done to set their fees.

**Ms GEORGE**—I will give you an example. Queensland charges \$2,053, as against New South Wales which charges \$9,700.

**CHAIR**—But they do not give much service. Try Tasmania.

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**Ms GEORGE**—Tasmania charges \$2,280.

**Ms Dawson**—I do not know when they set those fees. Those fees may have been fixed for some time. What I can say is that our fees are based on an independent costing of all steps in the process. I want to return to the principle that I mentioned earlier, because it is particularly important. We have made it clear that our priorities in the Department of Community Services are to build and apply our expertise to the care and protection of children at risk in New South Wales. We are happy to share our expertise with the Commonwealth to support its broader humanitarian and immigration goals, but that must not impact upon our ability to respond to the need for care and protection of the 10,337 children that I have just talked about. If our support cannot be recognised by funding and assistance from the Commonwealth, then fees need to be applied to this service. We believe our fees are a true reflection of the genuine costs to us of these services. I should say that we have hardship policies that apply for those who are of lower income. So it is not as if each and every person is obliged to pay this fee. Under hardship circumstances they are able to access fee relief.

**Mrs IRWIN**—How much fee relief would that be?

**Ms Dawson**—Between 25 and 50 per cent.

**CHAIR**—Is that a reduction?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**Mr QUICK**—Can you give us a breakdown of the costings?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, we can. The \$9,700 covers an information and training component, which is \$640, an assessment component by a contracted assessor, which is \$4,260, and an allocation and placement fee, which is \$4,800.

**Mrs IRWIN**—Can we now compare that to, say, a local adoption? I think you stated an amount of \$3,000 for that. Do they have to pay for information and training?

**Ms Dawson**—We have not gone through a full program of establishing all the elements of the cost. Basically, that cost, as I understand it, covers assessment, primarily. The contract assessors are really the key component of the service.

**Mrs IRWIN**—Can you take that on notice and give us the breakdown of that \$3,000 and compare it to the \$9,700?

**Mr QUICK**—You said the charge for a contracted social worker for an overseas adoption was \$4,000.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, I did.

**Ms Griffin**—That is a good rate.

**Mr QUICK**—And it is not the same amount of money if you adopt locally, so the process is different.

**Ms Dawson**—We have a policy of assisting local adoptions of children in care in particular.

**Mr QUICK**—You are subsidising it, then.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**Mr QUICK**—To what extent?

**Ms Dawson**—To the extent of the difference between the true cost—

**Mr QUICK**—How much is it? If it is \$4,000 for overseas, how much is it for a local adoption? It is half of that?

**Ms Dawson**—We have just identified the fee as \$3,000. We can give you the breakdown of that in response to your question.

**Mr QUICK**—I would appreciate that.

**Mrs IRWIN**—So you are saying that it is virtually cost recovery.

**Ms Dawson**—For the assessment.

**CHAIR**—For overseas.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, for overseas it is a cost-recovery principle.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I am finding this hard. When you look at New South Wales, which we have just heard charges \$9,700—you had 66 adoptions in 2003-04—and then at Victoria, which did a lot better than New South Wales—they had 86 in that year—you find that their fee is only \$6,250.

**CHAIR**—They charge less for domestic adoptions too. There is a definite price signal that says: ‘We don’t want overseas adoptions.’

**Ms GEORGE**—In New South Wales.

**Mr QUICK**—Regarding the \$4,000 charged for overseas adoptions, what proportion is for follow-up once the child has been adopted, in the one year that you technically still own the child?

**Ms Dawson**—We can articulate what all those costs cover and we will table that for the committee.

**Mr QUICK**—If I live in Wagga Wagga and I want to adopt a child from overseas, can you explain the process?

**Ms Dawson**—Of applying?

**Mr QUICK**—Yes, if I live in Wagga Wagga.

**Ms Dawson**—I will ask Ms Griffin to respond to that question.

**Ms Griffin**—People can access information through our web site and then information is sent to them. In that information is an expression of interest form, which they can lodge. When we receive that at Adoption and Permanent Care Services, everyone is invited to look into our training session. That session is set in Sydney for a two-day period, which they would come to. At that training session they get an adoption application and then they go away and think about, ‘Is this the way we want to form our family?’ They have up to six months to lodge that application. We give them an extra six months extension if they are not sure that they want to do it at that time. Then they lodge an application. We have been able to get the time period, from the lodgment of the application until approval, down to nine months.

**Mr QUICK**—Do I get a file number when I apply?

**Ms Griffin**—Yes.

**Mr QUICK**—Congratulations, because the other states do not give one.

**Ms Griffin**—I do not think—

**Mr QUICK**—It is true. I can ring up and say: ‘My file number is whatever. Can you tell me where it is in the great scheme of things?’

**Ms Griffin**—Everyone is given information about who their caseworker and who their clerk is. They are given contact names so they know who they can email and they will get a response.

**Mr QUICK**—In our information it says that you have seven people working on adoption in the department. Does that include overseas as well as local adoptions?

**Ms Dawson**—Those are dedicated intercountry adoption resources.

**Mr QUICK**—Are there seven full-time staff?

**Ms Dawson**—There are eight full-time staff.

**Ms Griffin**—There are eight full-time staff and other staff as well.

**Mr QUICK**—What do you mean by ‘other staff’?

**Ms Griffin**—Administration staff.

**Ms Dawson**—I could comment on that. The applications for intercountry adoptions are managed by the dedicated intercountry adoption staff, but we obviously also have staff who organise and deliver the information and training support. We also have staff who deal with post-adoption support and a proportion of their time would be devoted to supporting the intercountry adoption function.

**Mr QUICK**—When I visited Beijing I went to a central agency. They had a three-storey building and it was well set up. If I went to Sydney I could go somewhere and visit the DOCS office, on the fourth floor where the agency is based?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes. If you visit Parramatta, that is the area where the Adoption and Permanent Care Services currently operate.

**Mr QUICK**—So the eight full-time staff are dealing with the 24 adoptions locally as well as the overseas people?

**Ms Dawson**—No.

**Mr QUICK**—So they do not collaborate at all?

**Ms Dawson**—No.

**Mr QUICK**—They do not share any resources?

**Ms Dawson**—That is not correct. Firstly, the eight intercountry adoption staff deal with the roughly 880 case files that are on hand. In relation to the delivery of information and training sessions and the processing of the applications, there is close collaboration between the persons in the Adoption and Permanent Care Services branch and the intercountry adoptions team. They are very collaborative.

**Mr QUICK**—Can you tell me about the highly skilled social workers? We have heard numerous examples of dissatisfaction, with people having two or three social workers/case managers. If I apply, do I get one social worker who comes to visit me or do I get two or three, depending on who is contracted, because the department does not have their own? How does this system work?

**Ms Dawson**—The system works in the manner that Ms Griffin referred to earlier. Each case file will have a front-line contact person who will consistently go through the management of the case. Unavoidably, there may be times during the period of the intercountry adoption process where the caseworker may change, and I think that is inevitable. That does not throw into question the skills of the individual caseworker; personnel will change. We have a rigorous system for managing the contracted adoptions assessors and a person who is overseeing the practices of those assessors to ensure that they are doing timely assessments that are consistent with our expectations.

**Mr QUICK**—I am concerned about the role of social workers, because you have 10,337 kids in care. The social workers are trained to deal with dysfunctionality and putting families back together again. And then—compared to that issue stated earlier—you have these parents who in

many cases have gone through IVF and all that trauma and spent an arm and a leg, who have suddenly decided that they want to get involved in overseas adoption, which is a totally different process. These people, in most cases, have to fork out in excess of \$40,000, doing it not in desperation but because this is their last opportunity to have a child.

Have you noticed in your years in the department that there is some sort of change in ethos in the social workers' focus, because you have a different set of people and a different sort of ethos compared to dealing with dysfunctionality and putting families together again? Is the training of social workers now being focused in part—because we are not talking about a great number of people—on, and is there a better understanding of, the complexities of overseas adoption, compared to the cases of drug-addicted parents and dysfunctionality that the chairperson mentioned?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes. We have an intercountry adoptions unit of eight dedicated people with an ethos that is supportive of getting appropriate outcomes in intercountry adoption, recognising the differences—

**Mr QUICK**—But do you have the supportive social workers?

**Ms Dawson**—They are social workers.

**Mr QUICK**—The eight people are social workers?

**Ms Griffin**—Five of them are social workers and three are clerical staff.

**Mr QUICK**—Yes, but you are contracting out social workers to deal with these families.

**Ms Dawson**—No, there are a number of different elements to the process of managing an intercountry adoption. One of the steps in the process is assessing the family in its family situation. That is the job that the contracted adoptions assessors do. Then there is a case management function: the interactions with the parents, the working with them through the process; all of those important tasks of supporting people through what is actually—

**Mr QUICK**—I understand that, but if I live at Wagga Wagga—

**CHAIR**—No, hang on—

**Mr QUICK**—I am not getting someone from Parramatta coming and looking at me; the social worker who is dealing with the Wagga Wagga area is dealing with me. If that person does not have the right ethos and attitude about overseas adoptions and is primarily involved with putting dysfunctional families back together again, Ms Dawson, I think we need to change that attitude and consider that.

**Ms Dawson**—Could I also explain to you how we ensure that the very healthy culture in support of intercountry adoptions in our central office is then shared with our regional offices? Mary can explain that in some detail, so I will get her to do that.

**Mr QUICK**—No, I am not talking about the local office; I am talking about the position of social workers who are contracted out for a large fee—\$4,000—when we have had numerous examples in our 250 submissions saying that there are problems with social workers—

**CHAIR**—And their individual attitude.

**Mr QUICK**—who have been principally trained to deal with dysfunctionality, who are not sensitive to people who have been frustrated by IVF and now see intercountry adoption as their only chance of having a child. These people are having their cupboards gone through, having numerous visits, having to fill out 270-page workbooks. When these parents that we saw are being glibly passed over, I think there needs to be a change of ethos with social workers.

**Ms Dawson**—We have talked about the changes that we have just instituted in terms of trying to improve the practices of the contracted adoptions assessors by having some people working centrally on the casework practices that they use for assessment. Yes, there are issues in that. But I return to the fundamental point that I made earlier: we have a system that has very intensive assessment practices—more intensive than you would apply to a child in a child protection system. That is our fundamental issue.

**CHAIR**—Why is that so?

**Mr QUICK**—Why?

**Ms Dawson**—We have gone through the issue of the manner in which we structure the whole framework of intercountry adoptions with a central authorities meeting. If it operates—

**CHAIR**—I understand all that. But why do you have a more stringent assessment? By agreement at that meeting, this is what they say are the guidelines.

**Ms Dawson**—That is right.

**CHAIR**—That authority has been delegated to that meeting under the MOU. That is all it is—it is only an MOU.

**Ms Dawson**—It is not delegated. That is not the way the central authorities meeting operates.

**CHAIR**—Basically, what is happening across the states is that each of the governments has taken on the central authority task. South Australia did have an NGO doing it, and then they claimed it back. Have you examined using an NGO to carry out that function?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes. In fact, over the last 12 months we have moved to establishing an accreditation system for our monitors—

**CHAIR**—But there is no money, they tell us, to get accredited.

**Ms Dawson**—I am sorry?

**CHAIR**—We have had people write to us and say they now have a system to accredit but there is no money to assist them to become accredited. None of the adoption groups seem to get any funding from anyone, whereas if you are trying to link up former adoptees with biological parents there is money made available. But there is no money made available to the groups who support parents who adopt. Are you actively considering using an NGO to carry out this function of vetting those parents?

**Ms Dawson**—That is why we have set up an accreditation system. We are very hopeful that agencies will be interested in becoming actively involved in the intercountry adoptions system. In New South Wales, we provide various funding to support groups. Accredited bodies will also be able to charge fees for the service.

**CHAIR**—So they have to be accredited before they get any money.

**Ms Dawson**—There is no funding associated with accreditation.

**CHAIR**—But there is no funding for these groups.

**Ms Dawson**—We provide project—

**CHAIR**—Can you provide me with a list of the funding that adoptive support groups get from you? Do you have that?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, I can. You will be aware of the Benevolent Society program in Sydney that we provide funding for. We provide a range of project funding.

**Ms GEORGE**—We are talking about intercountry adoption. Do you provide funding for that?

**Ms Dawson**—There will be funds provided to some support groups. We can give that detail to you.

**CHAIR**—So you are hoping that the sort of NGO that would put its hand up to do the overseas adoption investigations would be somebody like the Benevolent Society. You are not interested in people who have an adoption focus.

**Ms Dawson**—There is only one constraint on who puts their hand up for becoming an accredited body, and that is a constraint that is set down in the Hague convention which makes it very clear that a person with a commercial interest in the adoption of children cannot be an accredited service provider or a regulator of adoptions. That is perfectly right and proper. We have obviously designed a system which respects the Hague convention. Subject to that constraint, we are inviting a range of interested bodies to become accredited. We have a number of agencies, such as Centrecare and others, who are quite active in the adoption services area and which may wish to broaden out to the intercountry adoption area.

**CHAIR**—They may expand into intercountry adoption.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—So you are actively considering handing over that function to an NGO if you get an appropriate NGO?

**Ms Dawson**—Absolutely—or more than one. We do not think that there should be a single service provider. We believe that there should be a number of service providers.

**CHAIR**—I will put on notice with you that I want to ask you about where the Bolivia negotiation is at.

**Mrs IRWIN**—Actually, I was going to ask about that. I have a number of questions here. I was going to ask you how the accreditation system was going for intercountry adoptions but I think you have covered that, so I will cross it off my list.

**Ms Dawson**—A welcome relief.

**Mrs IRWIN**—In your submission you stated that New South Wales is currently leading bilateral negotiations to establish a program with Bolivia. How is that going? What stage are we at?

**Ms Dawson**—We have been on the quest for finalising an agreement with Bolivia for at least two years now. It has proved to be an extremely complex process legally and, I guess, for want of a better word, diplomatically. Let me explain why, because it has been a challenge to us as well. Basically, Bolivia's adoption laws state that any overseas country having an intercountry adoption arrangement with Bolivia must sign a Marco agreement with the Bolivian government. There are a number of documents that a body must provide in order to have a Marco agreement. They must provide the adoption law of the country, the staff and the qualifications—quite an intensive level of information about what Australian services provide.

The additional complication is that there is a requirement under Bolivian law that a Marco agreement only be signed with an accredited body, but here is the trick: the New South Wales Department of Community Services is not an accredited body and Bolivia has to consider different arrangements to facilitate signing an intercountry adoption agreement with Australia. You can see what sorts of complexities are arising here.

In order to overcome this, New South Wales has sought some assistance from the permanent bureau of The Hague. It went off to The Hague to bring in the big guns. They have written to Bolivia advising that the Hague convention allows the originating country to work with central authorities in other jurisdictions. Following this approach, the Bolivian government has decided that it will sign an agreement that makes central authorities accredited bodies. So we have got through that little hurdle. However, the challenge has been to have the documentation supporting that decision drafted and signed by no less than three relevant Bolivian ministers. Unfortunately, the political unrest and dynamic nature of government in Bolivia have made that a fairly complex process.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I can fully understand the reasons that you have made that recommendation that the Commonwealth take over the management of intercountry adoptions. The reason that I also asked about Bolivia is that we have received some very critical evidence regarding New South Wales DOCS that people have been discouraged to adopt from Bolivia. They have also



been told not to adopt from Latvia but they are having a bit of pressure—this is the evidence we have received—to adopt from China. Is it the norm to encourage applicants to adopt from one particular country?

**Ms Dawson**—No. We do not discourage people or channel them into any particular country to adopt. As I said earlier, we are very clear with them what the particular processes and impediments might be and the constraints on an agreement by agreement and therefore country by country basis. In relation to Latvia, there are some very particular nuances around what children will be made available by the Latvian government. My recollection is that only Latvian families can adopt Latvian children, and that is part of the expectations of the Latvian government. So we make these constraints very clear to the adoptive parents. We will equally say that, if you are interested in adopting from Korea, here are the constraints and opportunities. China comes up a lot because there are no quotas and we can explain to them the relatively open process. We do not try to pick and choose countries for adoptive parents; it is rather the opposite.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I have heard that children from other states have been adopted from Latvia, but thank you for that.

**Mr QUICK**—Can we go back to Bolivia?

**Mrs IRWIN**—If you want to go back to Bolivia you can, Harry, but I have got one question.

**CHAIR**—We will explore the Bolivia question. Louise has not had any questions yet, but we will come to you with the Bolivia question.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I have a number of questions but I know time is of the essence, so I am going to ask only one. We had the Victorian government before us on Monday. They gave us their intercountry adoption kit, which they give out to prospective adoptees. I am sure that New South Wales would have the same. What horrified me, and I think I can also say other members of the committee, was that when it gets to the allocation—when you have been allocated a child from an overseas post—you have 24 hours to accept or not accept it, but they also require a pregnancy test to be taken. If that pregnancy test shows that you are not pregnant and you want to adopt that child then you can go ahead. But point 14 in the allocation information states that, once you have been notified that you can get the visas to travel overseas to get your child, a pregnancy test is required.

Does New South Wales require that pregnancy test? I put it to the Victorian government: what would happen if the mother was in the very early stages of pregnancy? We were told that she could not proceed with the adoption. That is very hard, even if you are adopting a three- or four-year-old, because in some cases it can take a number of months to collect a child. A photo of the adoptive parents may have been sent over and be sitting on the child's little dressing table. They are getting all excited because mum and dad are going to come. But mum and dad then have to turn around because it has been found out that mum is pregnant. Does that happen in New South Wales?

**Ms Dawson**—We do not require a pregnancy test at the point of notification of an allocation. That is the simple answer to your question.

**Mrs IRWIN**—That is excellent. And that is both at the beginning and at the end—once adoption is due to take place?

**Ms Dawson**—There is a complexity that my colleague is wishing to draw your attention to.

**Ms Griffin**—In the Adoption Act 2000, the New South Wales legislation, it does actually say that a child for adoption cannot be placed with a pregnant mother. Generally, we have a discussion with the family when we are ringing them up to tell them the news about the allocation of their child. If that happened, it would come out at that point and we would not be able to place with them. That has happened, but very rarely in my time.

**Mrs IRWIN**—But you do not require a test?

**Ms Griffin**—No, absolutely not.

**Ms Dawson**—No, we do not.

**Ms Griffin**—When we ring people up for an allocation we talk about and update their situation.

**Mrs IRWIN**—But what happens if you phone them up and they say: ‘I am going to get my child. I am so excited. By the way, I am six weeks pregnant, but I still want to go ahead with the adoption.’ Are they still allowed to adopt?

**Ms Griffin**—No. The law precludes that.

**Mrs IRWIN**—We will have to look at that, won’t we?

**Mrs MARKUS**—Could you please explain what you mean by social work principles and practice? I have some understanding about what you mean, but I think it is important for it to be on the permanent record.

**Ms Dawson**—I am talking about all of the intensive assessment and other case management practices that apply to prospective adoptive parents.

**Mrs MARKUS**—Further to that, there is a pressure point, which has already been alluded to. The department’s primary role and core business is really about identifying children at risk and responding to families, the focus being on children in care or that are in need of care. On the other hand, with assessment for adoption and overseas adoption you not always have but are more likely to have a healthy couple, without the child being at risk. There is nothing pathological. The couple want to engage in the process of forming a family.

Would you say that the culture of the department, and possibly the model which social workers may practise, could be better encouraged within the department when the focus is a more pathological assessment approach? A more appropriate strengths-based model may not be fostered as much within the department such as yours, while within family support services, for example, there is a more strengths-based model. Would it be more appropriate for that kind of model to be used so that we are looking for how families can rather than how families cannot?

**Ms Dawson**—We would support a strengths-based model for the assessment of prospective intercountry adoptive parents. That is a very important point that you make.

**Mrs MARKUS**—There is another point that I would like to make along with that—and it is something that you have already alluded to in terms of changing the practice. Say, for example, hypothetically, the Commonwealth assumed greater responsibility in negotiating agreements with other countries: could it be more appropriate for an NGO to be carrying out the assessment process rather than intercountry adoption being managed and handled within a state department that manages or looks after children at risk?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes. You make a good point and, indeed, that is why we have moved to operationalise the accreditation aspects of our adoption legislation to provide precisely that opportunity.

**Mrs MARKUS**—The other thing that I wanted to come back to is permanent care. What legislation is in place in New South Wales for children in permanent care to be recommended or made available for adoption? Does that happen? Is there a process in place for that?

**Ms Dawson**—The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act is the legislation under which permanency planning and placement decisions are made. That act has a set of permanency planning principles set down in it. It specifically has a provision for a sole parental responsibility order under section 149 of that act, which is one of our permanent placement options, and then obviously adoption becomes an opportunity on that spectrum as well.

**Mrs MARKUS**—Is that encouraged?

**Ms Dawson**—As I mentioned earlier, we are doing more to encourage it. We can do better in relation to permanency planning policy and practices, and that is a very strong focus of our current New South Wales reforms: to do better.

**CHAIR**—I want to go back to Bolivia. One group of people that you said you did not seek any help from in negotiating this agreement was either the Attorney-General's Department here or the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Ms Dawson**—I did not quite get to finish the rich tapestry of all of the processes that we went through. Certainly we have had regular exchanges with both the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department. That has not really resolved the situation, because New South Wales has been asked to continue as lead responsibility funding the overseas trips, making the overseas trips, and receiving all of the extensive consular information from Bolivia and so on. So it has not really—

**CHAIR**—You are virtually operating as their delegate, aren't you?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**Mrs IRWIN**—Have you been to Bolivia, Sue?

**Ms Dawson**—Mary has had many long hours in Bolivia.

**Ms Griffin**—I have been on the phone, email, faxes.

**Mrs IRWIN**—And a lot of frustrations.

**Ms Dawson**—Two years.

**Ms Griffin**—But it has been in a difficult period.

**CHAIR**—Are we getting any closer? What is the impasse now?

**Ms Dawson**—The impasse now is simply completing the documentation relating to what is called this Marco agreement.

**CHAIR**—What is a Marco agreement?

**Ms Dawson**—We have learnt a lot about Marco agreements through Bolivia. This is one of the challenges of learning about the idiosyncrasies of each country's law. A Marco agreement, which is a requirement of Bolivian law, is an agreement that provides, I guess, due diligence for the Bolivian government about how services will be provided in Australia by all of the Australian central authorities. It is their certification device, if you like.

**CHAIR**—Did you ask DFAT to be part of this?

**Ms Dawson**—I might get Mary to comment on the role of DFAT.

**Ms Griffin**—They have also been making calls to the Bolivian vice-ministry for me when I get to a point where I am not getting any responses, but they have acknowledged that there are difficulties there. We have had three changes of ministers, we have had director-generals changing because again, in July, the government changed and they are in a caretaker mode at the moment. So staff keep changing—one person signs it, then you get a new minister and they say, 'The new minister has to sign it.' It has been very challenging, but with DFAT we have sought their assistance and done everything possible.

**CHAIR**—Where is the closest mission?

**Ms Griffin**—In Santiago, Chile.

**Mrs IRWIN**—Are the doors open at the overseas mission for you? Could you virtually ask them for assistance with negotiations, as well, with Bolivia?

**Ms Dawson**—Do you mean the orphanages?

**Mrs IRWIN**—No, the problems that you are encountering.

**Ms Griffin**—That is the Bolivian government. The Australian government has obviously contacted them and the Hague has written on our behalf, but it is the Bolivians being able to all

sign this agreement. There are three ministers and every time it gets to one and one signs it, then he is changed and then you have to go back.

**CHAIR**—Is there any sort of underground attitude that they would like a minister or someone of that nature to come and sign the agreement on behalf of Australia? Do you pick that up at all?

**Ms Dawson**—I am not sure that that is so much the problem as whether we have a sufficiently robust system in place for us to elevate the issue.

**CHAIR**—You as New South Wales?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—But if, for instance, the Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs) did a visit, would it be possible to get the three ministers to all sit down and sign it?

**Ms Dawson**—We think so, and that is precisely the point we are making. Diplomatic strategies at key points in these negotiations become critical to getting them over the line; otherwise, they just go back around the mulberry bush, as this one has, each time that there is some shift in local political circumstances.

**CHAIR**—I do remember being overseas and diverting my trip entirely to go to a third country to sign an agreement because that was the only way we were going to get it signed.

**Ms Dawson**—Yes, and we are looking for that kind of leadership.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I will have a talk to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Most probably you will take this on notice: can the committee have copies of the New South Wales state legislation, procedural manuals, policy and guidelines, and requirements for accepting and processing an application?

**Ms Dawson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—There is an issue—and it is obviously something you are concerned about and looking at—with the use of social workers. We have had submissions over the period that have said that a particular social worker will get a set on someone and say, ‘You’ve got low esteem, you have got this, you have got that,’ when the person clearly hasn’t. How on earth do you deal with a situation like that where you get competing attitudes of social workers where one will be helpful and the other one will be a—

**Ms Dawson**—I assume you are talking about the adoptions assessors, who make fairly close and sensitive judgments about people’s capabilities and their home arrangements. We have, first of all, the arrangements that I talked about for trying to improve practice amongst contracted adoptions assessors. We also have internal review processes where recommendations for applications to be refused or questions relating to them are raised by the contracted adoptions assessors. We have an internal panel system that Ms Griffin leads that allows us to have a bit of a check around what has gone on in the dynamic between the assessor and the family. If it is clear to us that that dynamic has become unhealthy in some way, we can do two things: either we can

send in another assessor to get a more measured and perhaps less difficult assessment or we can review and redetermine the application ourselves through our internal processes. We are conscious that those situations can arise and we have some quite good practices around dealing with them.

**Mrs MARKUS**—Have you said how many assessors you have?

**Ms Griffin**—Thirty across New South Wales.

**CHAIR**—I know it is probably adjudged improper to tell us even in confidence precisely what happened to this child. Perhaps you could give us in confidence information about what are the prospects for such a child. We are in a public hearing so you cannot do it now, but subsequently I think it would be helpful to the committee to know.

**Ms Dawson**—What I can do is provide richer detail about the complexities that arise in these sorts of cases, what challenges they pose and what options are available to us.

**Mrs IRWIN**—I think that is the only way that Sue can go, because we have Hansard here and the public as well.

**CHAIR**—The public is entitled to come. But it is sensitive information. Thank you very much for coming this morning. It has been quite helpful. New South Wales is way below everybody else in terms of per capita adoptions. With 800 applications in the system, if we can help those people who are good parents and who are going to give good homes to people, that is something we would all like to see. We have had the pleasure of seeing and hearing from some of the children who have been adopted as we have gone around, and that has been quite a lovely experience. A life has opened up that would not have otherwise been available. We have heard from children who were adopted in the eighties and the difficulties that they had in that period, when they were unusual, to say the least. They are now wanting to help adoptees. We are aware of the complexities in that sense too. We are grateful to you for coming in. If we need to come back to you with specific questions, I take it that would be in order?

**Ms Dawson**—Certainly.

**CHAIR**—I thank everyone for their attention and attendance, particularly Hansard.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Irwin**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 11.59 am**