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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Balancing work and family

THURSDAY, 4 MAY 2006

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Thursday, 4 May 2006

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, Ms Kate Ellis, Mr Fawcett and Ms George

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities. The committee is particularly interested in:

1. the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;
2. making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and
3. the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

WITNESSES

Caroline	61
CRAWFORD, Mrs Glennis Anne, Honorary Secretary, Isolated Children’s Parents Association of Australia Inc	37
DANN, Ms Sandra, Director, Working Women’s Centre South Australia Inc	88
DEVENISH-BATZLOFF, Mrs Bernadette Margaret, Publicity Officer and Federal Councillor, Isolated Children’s Parents Association of Australia Inc	37
DUNCAN, Mrs Jody Lee	61
FUDGE, Ms Elizabeth Anne, Project Manager, Children of Parents with Mental Illness, Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association	52
GILES, Ms Janet, Member, Premier’s Council for Women	23
HARRISON, Ms Christine, Director, Strategy, Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, South Australia	2
HARVEY, Mrs Annabelle	61
LABLACK, Ms Karen, Director, Population and Migration Division, Department of Trade and Economic Development, South Australia	2
MASON, Ms Paola Untonia, Co-Convenor, Children of Mentally Ill Consumers	52
McINNES, Dr Elspeth Margaret, National Convenor, National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc	72
MORT, Ms Fiona, Manager, Policy, Office for Women, Department for Families and Communities, South Australia	2
RYAN, Ms Sally Jean, Executive Policy Officer, Premier’s Council for Women	23
SHAKES, Mr Christopher, Assistant Director, Children’s Services, Department of Education and Children’s Service, South Australia	2
TAYLOR, Ms Jacqueline Sharon, Executive Officer, National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc	72

Committee met at 9.39 am

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services into balancing work and family. To date the inquiry has received almost 200 submissions and taken evidence from over 50 individuals and organisations. Our witnesses today include several organisations that represent women. We have received evidence that women are facing immense time pressures from both playing a key role in the home and participating in the work force. For some women, work is a financial necessity; for others, it helps them maintain contacts in the community, contribute to society and maintain their skills. The committee hopes to expand on these themes today. This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be made available via the committee's website. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff here at the hearing.

[9.40 am]

SHAKES, Mr Christopher, Assistant Director, Children's Services, Department of Education and Children's Service, South Australia

MORT, Ms Fiona, Manager, Policy, Office for Women, Department for Families and Communities, South Australia

HARRISON, Ms Christine, Director, Strategy, Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, South Australia

LABLACK, Ms Karen, Director, Population and Migration Division, Department of Trade and Economic Development, South Australia

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you very much for coming today. We do have a good submission from the South Australian government, but I am doubly pleased that you have such a diversity of representation today. I invite each of you to make a short opening statement so that we can get a perspective of the areas that you represent.

Ms Lablack—As you are aware, the submission was made some time ago, and since that time a number of government position documents have been released. We have also had a state election, during which this current government made a number of commitments. Each of us will bring you up to date on what commitments have been made since we made the submission.

Ms Mort—In terms of the role of the Office for Women, clearly one of our positions is wanting to emphasise that the issue is more than just a women's issue. It is actually an issue about community, work-life balance, and men and women's access to a balance in their lives and their involvement in their children's development and upbringing. One key thing that we would like to emphasise at the beginning is the importance of a multidimensional range of strategies to address the issues, so it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Families are diverse in the community, and we need to recognise that different things are going to be required, not only for different families and different people but also at different points in their life cycle. What might be sufficient, appropriate and helpful for a woman in her early 20s and a family nearing their 30s may not be appropriate for a woman and a family nearing their 40s. The importance of access to affordable child-care options is another critical thing. It is detailed in the South Australian government submission as well. Within that, I suppose a critical issue is accessible, appropriate and localised child-care arrangements so that whoever actually requires that does not need to travel too far to utilise it and can afford it. They are probably the key points that we would like to emphasise at the beginning.

Mr Shakes—My perspective today will bring the work that our department does in relation to the planning and supply of early childhood services and, as we have already heard, the provision of child care, and not just child care but a range of other services for families underpinning the successful balance of work-life priorities. In South Australia we have gone through an extensive

review of our early childhood services system, which ranges across maternal and child health, education and care and family support, and I understand that the report of that inquiry, the *Virtual village*, has been provided to your committee. I would like today to update the committee on the work that we have done since the report was released and since our submission to this inquiry was made and to raise some issues from the perspective of the South Australia government in relation to the provision of a family-friendly early childhood service system.

Ms Harrison—Because the South Australian government submission was made very early in 2005 it predated the extensive work undertaken by the state's Training and Skills Commission in conjunction with business, industry and the community to develop a strategy for South Australia's workforce to 2010. I would like to table that strategy for the committee today and have an opportunity to highlight the impact of the strategy on the issue that is before you particularly as the Training and Skills Commission received a very clear message from the community, including business sector, that the development of our workforce is not simply a training strategy alone but will require collaborative efforts with businesses and enterprises with respect to work practices and employment conditions in order to increase the size of our workforce and also meet the burgeoning demand for skills to respond to our economy.

CHAIR—Do you want to tender that document now?

Ms Harrison—Yes.

Ms Lablack—From the Department of Trade and Economic Development you would have received a copy of our population policy that the state government released some years ago with some of the recent movements that have happened to give a higher priority and to coordinate to certain areas. As you can see, these issues are very complex and many areas are involved across government and the community. The Population and Migration Division was formed in the department of trade—I was appointed earlier this year—and we have very much a coordination facilitation role looking at linking all the strands of the different programs and agendas across government so that we can put an integrated picture together and look at where we are complementing and overlapping, but also having a clear focus on what we are trying to achieve. From the department of trade's perspective we have a very strong interest in the availability of skills and optimising people's skills, but also in what makes attractive workplaces for people to be in the workforce, and that includes women and their partners.

CHAIR—Karen, South Australia, as I remember well from being Minister for Aged Care, is the fastest ageing state in the Commonwealth and because of that demographic South Australia had developed quite a lot of innovative policies in aged care. Obviously, with the low birth rate and your ageing population you need women to return to the workforce to expand your workforce. Is the proportion of women who have re-entered the workforce higher in South Australia than in other states?

Ms Lablack—I would not have that information at my fingertips but we can certainly get that sort of data for you.

CHAIR—That would be helpful. In the last two decades in particular we have seen women stay at high school longer and they have done to tertiary study. This has coincided with women returning to the workforce as well. From your point of view, have you categorised this return to

the workforce? Is there a larger population of women in trades, for instance, or is there a larger population in professions or are we looking at a larger section in the casualisation of the workforce in casual work, as well as part time, which is different from—

Ms Lablack—I will refer that to Fiona. She might have a better feel for that information in terms of the breakdown of women.

Ms Mort—We can certainly get you the actual data, the analysis. Some research on women in employment has been done in South Australia that is currently available on the Office for Women website, but I can certainly get you copies of those documents. They give a bit more detail. The sense from those documents is that women re-entering the workforce are re-entering into casualised, part-time employment that is opening them up to be quite vulnerable to a whole range of issues, and then, adding to that, the impact of limited access to child care in particular areas and the cost of that is resulting in extra pressures on them to maintain that link with the workforce. Also, in terms of the child-care arrangements, it is not only child care across the board but particularly short-term, emergency type child-care arrangements. When they are called in to work at short notice, they find difficulties in getting the access to those places, which means that they are unable to go and do a shift or whatever, because of the whole dynamic of casualisation. But I can certainly provide the executive summaries of those reports, which would give you some detailed stats.

CHAIR—Do you make the distinction, as we have been doing during our inquiry, between part-time work, which can be of a permanent nature, and casual work, which can be part-time as well?

Ms Mort—Yes, absolutely. We do make that distinction.

CHAIR—Has there been a growth in part-time work as well?

Ms Mort—Again, I would probably have to go back to the detail of those reports. Certainly they indicated growth in both part-time work and casualisation, but from my memory the growth is probably more in the casualisation than in the part-time area, adding to that all the issues that I stated previously.

CHAIR—So in that area you would have quite a bit of shift work?

Ms Mort—Yes.

CHAIR—I have been talking to various people, sometimes just having a conversation on an aeroplane with someone: ‘How do you handle it?’ We are seeing quite often the phenomenon of a husband and wife arranging their affairs, both working shift work, so that one looks after the child then the other one comes home, but they are literally passing like ships in the night. I was wondering if anybody had done any research about the impact that that has on the life of the relationship. It might lengthen it! But I wonder if anybody has done any research on it, and I would be interested to know from your resources if you have.

Ms Lablack—Certainly we could look into that, but off the top of my head I am not aware of anything.

Ms Mort—I certainly think the whole issue of shift arrangements and passing in the night, as you described it, has been identified in different forums that have been held, particularly a recent one that Pru Goward spoke at in South Australia, which raised the issue of not having contact with partners because you just say, ‘Here’s the keys; here’s whatever,’ but there should be some more detail that we can provide to you about that. I do not know that there has actually been specific research, but certainly I think it has been identified in some of the research on women in employment that I spoke about earlier and that we can provide to you.

CHAIR—I have one last question, and then we will move on to the other members of the committee. One of the things we have identified is that shift workers could benefit greatly if the benefits that accrue to institutional care were available for people who utilise a nanny service. We use the term ‘nanny’ because we know what we are talking about. But certainly there are a lot of people who work in jobs in everything from ambulance to policing to supermarkets who work shift work and are not able to access institutional child care because it just does not service those hours. Have you considered that degree of flexibility in child care in your policy initiatives?

Mr Shakes—I can answer that. In South Australia we are uniquely placed in that we sponsor almost all home based child care—family day care.

Ms GEORGE—Is that with the government?

Mr Shakes—Yes. My department is a sponsor of around 5,000 child-care benefit places, and we support around 1,000 care providers who work providing care in their own homes. In South Australia we have the highest rate of overnight and weekend care. Family day care is the most flexible and affordable option for workers who are working in shifts.

We have some difficulties, and every family day care scheme around Australia has similar difficulties now, in recruiting care providers. It is the workforce shortage within the children’s services sector that we are struggling with. We are this year going to embark on a study to try and understand the recruitment difficulties we have in family day care with finding care providers who are willing to provide flexible child care from their own homes.

Ms GEORGE—Christopher, what percentage of that care is actually in the home of the worker rather than the worker taking the children to the family day care worker?

Mr Shakes—In this state, none. We have a legislative barrier which says that family day care can only be provided in the home of the care provider. We would very much like to overcome that barrier but we require a legislative amendment to the Children’s Services Act in order to do that. The federal government has made in-home child-care places available, but we are unable to take them up because of that legislative block.

CHAIR—So that is state government legislation?

Mr Shakes—That is our legislation.

Mr FAWCETT—Are there any moves to look at overturning or changing that?

Mr Shakes—Yes. We would very much like to do that. There are some issues around care in the home of the child that need to be worked through in relation to liability, insurance and various safeguards of that sort, which we have been working through over the past year or so. While it would be a relatively minor amendment to the Children's Services Act, I think the general practice in government is to bundle amendments together and do them in a group rather than one by one. But our minister is certainly interested in a legislative reform program and that would be part of the agenda we would be putting to her.

Ms GEORGE—What is the spread of employer provided child care? You made reference to the FBT and the changes you would like to see there; would you like to elaborate on that for us?

Mr Shakes—We have been approached by a number of employers who feel that the FBT exemption ruling from the ATO which limits FBT exemption to child care that is actually provided in the workplace is a major barrier to them structuring family-friendly work arrangements for their employees. We have been working with one particular employer, a pharmacy organisation, that has small groups of women working extended hours seven days a week in a range of different locations in the metropolitan area and in the country; there is no single place. The option of building and running their own child-care centre is not a sound one for them from a business point of view, and they have talked to us about striking leasing arrangements with, for instance, nearby child-care centres or family day care providers which would guarantee their employees access to the child care that they need. But, in order for that to be a useful proposition for them, they would need the FBT ruling changed.

Mr FAWCETT—Or they could take up on the private rulings or copy the private rulings that already exist for some firms, because some firms, some banks in particular, have already gained private rulings on FBT—that if they are providing child care for their workers then they do get that exemption.

Mr Shakes—Yes. Not having seen those private rulings, I do not know exactly how they would operate, but I understand that the employer that I mentioned is actually seeking a private ruling of their own at the moment. So it will be interesting to hear the outcome of that.

CHAIR—Would-be employers who wish to do this would be wise to get a private ruling, because the tax commissioner can change his public ruling any time he likes, but a private ruling is binding upon him and that is why firms are taking that extra step.

Mr Shakes—I see.

CHAIR—But, if my recollection serves me, I think a leasing arrangement is within the guidelines. I think that is worth looking at.

Mr Shakes—If that were so, that would open up that possibility. I think the issue for South Australia is that we have a lot of small employers; there may be only one employer that is large enough to sustain its own child-care centre in this state.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I have a few questions about population policy in particular. Increasingly, it strikes me that we have a lot of work to do to outline the benefits of balancing work and

family, not just for families and individuals but also for us as a community in terms of our population. South Australia is where that is at its most important or will hit the hardest first.

I do not know whether other states have the focus on population policy that South Australia has had to this point. We have not heard much about it as we have travelled around. I would be interested to know what we are doing right. Also, the submission mentioned a brochure that had been prepared for employers and employees about the benefits of balancing work and family—and I am not sure whose area that falls into—but I am curious to know what the reaction has been to that, how effective it has been and whether there are other initiatives being worked upon specifically aimed at community attitudes?

Ms Lablack—In terms of population policy per se—I speak from being in the job for only four months, so I cannot be 100 per cent sure—from what I have seen, some elements of what we are covering in population policy are receiving attention. New South Wales's attention is on skilled migrants. Victoria has, I think, \$6 million over three or four years and is mainly focusing on skilled work and those sorts of issues. I personally have not heard about other initiatives or about having a focus on population.

I have been involved in the Australian Population Institute. I know there is a group in Victoria, but the issues for Victoria are different from the issues for South Australia. They have not had the drive for as great a number as South Australia is looking at to try to get the diversity of a community, particularly because of the number of aged people in our population and also the people who continue to leave. In our population policy we have a number of targets. One of them is the net interstate movement of people. South Australia still continues to have a net movement of people out of the state. Some of the other states may be paying a bit more attention to it, particularly Queensland, to where people might have been very attracted in the past. There are signs that possibly things are turning: people are possibly starting to leave Queensland. I do not think they will be the same circumstances that South Australia faces but, all of a sudden, they might shift their emphasis in believing that they are doing the right thing and that people are being attracted. Other things, like housing affordability, the range of jobs that are available, might be starting to influence that. The next part of your question related to the work and family brochure.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I am interested in any things that the South Australia government are doing to address community attitudes. To explain that particular portion of my question, a fortnight ago I was reading a column in a major South Australian newspaper—

CHAIR—There is more than one?

Ms KATE ELLIS—where the columnist wrote that he did not agree with the government subsidising parents: if they choose to have children then they should bear the sole responsibility of that and, further, he could not understand why there was any subsidy whatsoever for child care. That is another example of the need for us to do some serious work in the community about why children are important to all of us in terms of population. It seemed that your brochure on balancing work and family, which was for workplaces, was an example of getting out into the community and trying to change these attitudes. I am interested to know what brought it about, whether it was effective and whether there are any other community campaigns which are being run.

Ms Lablack—One of the biggest things that I have found since being in the job is how difficult it is to find levers that you can influence to make a change happen. You talk about something as pervasive as that cultural attitude. I have been in workplaces where there is an absolute hostility to having children around at all, which I found absolutely astounding. It does not encourage that ease that you might have—even in the roles that I have had—to ask for things, to have the flexibility or to suggest changes.

In our own workplace we found that the culture of support from each and every member in the organisation is very critical—people understanding what flexibility means, why you are asking people to be really organised and why you are asking for limits on work. It is the same as any job: there is only so much you can do. But, if you have an attitude, because somebody is not here because their kid is sick, or whatever, rather than they are just not available, why should there be a difference in that?

I think this is one of the big challenges we are going to have: what we can do to actually make that influence. We are certainly going to be investigating—our focus is on researching—to get more information on what we can do, working through people’s actual experiences so that we can see what we can influence.

Ms Mort—I will just bring to your attention the women’s policy that was released by the government just prior to the election. It made a commitment to promote voluntary, flexible working arrangements in all government departments, seeing government departments as one of the levers to influence community attitudes, business and other organisations, but also requiring chief executive officers to emphasise the importance of these flexible arrangements. I suppose that is a sense of community education, but starting at the point of the government departments themselves, which can inform and influence.

Ms Lablack—And I think you need to take it to seeing what has really worked. We in our office are deliberately looking at this. So we want part-time arrangements, flexible arrangements: what does that look and feel like for us in trying to get the sorts of demands in the work that we are doing and use that experience to inform us about what we are going to be doing? Because, when you go to a small business, they do not have time to think about it. They want to be able to see: ‘Here’s a model that a similar business is using that is working for them.’ Or they are working out their own arrangements which they come up with themselves, but they are not really calling it ‘family friendly’; they are just keen to have a workforce—the people—there. They know they want to keep them, so what do they have to do to keep them?

Ms Harrison—I will follow on. As I said earlier, the primary thrust around the workforce development strategy is not just the skilling of the workforce but increasing the workforce, with a recognition that, to increase the workforce, there will need to be different employer attitudes and different behaviours around working conditions and working environments. I would have to say that that is the greatest challenge: from a government intervention perspective, how does government play a role in changing enterprises? However, what we have seen is that, as the demand for skilled labour becomes more of a pressure point, enterprises are making their own decisions, and the best enterprises are those that actually do workforce planning. So the enterprises which look at their workforce profile now and work through with their business planning to determine what kind of workforce profile they will need in the future, where the gap

is and how they are going to meet that gap are the ones which are then thinking about changed working conditions.

We are experiencing a demand for labour through the general robustness of the South Australian economy, but also the greater demand for workforce is coming through our retirement intention rate or the replenishment rate. You have picked that point up because of the obvious demographic profile of the state. But there are two major projects which are influencing the economy—that is, South Australia's success in achieving the air warfare destroyer contract and also the mineral expansion boom.

To use the mineral expansion boom as an example, the Upper Spencer Gulf is the primary area in which that expansion is going to occur. The mining companies that the South Australian government has been working with in this workforce planning have come to their own conclusions that they need to develop the regional community—that they will need to gain a workforce from their local, regional capacity rather than the more expensive and less sustainable option of fly in, fly out, which has been the typical behaviour of mining companies. That behaviour, then, is starting to address the questions of what a workforce will look like. It will have a better balance—it will have a better gender balance and it will have a better age-profile balance—which brings with it the question: 'What are the experiences of people in those different life cycles?' Young people will have different caring responsibilities from those of older people.

OneSteel would be a useful company for the inquiry to make some further inquiries about. At a recent conference—only in the last 24 hours—the general manager of human resources portrayed a very interesting picture of how that company is changing its workforce practices, both in respect of attracting newer employees but retaining existing workforce and also attracting those members of our community who have been traditionally disengaged from the workforce. The Whyalla region has a very high rate of youth unemployment and disengagement but also a potential workforce from an Indigenous population. Salary is not the only answer, but working conditions are, along with arrangements around not just the family caring responsibilities but the aged care responsibilities.

In summary, the challenge, from this point, is that businesses will come to their own conclusions in time. So it is a just-in-time response. I suspect that, even if government were to do nothing, something will happen amongst enterprises. But that is not to say that that is a satisfactory response. I think the point about community attitudes and community expectations is a very important one and it is one area where government can play a role. If our young people grow up with a traditional approach that young women in particular will come to the age of 30, have a child, then find it difficult to return to their career, that will not be an aspiration that we would want to perpetuate in our community.

Following on, we are doing some research about the lifecycle experiences of people for exactly that reason—to look at the family caring relationships not just in the early stages of life but also in the later stages. As part of the Workforce Development Strategy, the South Australian government has been promoting the strengthening of our research capacity in the state, and that has happened through a consortium of three universities around workforce development. There is also some research happening in the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies by Barbara Pocock, who, in conjunction with Lend Lease, from a developer's perspective, is

looking at what factors will influence people returning to the workforce. Is it child care? Is it transport proximity to the place where they work? I would recommend that to the committee if contact has not already been made. I think that also touches on the issue of community attitude. If we are developing regions and communities around this expectation that you can participate in work and also have a balanced family life, then we will do a lot in that area.

I am sure I have seen the brochure, but I do not know where it emanated from. There are a number of commitments that the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology and the Department of Trade and Economic Development, in conjunction with the office of women, will be undertaking during this government's administration. There has been some discussion in the past about an accreditation scheme for businesses. We have grappled with that issue. We are not convinced that that is the best way to go, but certainly the kinds of models that we have looked at have been around reporting similar to the equal employment opportunity management plans. We do need to think very seriously about the ways in which we can support and encourage businesses and enterprises to look at their family and work practices and how they relate to family and life balances.

Following on from the success of the Victorian scheme for parents returning to work, we introduced that program with the introduction of the population policy two or three years ago. That program has been so successful because it addresses the issues of women in particular who leave the workforce and who therefore are not able to maintain their skills, or their job has changed or they have to change jobs because they are going to go back to work part time. That program has been so successful that we have now had to suspend that.

Ms GEORGE—What do you mean?

Ms Harrison—No matter how much money we put into that program, we would not be able to meet the requirements.

Ms GEORGE—So the program will not be available to the sole parents who, under the federal laws, will be returning to the workforce?

Ms Harrison—As your inquiry is actually addressing the issues of what the federal government can do, what we have found with that program is that we need to have better coordination between the federal government's programs and our own programs. What we have seen is substitution of people participating in the state government's return to work program rather than getting the full benefit from the federal government's programs, the details of which I am not intimately associated with.

The program is suspended because of the way in which it operates—that is, individuals register through a web based program, which happens very quickly. So we are fully committed for the next financial year. I believe that is a very strong community indicator that skills are a necessary requirement of returning to work and reflects a range of reasons as to why people require some upgrading of skills in order to return to work. I suggest, without having any definitive evidence, that it is because of the changing nature of the workplace while they have been out of the workforce or because they have to change jobs.

Mr FAWCETT—One of the points you made that I think is critical was about the attitude of employers. You talked about the fact that large corporations like OneSteel and your own government departments are reaching the point where you are saying that, to attract and retain a workforce, we need to change the way we think. That is fantastic for the small percentage of the Australian workforce employed by very large corporations or government departments. The vast majority of Australians are employed by small businesses that just do not have the profit margin or the fat to put in place some of that contemplative ‘let’s restructure because it is a nice thing to do for five years down the track’ approach.

You mentioned taking a Victorian program. Victoria has another program that I have had feedback on and that businesses in South Australia are accessing because the South Australian government does not provide anything similar. It is essentially a mentoring program. For example, if you are small business A and you look over and see that small business B is keeping their workers—their workforce is happy—the government is basically facilitating the opportunity for you to go in and do a benchmarking so that businesses can learn from each other about how to better workplace practices. People from South Australia are going to Victoria to access that program because it is adding so much value to companies.

Ms Harrison—I would be very interested in the details of the program.

Mr FAWCETT—I would encourage the South Australian government to have a look at what Victoria is doing, because it is obviously adding value if people are going interstate to access their program. It is shaping attitudes within small businesses—and small business is where the majority of people are employed, I think it is an essential factor in moving away from the part-time arrangements and towards the flexible arrangements that you identify in the table in your submission as being one of the critical things that will enable, in particular women, to go back into the workforce on a more sustainable basis.

Ms Lablack—My experience in working with small businesses is that it is being able to see how they can apply it in their workplace and realising what they call that issue. If they have a problem, it is not necessarily about getting access to the workforce but about their being able to realise what it is that is preventing them from getting that flexibility or the way in which they need to do it. Most small businesses have learnt on their way up and have relied on whatever resources they have had to develop their business. So it is very important that businesses are able to see other businesses like their own doing it well and to see the model and how easily they can apply it.

Mr Shakes—I will just add a final point. The evidence that we have—and a large amount of it is anecdotal—from the service system side is that, even under the current cultural environments that apply in workplaces, in South Australia there is a fairly acute undersupply of the kinds of services that families need to support workforce participation. So, even if there were no changes to the existing workplace culture, we would still need to address issues around access to services and the way in which early childhood services work.

Our government has made some particular commitments since the early childhood review to develop models of service provision such as early childhood development centres, which are described as—I do not like using this term—one-stop shops where families can get access to a flexible range of services—maternal and child health, child-care, federally funded child-care,

preschool, early years of school, family support services—all in one place. I think there are new commitments around doing that. Cultural change is a necessity but it has to be paralleled by the kind of reliable, high-quality early childhood services that families would need in order to be reassured that when they take up flexible working arrangements their children are being cared for appropriately.

Mr FAWCETT—As part of those reviews, is the state government working with the local governments on planning permissions for long day care centres? I noticed that you commented in your submission that long day care providers in the private sector tend to go to particular areas. I have found, certainly in the electorate of Wakefield, some of the commercial groups moving into lower socioeconomic areas and, to the considerable angst of the community based child-care centres, setting up right next to them.

A lot of it comes down to a lack of coordination in placing those centres, which is currently a local government responsibility. At the end of the day, it is their decision whether centres are allowed to be built in an area. It strikes me that there is a role for government to coordinate this at a state level, if not at the national level, and to ask, ‘Where are the demands and, therefore, where should we approve these centres to be set up?’ Have any of your reviews touched on liaising with local government to try and get that kind of planning coordination?

Mr Shakes—Yes, to some extent. We are aware of the phenomenon you have described. In some cases those commercial child-care centres are in potential competition with new investments that the state government is making in early childhood. Our minister is of the view—and she has written to her federal counterpart about it—that there is substantial scope for bilateral planning of early childhood services in South Australia, under the rubric of the national agenda for early childhood. We have just begun bilateral discussions with officers from the federal department about how best to improve early childhood services in South Australia. Planning in the absence of a consistent national planning model for early childhood services is an issue that our state, along with other jurisdictions, has raised with the federal minister responsible.

Ms GEORGE—At the moment the federal department cannot tell you the areas of high and low demand.

CHAIR—My memory is that someone was putting together a database that you—

Mr FAWCETT—Mal Brough has just launched it.

CHAIR—Yes, he has announced it.

Mr Shakes—In July, every child-care service will have to phone in fortnightly their vacancy information. That would be its first objective.

Ms GEORGE—That does not obviate the problem. I am seeing it in my electorate, too, where the commercial providers are coming in and, with council consent, setting up in competition with the long day care community service centre that has been there for donkey’s years. It just seems to me that there is a lack of coherent planning. At the moment, there is a total

reliance on the market to provide the service rather than on some coherent overview of what is best in terms of taxpayer dollars and the amount of money that goes into this area.

Could I just follow up on that. In the submission you make the point that the Commonwealth has been reluctant to enter into agreements with the states and territories in relation to child-care. Could you just explain a little about that and about what kinds of agreements you think might be worth while for the future?

Mr Shakes—In South Australia, we have had a long history of working collaboratively with the Commonwealth government. Through the eighties and early nineties, we worked together on building and establishing new community-run child-care centres, family day care expansion and the expansion of out-of-school-hours programs.

Since the last of those agreements lapsed, I think in 1992, we have not had any kind of bilateral agreement with the federal government on early childhood services, except for one small and highly valued program—our rural care program—where we are establishing small child-care centres, which the Commonwealth and the state are jointly funding, in communities that are too tiny to sustain any other form of mainstream child-care service.

We think the development of a national agenda for early childhood, the growing awareness of the importance of early experiences and the pressure of demand have created an atmosphere where it might now be possible to structure different kinds of agreements on how the whole range of early childhood services is delivered.

As with any agreement, we believe that there would need to be reciprocal elements within it. I think the South Australian government has signalled its intention to invest in early childhood through the early childhood development centres program and through other initiatives, such as the development of universal home-visiting services for newborn babies and sustained home visiting services for families that need it.

We would be willing to talk to the Commonwealth—and I think our minister has indicated this—about how the total early childhood picture works in South Australia. The framework that has been created for us by *The virtual village* report requires us to look at how universal services operate, how targeted services operate and how intensive services for highly vulnerable children work together.

The drive to expand services also needs to consider the acute importance of early experiences and the lifelong impact of negative early experiences on particular children who are vulnerable. We believe we can work together on developing a more universal, more accessible and better quality early childhood system that is more responsive to families' needs. Just to illustrate: part of the reform program that we would be looking at would be, for instance, to continue to use state government infrastructure to potentially expand child-care services. Our rural care services are based in state government kindergartens. We have a universal preschool system in South Australia for four-year-olds which is effectively free.

CHAIR—Say a bit more about that.

Mr Shakes—Every eligible child in South Australia has the right to four terms of preschool education in the year before they enter school. That is a longstanding commitment.

CHAIR—So it is a full year.

Mr Shakes—It is a full year of four terms, with four sessions per week, so it works out to around 12 hours care per week. Preschools are an interesting example because they operate on a sessional basis. We believe that over time it is not a family-friendly thing if you have got your child there and you have to pick them up in the middle of the day and then come back the next day for their dose of preschool. So we have been working over time on making that provision more flexible.

Also we would like see—and the early childhood development centres are doing this, in fact—how you would build in a birth-to-four component to those services and how you would link what we call preschool more effectively with the first years of school. We have established a birth-to-eight school in South Australia which includes child-care provision and which operates for 50 weeks a year—the child-care part of it at least. We would be interested to pursue that direction with our early childhood development centres. The government made a substantial policy commitment prior to the last election about expanding that way of doing business.

CHAIR—To 50 hours a week.

Mr Shakes—The early childhood development centres, when they have child-care in them, would operate 50 hours a week, but they would also—

CHAIR—That would be a universal entitlement—you are looking to expand to 50 hours a week?

Mr Shakes—The universal entitlement would stay as it is—which is a significant gain relative to other jurisdictions, I might say—

Ms GEORGE—Particularly New South Wales, my own state.

Mr Shakes—but we would be looking at more flexibility around how those hours are delivered: different times, longer opening times for our early childhood services, longer weeks of operation.

CHAIR—Earlier in our hearings, we held what we called a nannies' day, where we had everybody who is involved in providing individual services into individual homes—from people who contract it out, to people who do the work, to people who try to match up families to share and all that sort of thing. One of the things that came out of that was the thought that, if nannies had at least a level II certificate and were registered, then if you employed someone from that pool they would be eligible for CCB and the future 30 per cent tax rebate. Not everyone wants to institutionalise their child, and that is all we offer at the moment. Even at family day care you are in there with a whole bunch of other kids.

Ms Lablack—I think the cost is probably fairly prohibitive. Looking at myself, that was very difficult for me at that time.

Mr FAWCETT—We find a lot of shift workers use nannies. Most people would report—depending on which city they live in—that, as soon as you have got two or more children involved, it is actually cheaper to have a nanny than to use a day-care centre. There is quite an interesting demographic for people who use nannies, and it is not just the rich that people would imagine.

Ms Lablack—I think it takes substantial effort, once you have had two or more children, to still be in the workforce. That is very difficult.

Mr FAWCETT—One of the arguments the industry put forward is that, for work-life balance, their model of child care considerably reduces stress for a woman going back to work. The normal child-care scenario is that you are up at five, you are scrambling to get ready and to get the child ready, fed and clothed and then you are out to child care and off to work, always wondering, ‘Am I going to get the phone call saying that they’re sick?’ You race out the door at the last minute, come home, bathe and feed them, have dinner et cetera and collapse on the bed. There is no quality time at all with the rest of the family, whereas with the nanny situation their argument is that you get up, you get ready for work and they arrive. You have had some nice time with the child and they do the bathing, the cleaning and all the rest of it. You come home from work and the child has been fed and is ready for bed and you can read a story. So the work-family balance is far easier. That is part of their argument about why their industry is good.

Ms Lablack—As long as you have back-up if they are sick.

CHAIR—But the child is there if they are sick.

Mr FAWCETT—If the child is sick then they stay at home.

Ms Lablack—No, I mean if the nanny is sick.

CHAIR—Sure, but that is true with anybody who is running a business.

Mr Shakes—I do not disagree with those issues about flexibility. The question is finding the right person and being assured that they are competent to do the work.

CHAIR—That is why he talked about level II certificates.

Mr Shakes—Our family day care providers are at level III.

CHAIR—We are saying level II is the starting point.

Mr Shakes—It is effectively an entry level.

Ms GEORGE—Is the preschool system here under the auspices of the department of education or children’s services?

Mr Shakes—We are in one department, almost uniquely.

Ms GEORGE—That is interesting. And are those sessional arrangements conducted through the local primary school or in separate structures?

Mr Shakes—Around a quarter of our preschool programs are in primary schools. Three-quarters of them are in small stand-alone services. The directors of those services have some freedom about how they structure their sessions, and we are getting increasing pressure from those directors to push the envelope even further, because they are getting pressure from families about when they are open and for how long. Some years ago we introduced what are loosely described as back-to-back sessions, so that for some time, instead of having to have your four sessions on four days, families have been able in many preschools to use their four-session entitlement in two days. So they get two sessions per day. We are obviously keen on expanding that even further.

CHAIR—What percentage of child care in this state is formal and what percentage is informal for people who return to the workforce?

Mr Shakes—We do not measure informal child care. I can provide you with statistics around child-care provision and how it has grown dramatically over time in South Australia.

CHAIR—Which has grown—informal?

Mr Shakes—No, formal child-care provision has grown very rapidly. We do not regulate the informal sector, so we are guessing as to the extent of it.

CHAIR—I think the national figure, if my memory serves me, is about 60 per cent. Do you remember?

Ms GEORGE—It differs with age. The younger the child is, the more likely they are to have informal rather than formal care. Coming closer to school age, that changes.

Mr Shakes—One of the trends we have noticed over time has been the tendency of families to rely on a patchwork of arrangements which might change from week to week or even day to day. There is some research the Institute of Family Studies has done on this question of the range of different settings that children go through during the course of a week.

CHAIR—That again supplements the argument for having access to a nanny, which would give consistency.

Mr Shakes—True. In any of these circumstances the research is telling us quite powerfully that for very young children in particular, who are going through a very important period in their cognitive and emotional development, secure attachment is really important.

CHAIR—Exactly.

Mr Shakes—If you have a service system and the range of work and family arrangements that are actually adding to turbulence and the risk of insecure attachment, then there is an issue that needs to be addressed.

CHAIR—Not to mention the late payment fees when you are late picking up the child. It has always struck me that there are big profits there. It is like supplying garlic bread at a restaurant.

Ms GEORGE—Still, if you could open some of the legislative constraints, you could expand your current family day care and do in-home care.

Mr Shakes—We could, and that would be a terrific synergy that we want to pursue.

Ms GEORGE—I think that would suit a lot of parents.

CHAIR—There is no reason why it would have to be a government operation. That is one way of providing it.

Mr Shakes—We work with babysitting agencies, which are registered in South Australia. It is the lowest level of—

CHAIR—They are very expensive.

Mr Shakes—It varies, I think.

Ms GEORGE—You make reference to the tax system and the disincentives. You make a recommendation to review income tax and family payments to remove distortions and anomalies. Have you done any research locally that would be an interest to the committee on women saying it is really not worth their while returning to work because it eats into allowances and they pay the extra tax and child care and there is nothing left over?

Ms Mort—The women in employment research indicates some of those issues. There are some reports we can provide to you which contain those types of comments. When we talk with women generally in relation to these issues they have certainly identified that there is no incentive. They are up against it to enter the workforce because of the issues of taxation, payment of fees, et cetera. It comes back to the comment that Chris was making in the discussion previously about the need for a range of options to be available that are affordable and accessible for a diverse range of people in the community. They need to be tailored to provide at local and regional levels and not just in the big child-care centres in the cities. In terms of cost effectiveness, the issue of nannies and private babysitting becomes problematic when you look to our rural and regional settings and how they would operate there. Possibly the cost would be prohibitive.

CHAIR—If there was tax deductability it might become much more affordable for a lot of other people, mightn't it? Do you have a view on tax deductability? You can get it for dry cleaning.

Ms Lablack—Personally, it would have made a lot of difference to me.

Ms Mort—Tax deductability is one thing but look at the whole skills shortage in terms of recruiting people in, say, South Australia. The whole reason for the population unit being put together is that we have had difficulties in the metro area that get exacerbated in rural or regional

locations. Attracting skilled child carers, whether they be nannies or whatever, to those locations is more than just about the ability of the parent to pay.

CHAIR—On the other hand, I notice in a submission that is coming later in the day—I think it is an organisation dealing with isolated parents—that they say a lot of home schooling goes on and they would like some tax relief or tax deductability to be able to hire a tutor so they can have some proper schooling for their children. It says in the submission that if they are in business they can somehow get a tax deduction—I am interested to find out how—but if they are an employee there is no way in the world they can. Again, that would seem to be a question of child-care services being a tax deduction. But that is another point.

Ms Lablack—Going back to the child-care thing, from a personal perspective there is also school holiday care and the integration of before school care with the timetable, the school system and after school. You have two weeks over Christmas and if you are required to work over the holidays—not the public ones but in between—you do not have options very often. It just does not end when you get your kids to school.

CHAIR—Exactly.

Ms GEORGE—What is happening to the facility that is providing the sessional preschool out of session? Is it in constant demand? I am thinking about converting some of those structural arrangements into a broader use for before and after school and vacation care. Is that feasible with some government assistance?

Mr Shakes—We have around 70 per cent of outside school hours care in South Australia run by primary schools. We have a massive physical infrastructure and investment in that area, and outside school hours care has been the most dramatic area of growth in formal child-care provision in South Australia in recent times. I am happy to provide data to the committee to show how that occurs. With that rate of expansion, which again is entirely reliant on the Commonwealth release of child-care benefit places, we can envisage that over, say, five years every primary school in South Australia could potentially have the opportunity to operate a before and after school and vacation care program.

CHAIR—Does each school do it themselves?

Mr Shakes—Each school does it.

CHAIR—Runs it and organises it?

Mr Shakes—Yes.

CHAIR—So they make a profit.

Mr Shakes—Generally through a subcommittee of their governing council, as we now call them. We have done a lot of work to support the effective management of that system around the roles and responsibilities of principals and those subcommittees. We have just released a new guide, which we published on the web, to facilitate the operation of outside school hours care programs. Our minister is committed to introducing outside school hours care regulations in the

near future. We operate a system that complies with national standards. Seventy per cent of the services that are run by our department operate to national standards, and the other—

CHAIR—Are they run by the department or by the school?

Mr Shakes—They are run by the school. That is a good thing, because the legal entity that runs—

CHAIR—It is a potential income stream for the school.

Mr Shakes—It is, and how the school spends those funds is up to them. We encourage them to reinvest in high quality outside school hours services wherever they can.

Ms GEORGE—And that is available for vacation care as well?

Mr Shakes—In most locations, yes. The Commonwealth has a practice of allocating before school, after school and vacation care places separately, but most schools are trying to build a suite of all three where they can. Before school is the most problematic, because the numbers tend to be relatively low and they are a bit of a drag on the viability of the service.

Ms GEORGE—Yes, I find that in my area too.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I want to add to that. Based on my experience with some of the schools in my electorate that are doing that, I want to put on the record that I do not think that doing it for profit is necessarily always the reason. A lot of the schools are saying that in order to attract students these days, they need to be able to say to parents that they have after-hours school care. A lot of them are doing it at a low cost in order to provide a service to the students and their families as well.

Ms Lablack—And kids will come from all over Adelaide to particular schools because of the quality.

Ms GEORGE—While in my state it is ad hoc whether schools do before and after school care, it seems to me that here it is much more systemic.

Mr Shakes—Yes, I think we have a more systemic commitment. I have four project officers who work exclusively on outside school hours care, and I think that is unique in Australia.

Ms GEORGE—I would be interested in getting further information about the system and how it works, if that is possible.

Mr Shakes—Yes.

CHAIR—You made a statement earlier about South Australia losing its population. Who is it that leaves, and what skills do they take with them? What is the average retirement age in South Australia?

Ms Lablack—I cannot give you the average retirement age, but I am sure we can get that information for you. From what I can recall, the largest group that leaves is young, educated women.

CHAIR—Really?

Ms Lablack—Yes.

CHAIR—And they are the ones who leave most?

Ms Lablack—They are the highest proportion of the group that leaves. We can provide the actual numbers, as reliable as that information is; it is very hard to get accurate information on interstate movements. The sources of that sort of information are not particularly reliable. Obviously, the census will be a great time to get current numbers.

CHAIR—How would you feel if the Commonwealth was to finally bite the bullet and say, ‘We’re going to phase in a new retirement age from 65 to 70, and do it in exactly the same way that women’s retirement age was phased in from 60 to 65’—in other words, it is incremental. How would you feel about that?

Ms Harrison—I would like to speak on that, but we may have to provide you with some further information. Certainly, there are some disincentives for older people to stay in the work force, and they are linked to superannuation and taxation matters. That comes up consistently when we have discussions with the industry and with the community about the reasons why people leave the work force. While today has been very much focused on the family life balance in the family age group of workers, equally there are reasons why people in their mid-50s, particularly women, do not stay in the workforce. For men, of course it has been related superannuation matters, because most men have superannuation.

Ms GEORGE—I wonder if that will change now that you can draw down on your super while you remain in the workforce.

Ms Harrison—It may. I think we need to do more work at both levels of government about what incentives or disincentives there are for older workers staying in the workforce. Some of them are hours of work, patterns of work and the financial benefit. We have done some very intensive work around retirement intentions in South Australia and we have some data around what that expectation is with respect to our workforce. As I said earlier, the demand for skilled labour or skilled workers is actually greater through the retirement intentions than through the economic growth in the state.

Ms Mort—Just on that point, it is probably useful to note that South Australia has a state ageing plan. One of the things within it is workforce participation and looking at some strategies to develop that. Also, the women’s ministers of the Australian government and the states and territories are looking at the work around older women’s participation issues. One of the key issues is workforce participation of older women and looking at those things as well.

CHAIR—In reality, the statistics show that the number of older women staying in workforce the longer is actually rising at a faster rate than men because it is off a very low base. But it is

quite encouraging. I think there is quite an acceptability in that employers see these women who have this drive as really very reliable. Their loyalty is good. There are a whole lot of factors that apply that make them an attractive proposition to employ. Of course, those old superannuation schemes said that, if you had not retired by 55, your superannuation entitlement would be less. That was a problem we had with the old Commonwealth superannuation scheme. We would have people retiring and then they would come back as a contractor on the following Monday.

Ms GEORGE—Can I ask one other thing. It is a little bit tangential. It is about skills. I have been reading that South Australia, it appears, at least anecdotally, has relied a lot more on the importation of skilled workers from overseas than other states. I do not know whether that is because the degree of shortage is higher here than elsewhere. I am just anxious to know what procedures are applied before the importation of skilled labour proceeds in this state. Is there a state vetting authority?

Ms Lablack—We have a regional certifying body, but we can provide you with a written statement outlining the details of the process in terms of identifying where the skills shortages are as part of the immigration process.

Ms GEORGE—In those areas where there are skilled shortages, are there proactive training strategies in place, having identified a particular industry with a particular problem, or is the short-term fix a solution to the problem?

Ms Harrison—Skilled migration will never be our sole answer to meeting either our population increase demand or our skills demand. In this state we are refining the way in which we are measuring or forecasting our demand for occupations and in particular industries so that our skills and training systems will be much more focused on skills demand. By implication, there are skilled migration programs to meet the immediate demand, but also there will be training and other supply side interventions to be able to meet the longer-term demand in those occupation areas.

Ms GEORGE—But the approval is a state based approval?

Ms Lablack—There is a Commonwealth component there.

Ms GEORGE—I know, but there is also—

Ms Lablack—We fit in with the requirements of the Commonwealth.

Ms GEORGE—I know the Commonwealth policy. I am just anxious to know how it gets implemented and who makes the decisions to actually bring in the overseas skilled workers. Does a state body do that?

Ms Lablack—I think it is best that I provide the details of the process to you in writing.

Ms Harrison—It is true that the state sponsored skilled migration program had more participants than the industry sponsored skilled migration program, but Karen can provide that information.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming. We would be very obliged to receive the answers to questions you have taken on notice in order to supply us with information. It has been a most informative session. Thank you.

[10.51 am]

GILES, Ms Janet, Member, Premier's Council for Women

RYAN, Ms Sally Jean, Executive Policy Officer, Premier's Council for Women

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. We have your submission. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Giles—The Premier's Council for Women in South Australia was established by the Premier in 2003 to provide advice to the Premier in relation to issues facing women in this state. It is made up of a very diverse group of women from a range of backgrounds and expertise. We meet monthly, and we make it a commitment to keep in contact with women in the community and link with women's networks so that when we give advice to the Premier we are speaking on behalf of not just a group of women who meet but also ones who are broadly connected within the community here in South Australia.

When we were first established, we held community forums in order to be able to identify what the priorities for women in our state were, because there had not been an identification of women's priorities for some time before the election of the Labor government. What came out as one of the very strong and key priorities for women was the issue of work and family, which is probably of no surprise, because it is a high priority issue right around the country. We have been working with the state government on this issue, and it is consistently on our agenda each month. However, we have found, in recent times particularly, a large number of issues really come under the authority and responsibility of the federal government. That is why we are pleased to be able to give the evidence today.

We have got the key points and our recommendations in the submission, but we would like to add to statements about more recent things that have come to light since we put in our submission, in relation to two pieces of federal legislation. One of them is the introduction of Work Choices and the other one is Welfare to Work legislation. We would also like to spend some time—and this is not in our submission—on the impact of those two pieces of legislation on the issue of work and family. We believe that they interact strongly with the whole question.

In our submission we have dealt with why work and family are important policy issues, and I do not think that we need to go into that any further. I am sure that representatives from the state government have identified this, but the council is also concerned that as women's participation in the workforce has increased there is an impact on our economy around a range of issues in terms of women's participation in the workforce. I think that you have probably covered it in terms of the ageing population that we have got in South Australia, the skills shortage and the low fertility rates in our state and the importance of not reducing our population as a result of the rise in women's participation in the workforce, and that is a policy issue that we are concerned about in the state.

I do not know whether this is this submission, but when we responded to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission discussion paper we also raised our concern—and women in the state are concerned—about the importance of the early years and family life in our state and we recognise the traditional and social functions of women in the community. We not only raise children but also we take part in a large amount of the domestic and volunteer work in the community. Also now we are increasingly caring for aged parents. Having babies later in life has led to a generation of women looking after aged parents and children at the same time and this has led to particular issues for work and family.

We have highlighted the serious disadvantage to family formation particularly for working women in their careers and the financial and social aspects of their lives, and those are outlined in our submission. We have made specific recommendations about what we see as solutions that have been discussed and endorsed by the council as the key way we think things should go and we have also provided these to Premier as part of our quarterly report, though a number of them do fall outside the gamut of the state's responsibility and fall within the federal approach. I do not need to read them out but they essentially go to paid maternity leave, increased funding for child care, flexible workplaces and leave options, access to carers leave, reduction in working hours and overtime, offering employer incentives and, with reference to the tax system, including the question of tax deductions for child-care costs and tax benefits or incentives for businesses that provide child-care facilities or family leave conditions.

One of the key areas that the council has done additional work in—because it came up in the forums as being a major issue for women and in South Australia it is a particular structural problem in our labour market—is the issue of casual work and women. Our latest figures show that 30 per cent of working women in South Australia are in casual work. That means that they have no leave entitlements and the impact of lack of leave entitlements on the ability to balance your family and work, or even raise your family if you are a worker, is particularly stressful for women. There is also the stability of work and the ability to manage things like child-care arrangements and school sports days and the range of things that you have to do as a parent. It is much more difficult if you have got uncertain and casual work.

We have also dealt with the issue of gender equity in pay and workplace practice. That has come out as a major issue for us and it interacts with the issue of work and family. One of the key recommendations that would assist us in forming policy at the state and Commonwealth levels and providing advice is that we would like to see more gender analysis of employment in workplace data than currently exists in documentation available in this area.

The thing that I would like to add on behalf of the Premier's Council for Women is related to the connection between this issue and the new federal industrial relations system, Work Choices, that was introduced last year and proclaimed in March this year. Traditionally, as an industrial issue—and this has been the pattern in our state as well—improvements in the area of work and family, as something that is an entitlement at work, have been due to either industrial negotiations or national test cases. Nothing has been legislated under our state act, except for unpaid maternity leave, that gives an overall universal condition to working women. That means some individual industries have very good conditions because they have good bargaining power or they might be a heavily feminised profession or their employers see it as an important thing for their business. Some very good examples of that are in the finance sector, in the Commonwealth public sector and, just recently, here in the state public sector.

In South Australia, the conditions for people, particularly women, to be able to balance their work and family or manage their work and family have been patchy and reliant on the bargaining power of workers and the goodwill of employers. That means that we have big gaps and it is very patchy. For example, it is very unlikely that women working in traditional blue-collar industries would have access to any paid maternity leave. Following the introduction of the new industrial legislation, we have been concerned about the five minimum standards. Under that legislation there is only the provision of unpaid parental leave, and there is no other minimum standard relating to this area of work and family. We believe that, because the individual contract system is based only on the five minimum standards, we could see an undermining of the award and collective agreement conditions of family and work that exist currently, with those individual contracts matching the minimum standards more than the standards of awards and collective agreements.

The issue of unfair dismissal makes women workers who already fill the huge proportion of casual work in our state even more vulnerable and much less likely to approach employers if they do not think they will get a good hearing about things like picking kids up early, attending family events they want to do to participate in and rearranging shifts around child-care arrangements. There is a range of things that families have to negotiate, and it is largely women at the moment who have to do the negotiating.

Also, we are concerned about the undermining of the powers of the Industrial Relations Commission, which has been a major strategy nationally for improving things that are not necessarily going to be picked up right across the board by individual employers or individual unions. The support test cases that apply to all awards and agreements arise out of the role of Industrial Relations Commission. The Premier's Council for Women in South Australia, for example, was supportive of and pleased to see the family leave test case that the ACTU ran last year. We are concerned that that win, if you like, that will apply to all awards will not really apply to many women if they are on individual contracts under the new minimum standards under Work Choices.

Lastly, the Welfare to Work changes will have a significant impact on working women in their ability to have high-quality relationships with their children or know that their children are being well looked after, which applies particularly to single mothers. We are very concerned about the impact of that, and we have been working on it with our community sector people here in this state.

The two key things we are concerned about are, firstly, the basic reduction of income that is attached to this package for women who are single mothers and, secondly, the requirement for a single mother to go back to work after the child turns six. Because of the structural place that working women fit into in the workforce, they may be caught up in the Work Choices industrial system and will most likely be on an individual contract and unable to balance their family responsibilities and the care of their children if they have very little ability to bargain. But if they refuse to take contracts that undermine their ability to look after their families then we understand they will be in breach of their benefit and will get a penalty.

They are the issues we have discussed at a council meeting and wish to raise with you today. The last two were not included in our submission because at that stage they had not become law. We stress that, in the context of there being less ability for national industrial gains through the

Industrial Relations Commission, the issue of family and work becomes a really significant federal government issue in terms of the law and of policy on things like child care, taxation, paid maternity leave and other matters raised in our submission. That is our submission on behalf of the council. Sally might want to add something.

Ms Ryan—One point I would like to add is that it raises the issue of the importance of monitoring the impact of Work Choices on families, particularly in terms of balancing work and life, and looking at the impact on children and the elderly as well as on the working parents. While it might impact on particular workers, it ricochets off in other directions and impacts on other people who may not be in the paid workforce.

CHAIR—You mentioned gender equality with regard to pay. What is the differential in South Australia and does it apply across the board in trade and professional areas? Leave aside the public service; we are familiar with that. What percentage is women's pay less than men's in this state?

Ms Giles—There are some figures that came out recently. I cannot remember them now but we could get back to you about that. There have been some recent media reports on this. One report specifically related to South Australia, so we would be able to get that for you.

CHAIR—That would be good.

Ms Giles—My memory of what was reported is that there is still a significant difference across all industries. The report talked about it being largely due to a lack of women achieving promotion within some of the more professional and white-collar industries and to women being segmented into the lower paid positions within the workforce.

CHAIR—If you could find that for us that would be good. Is the birth rate in South Australia the same as in the rest of Australia or is it lower?

Ms Giles—I think it is a little lower. The South Australian strategic plan is measuring all of this stuff at the moment, and a report is about to come out which will be an audit of our targets. One of our targets is to do with population growth, so there will be good quality information. My understanding is that we have a lower rate than other states because our population is ageing and we also have a significant problem of people leaving to go to other states.

CHAIR—We heard in the previous testimony that it was largely professional women. What percentage of university graduates in South Australia are women?

Ms Ryan—There is a higher proportion of women than of men but I do not know the figure. We have it in our statistical profile but I could not pull the figure out. We do have access to that, if you would like us to follow that up.

CHAIR—That would be great, thank you. What I want to know then is what percentage of women graduates return to the workforce and how quickly they return to the workforce.

Ms Ryan—I do not know that detail, either. But I do know that, while there is a greater number of females graduating, the drop-off comes in follow-up employment you might expect

from a higher qualification—the slip-off comes once they get into employment. That is not carried through. Just as in certain professions you have increasing numbers of females coming in—such as engineering courses and so on—there is, as well, a significant drop-off in the ability to keep them beyond five to 10 years. But I do not have the state figures on that.

CHAIR—It would be very interesting if we could have those, because we are putting a lot of money into educating women in the workforce, and that is an important investment that we need a return on, to put it in economic terms. Also, women who achieve usually want to be able to use those skills. The other thing we have noticed is that the crunch decision as to how much you can cope with in the workforce is the birth of the second child rather than the first. I wonder if you have any statistics on that.

Ms Giles—I do not think any statistics are kept on that sort of thing.

CHAIR—I think there are.

Ms Giles—I think if anyone had those sorts of statistics it would be the population unit of the state government. We have done a statistical profile of women as part of our work in the state. We did it a couple of years ago, and we are in the process of updating it. That sort of information is likely to come out in that.

CHAIR—You say in your submission that the percentage of women in the workforce is increasing, despite the fact that you have been losing young, professional women. You have gone, over a 15-year period, from 51.8 per cent to 54.5 per cent. I was wondering who they are.

Ms Giles—It is a national trend; it is not just a trend here. Women are participating more actively in the workforce.

CHAIR—Yes, but what I want to know is whether South Australia matches the national average.

Ms Giles—My understanding is that it does match the national trends. We do not look much different to anywhere else around the nation.

CHAIR—Is that the same with regard to superannuation?

Ms Giles—Yes.

CHAIR—It matches the national trend?

Ms Giles—Yes.

CHAIR—I note that you say parents should be able to claim child-care costs as a tax deduction.

Ms Ryan—There are so many other things you can claim.

CHAIR—Exactly. I heard the other day that the most commonly claimed deduction is the dry-cleaning. It seems to me that if you can claim for your dry-cleaning you ought to be able to claim for your child-care expenses.

Ms KATE ELLIS—Some of the evidence that this committee has heard previously was from people who did studies into the best forms of assistance through the tax system that the government could offer. They thought they would come out with a recommendation of tax deductability for child care but instead actually found that it was not the most equitable approach. Obviously, in order to claim child care as a tax deduction, you have to be able to pay it up front in the first place. They argued that tax rebates were a better system. I just wondered whether your council has had the chance to see any of that research—whether you have concluded that, no, tax deductability is the best way, or whether you are arguing that you need a form of assistance through the tax system.

Ms Giles—What we would say is that you need a package; you cannot just pick one solution. I am aware of all those debates, but we would say you probably need a mixture of both. You also need, probably more importantly, some sort of tax incentives or ability for employers to provide the services. For example, I think the state government in Victoria has provided a stamp duty reduction for those employers that provide family-friendly provisions. So there is an incentive for employers to deal with this issue. We would not say that is going to be the answer, but there is a range of options. The women on the council and also women we talked to think that we should probably put tax deductability back on the table for discussion because of the way that the child-care industry has changed and because of the high costs of child care that currently exist out there.

Ms Ryan—We raised the point in the submission that one size does not fit all. You need a range of options for different people's circumstances, so they can match their own family situation. That is really important, because family types and family situations are so different and so varied.

Mr FAWCETT—On page 12 of your submission you mentioned offering employer incentives and accreditation awards to encourage implementation of family friendly practices, and you cited the Business Council of Australia and their award scheme. Do you feel as though that has been successful?

Ms Giles—If we are going to get change here, we cannot just rely on one part of the community to pick this up, if you like. These things do not solve the problem, but it keeps it on the business agenda. If we can give high status to those businesses which are actually doing something that is productive and useful then it will be useful for other businesses. It is really important for business themselves to raise the debate about the importance of family-friendly conditions in order to increase their productivity and business success. It is not just an obligation and a burden on them as a business; it is actually a really positive thing for their business. The more that is talked up, in our view, the easier it will be to institute policy changes and do other things that are required. But it is not the only answer. Our criticism of the stuff in the past is that we would not think that, just by giving someone an award, we would change the world, but it is an important part of the package and it needs to continue to be supported.

Mr FAWCETT—You said here that the federal government should follow suit. What kinds of initiatives or awards do you think would add to what ACCI are doing?

Ms Giles—I think it would be great if we could have a collection of a celebration of good practice and documentation of what business are doing and how they are doing as a modelling of what is supported by key businesses and the federal government in order to encourage business themselves to take up these initiatives.

Ms Ryan—I think some of that is about raising the profile and the media and community awareness of those sorts of things. Particularly in relation to the skills shortage, I think the ability of employers to offer those things, as part of the suite of what they offer, will mean that more workers are attracted to them, particularly women, because it will be a key issue to help them decide where they want to work. But I agree with Janet that it needs to be part of a suite of things that are offered—and that is the employer end—just like their ability to be able to avoid the fringe benefits tax, which I understand exists, if they offer child care in the workplace. If they are able to do that, it will attract workers with children. They will be able to return to work and it will aid things such as women's ability to breastfeed and build on the attachment of young children, particularly preschool children, to parents, rather than the stress of having children in different places from their parents.

Mr FAWCETT—A previous witness—and we were talking about the same sort of area—stated that the state government were highlighting that a number of businesses are now self-moving down that path because they are realising that the only way to attract and retain workers is to bring in family-friendly practices, and there was general agreement that at the smaller business end where, perhaps, they do not have the resources to invest in that, that there is perhaps a role for the state or federal government to look at facilitating mentoring and that awareness type thing. Would you also support that in a small business environment?

Ms Giles—Yes, but we do not think this is the answer. This is a very small part of the picture. The answer is to have some consistent and overarching federal policy and some structural things in place. This would be like the icing on the cake in order to encourage the change to occur. If we are going to rely on that to solve the problem then we will be waiting a very long time.

Mr FAWCETT—I do not think it is a case of solving the problem, but I think what you have identified is that there is an underlying goodwill on behalf of employers to ensure that they have a viable and happy workforce in the future. We need to provide them with a framework within which they can do what Sally has talked about: meet the very individual and unique needs of each family which, again, as previous witnesses have highlighted, will change. From their early 20s to their late 40s or 50s, a family's needs and circumstances in terms of flexibility and their work arrangements will change, so we need a framework whereby the employer can engage with the employee to provide them with flexibility and those arrangements to suit their own family circumstances.

Ms Ryan—A lot of families have to drop their children off really early to get to work and then travel back to get them, so having child care close by is really important for them. But I agree with Janet that that is just one aspect of it, and it raises the broader question of the whole public debate around work and family. Particularly since women are not picking up a lot of the unpaid work in the way they previously did, the question of who does the caring in our community is

really important nationally, and I think there is a really strong role for the federal government in that. As women are in the paid workforce and essentially need to be there to support their families, there are fewer carers in the community. There are fewer volunteers able to participate in children's sport, tuckshops and hospitals. The volunteer network has been much more integrated into how we work in general. It is important to have a national debate about both men and women being involved in solving this problem together. We must recognise that, unless we do that, we are going to have more relationship breakdowns, which will lead to more latchkey kids who are on the loose and likely to get into trouble with the law and more elderly people without carers. That is not the way to go. We have to put structures in place to avoid an outcome where people at the margins drop off and we have a dual system of winners and losers—haves and have-nots.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I want to take you back to your point about the need for somebody to monitor the effects of the Work Choices legislation on work and family. Who do you think should be doing that monitoring? I do not know whether the government is going to report back on those sorts of things. Is it something your council is looking at? Are other people looking at some of those issues in South Australia or nationally?

Ms Giles—We have not had a meeting in April, so we have not had a meeting since the legislation has been in place. But we have a meeting tomorrow and it is on the agenda. The state government is looking at keeping an eye on this. From our perspective as individuals, and not on behalf of the council, if we are going to continue to operate, as this is a major work of the council, then, yes, I think the Council for Women could play an important role in ensuring that the legislation's impact on women and therefore on work and family is monitored. That is the big issue for women in this legislation. I do not know if there is a federal government department that could also take on that responsibility.

Ms GEORGE—The last time the committee met in Canberra, Pru Goward made the same point. She said it will be important to monitor the impacts. The point that Janet has made is really important. Historically, a lot of the benefits we have had in Australia, such as equal pay provisions, maternity leave and carers leave, have come through the auspices of test cases before the Industrial Relations Commission. Unlike other European nations, where legislation has been the mechanism of providing across-the-board improvements, we have relied on our industrial arrangements. It seems to me that, in policy terms, depending on the High Court outcome, there is potentially going to be a major shift towards federal and state governments increasingly being responsible for ensuring that progressive societal changes are accommodated much more through legislative changes than has hitherto been the case because we have had another system of arrangements for the benefits to flow on. Pru Goward effectively made the point about paid paternity leave. Only about one-third of women in the private sector have access to paid maternity arrangements. If that diminishes, it raises the question of whether the government should legislate to ensure the uptake of those provisions across the board. It is a very philosophical argument for the future that we may need to address in our report.

Ms Ryan—On page 7 of our submission, we referred to an OECD study from 2004 which pointed out that countries which facilitate female employment and support child care for nought-to three-year-olds have the highest fertility rates. So helping at that end can also help.

CHAIR—There is something to be said here that is quite important. It has come out in evidence we have taken. It is that countries which have more liberal approaches to attitudes to women having children out of wedlock in de facto arrangements in fact have a higher birth rate than countries such as Spain, Italy, Japan and Germany, where there is a more patriarchal attitude. In those cases, women simply walk away. To take the next the next step, we talk about ‘family friendly’, but in fact the policy is woman friendly, and the woman is more likely to decide to have a child. Do you have a comment on the nomenclature that we use—‘family’—when we really probably mean ‘woman’?

Ms Giles—We also have to make sure that we are talking about the caring part of that equation. It is not just the having the children, it is the looking after the children. I do not know about the language we should use, but we would not want to frame the debate around it being a responsibility of women alone.

CHAIR—No, but you make the point in your submission that a growing proportion of Australian women and their partners are choosing not to have children at all, and we have a figure that perhaps a quarter of all women will not. In those other countries, where the prevailing culture is, shall we say, more patriarchal, women are simply saying, ‘We won’t,’ and there is very little part-time work in those countries. What we have seen here in Australia, for instance, is that, as women have re-entered the work force and have gained some financial independence, part-time work has grown to meet that and we have been able to embrace the concept of work and family, which other countries have failed to do. The net result is that their birth rate is around 1.1, 1.2 or 1.3.

Ms Ryan—In relation to women working part time or increasingly working casually, you have to look at the impact on individual women and their own financial situation long term. Because they are in and out of the work force so much they do not accumulate the super that they might otherwise—

CHAIR—But this is something that happens. However, when you are comparing with other countries, what happens is that those women say: ‘No, we won’t have children. We will continue in the workforce because it just doesn’t work to be in a marriage situation and work; the opportunity just isn’t there.’ There is another stat in someone else’s submission today that says that 85 per cent of women want to have families and work. In this country, we enable that to happen.

Ms Giles—We would argue that we do not enable it to happen—

CHAIR—Our birthrate says we do it a lot better than other countries.

Ms Giles—But not compared to places that do it really well, where we see the statistic saying that women are participating at extremely high levels and the birth rate is looking fine. I think that shows us more what the answer is.

CHAIR—Which countries are you holding up as examples?

Ms Giles—I am talking about, for example, Sweden and some of the northern Scandinavian countries, where they have dealt with this issue particularly well.

CHAIR—But they also have an enormously high tax rate of over 50 per cent, and I do not think the Australian people would wear that.

Ms Giles—I do not know whether that is necessarily linked to their work and family practices.

CHAIR—Yes, it is. Tax is very much involved in it, and in this country Australians would not wear that rate of taxation.

Ms Giles—I do not know.

Mr FAWCETT—You were talking before about reviewing the impact of legislation and things, and Jenny mentioned one metric which is perhaps a very simple and obvious one—maternity leave. One of the issues at the moment that you have already identified yourself is that every family is different. They might have elder care responsibilities as well as child-care responsibilities, so what drives a good outcome for them in the work and family balance may be very different. Putting in place a framework that notes that it is a huge liability for an employer to consider having 12-months paid maternity leave—whether they are paying, the tax payer is paying or whatever—and says, ‘We are quite happy for you to have a higher rate of pay or a payout but not take up that provision,’ may work for the family and may be the best outcome for them. If you then look at it, take that simple metric and say, ‘We’ve had a decrease in the number of women accessing maternity leave,’ you are not actually measuring the true benefit to work and family balance. All I would say is that, in taking a simple comparison of a country like one of the Nordic countries, you have to be careful about taking the simple metrics, because there are many countervailing arguments that say that what they have put in place has costs elsewhere.

Ms Giles—I suppose you just have to work out what you want to do. For example, if we want to have a high participation of women in the workforce and a high birthrate then we have to tackle the two together. We cannot say that women have to take on the burden of the birthrate without some support about how they will also participate in the workforce. So it is a policy and political decision.

CHAIR—But you jump to the conclusion that Sweden must be the answer, but you do not say that Australia should have a 50 per cent plus taxation rate—and Australians will not wear that. You have to look at all the issues together. There are many solutions.

Ms Giles—I do not have the numbers in front of me, but my understanding of the costings of the national paid maternity leave scheme is that it is actually quite cheap in comparison to other policy matters we have talked about.

CHAIR—To put the answer: I do not think child care or raising children is a 14-week problem; it is more like a 14-year problem—some people might say a 40-year problem!

Ms GEORGE—Sure. We are one of the few advanced economies that do not conform with the ILO standard—which, David, is not 12 months; it is 14 weeks, and we cannot even provide that for all Australian women.

Ms Ryan—Could I just go back to the point that Mr Fawcett made in relation to paid maternity leave. I think one of the hidden costs in not paying maternity leave is the loss of

workers. When workers leave a particular workplace—I have seen the figures, and I could not put my finger on where I saw them—for the replacement of a worker or the changeover of a worker there is a cost for each person of around \$85,000. I do not know where I have seen that figure, but I have seen it. I think we often have not looked at that cost of what it is to lose a worker or not have a woman come back to the workplace who has a skill base that matches to the workplace. There has been a hidden cost in that.

Mr FAWCETT—Sally, you are quite correct, particularly when you are talking of a skilled trade or professional level. It does not apply evenly across the whole business sector. That is that the danger of having one size fits all, versus saying that, if you are an employer in a large corporation with a professional woman in whom you have invested many thousands of dollars, you would be foolish not to work with her to provide that opportunity to bring her back with flexible work practices, preferably on a permanent basis, as soon as you possibly can that fits with her family. But that does not necessarily apply to a small, family-run business with very few employees. So you do need to have that flexibility. As many witnesses to this committee have highlighted, both employees and employers particularly, they recognise that huge cost that you are talking about—about just arbitrarily saying, ‘No, we don’t want to pay that’—and, where people can, many are going the extra mile to retain their workers.

I agree with your comment before that we need to look at not just the symptoms and simple fixes but the whole thing and the questions about why so many women are put in the position of having casual or long-term part-time work as opposed to being permanent employees. Often it is because of this constraint of a one-size-fits-all framework that we try to put across a range of sectors.

Ms Giles—I do not think the council would agree with you, because of the work we have done in relation to casual work. We are happy to give you a copy of the research that we have done in relation to what is happening with casual workers in South Australia. I do not think it is a matter of individual choice—that is what I am saying.

CHAIR—Do you have figures on where women in South Australia work?

Ms Giles—Yes, we do, in our statistical analysis.

CHAIR—Do you have those?

Ms Giles—Yes. In fact, we might provide to the committee the statistical profile of women in South Australia, which the council have done as part of our work.

CHAIR—I think that would be good for us to have.

Ms Ryan—Predominantly in feminised industries, but also in the lower echelons of retail and—

Ms Giles—Hospitals and—

CHAIR—I saw that in your submission, but I know that you omitted to mention law and medicine, where more than 50 per cent of the graduates are women.

Ms Giles—Yes, but not employed as—

CHAIR—They are the statistics I asked for about degree graduating women and their participation, but you did not have that.

Ms Giles—We have, but we did not bring it today.

Ms GEORGE—So they are moving interstate for employment opportunities?

Ms Ryan—I do not know in relation to those professions, but I know certainly in relation to some fields they are. There has been a particular push in the population policy to bring back some of those young workers who have gone interstate, in the hope of attracting them back to raise their families here if they have gone elsewhere as soon as they finished their tertiary education.

CHAIR—If it is women who are leaving, it might be a good marriage market!

Ms GEORGE—For women?

CHAIR—For women.

Ms Giles—Except that there are more women than men in South Australia.

CHAIR—Is that right? Maybe that is why they are leaving!

Ms Ryan—I want to raise an issue about the casual workforce, because I think it is a major problem. I have an anecdotal story from last weekend. I was out with my husband having dinner and I saw a young pizza maker making pizzas busily—I know it is only an anecdotal story but it alarmed me. A young girl came in and she was talking to him while he was busily making pizzas. She walked out past the window near me and looked incredibly distressed. I happen to know one of the workers there who I spoke to the next day and I asked what that situation was about. I did not know if it was some young girl off the street, but it looked like there was something going on. She said the young chef had been working 15 days straight at that point and the only time his partner, who was the person who came in, was able to see him was when she came to talk to him at work while he was making pizza. What I witnessed going past the window was distress.

I was thinking that he had been at that workplace until three that morning and he had to return at 10 the same morning to start the next shift, and he had been working 15 days straight. He was also presumably driving a car to get home. At one stage we looked at the impact on truck drivers from lengthy periods of driving and at safety for the rest of the community. You have casual workers who are frightened for their jobs, as was the situation with one young person who told me she had been working for 10 days straight—she was frightened. She wanted the money because she wants to do other things in a few months time and to get as much money as she could. A worker had been sacked the day before because she was not up to scratch, and there was a fear that they would lose their jobs.

It alarmed me because I thought about it, along with the research by Barbara Pocock in South Australia on the casualisation of the workforce and the impact, particularly in this state, of what it means. What chance does the relationship have in that anecdotal story? How would you enter children into that? When would they be conceived for a start? When is there couple time? When are they able to spend time together?

CHAIR—This is the whole question of shiftworkers where children are involved, and the ability to have care in your own home instead of institutionalised outsourced care is an important option we just do not get offered.

Ms Ryan—It puts phenomenal stress on Australian families. One of the things we quoted in our submission was that, where both parents work, 50 per cent of them feel stressed most of the time. That stress will impact on health and ricochet in all sorts of other ways that ultimately we will pay for if we do not put other remedies in place to prevent it.

CHAIR—What that is telling me is that there must be a tremendous shortage of pizza chefs in South Australia.

Ms GEORGE—In the Illawarra they did a survey into skills shortages, and I was stunned that the top skills shortage occupation is among kitchen hands. It seems amazing, doesn't it?

Ms Ryan—I think for most of them the idea of having permanent work does not really exist in some of those trades.

Ms Giles—In some areas, there is a relationship: it is not because there are not enough trained people, it is because there are not enough trained people who are willing to work in the conditions that industry offers. We find it interesting that when we look at skills shortages and the number of people with qualifications, they do not necessarily match. We have got big groups of well-qualified people who will not work in the industry because they do not like the conditions or they prefer a more stable environment. I think there are enough chefs out there; they just do not want the jobs.

CHAIR—What are they doing? Are they on the dole?

Ms Giles—Other jobs.

CHAIR—That is different. There are lots of people who are trained—

Ms Giles—It means that we do not have qualified people doing qualified jobs.

CHAIR—No. There are lots of people who are trained for one thing who want to go on and do something else. Chefs are no different from anybody else. You are not obliged to stick at the one trade you have trained in for the rest of your life. What we are saying is that there are obviously not enough coming up who are trained who want to work in that industry.

Ms GEORGE—What is the situation with child-care workers? I noticed the government in their submission said they had provided child-care scholarships for the last couple of years.

Ms Giles—I think in South Australia there is a range of things that are happening that are starting to improve the situation. There is still a significant shortage, but the state government has seen that there is an issue. Also, there has been a recent decision in relation to child-care wages which has helped significantly. Child-care workers are no longer on the minimum state wage in South Australia. They have got a wage increase which makes it a more attractive profession to go into. I think the combination of those two—

CHAIR—Are these government employed ones?

Ms Giles—No, these are privately employed.

CHAIR—So what is the hourly rate?

Ms Giles—I do not know. I will find out for you. They won a wage case last year in the Industrial Relations Commission of South Australia.

CHAIR—I think it is commensurate with people working in the aged care industry.

Ms Giles—No, it is higher now because they have got that wage increase. Generally, personal care workers rely on the minimum wage cases each year.

CHAIR—Do you mean a safety net adjustment?

Ms Giles—Yes. That is not the case any longer for child-care workers because they have got the wage increase.

CHAIR—So that means parents will have to pay more?

Ms Giles—Not necessarily, although I am not quite sure how each centre is managing. That may be the case but that is not necessarily so.

CHAIR—Someone has to wear the cost.

Ms Giles—Probably. I suppose we need to look at how we retain people in the industry by giving them a decent wage to live on.

CHAIR—But they have got to have customers to come and pay them in order for them to earn money too.

Ms Giles—It is really a vicious cycle.

CHAIR—As there are no other questions, we thank you very much for that information. We look forward to getting the additional information that we asked for. We appreciate your coming to see us today.

[11.42 am]

CRAWFORD, Mrs Glennis Anne, Honorary Secretary, Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia Inc.

DEVENISH-BATZLOFF, Mrs Bernadette Margaret, Publicity Officer and Federal Councillor, Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia Inc.

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. We have your submission, for which we thank you. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mrs Crawford—It is great to be able to have this opportunity to present to this hearing. You may or may not know that we represent the Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia. We are essentially a lobby group, lobbying for educational opportunity for rural, remote and isolated children. Our structure is that we have a federal council and a state council in all states except Victoria and within the states there are branches. We have put a submission to this inquiry mainly because of the fact that a lot of rural and remote people, particularly women, do a lot of unpaid work while at the same time trying to balance their family responsibilities, particularly those in the area of education.

I would like to draw the committee's attention to this book that has recently been released. It is some research by Professor Margaret Alston. She did this research on the impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia's rural and remote areas. It does not deal with just secondary; it deals with primary education of children as well. If you have not already seen this book and you would like a copy of it, I am quite happy to hand this one over to you.

Professor Alston, in her research findings, has highlighted quite a number of issues. Even though there is a focus on the drought, these issues have existed for rural and remote families for many years. The drought has just exacerbated that situation. As you understand, a lot of Australia has been in drought for many years. I will draw your attention to some of the things that people said in evidence to Professor Alston. The research really reflects the impact of what women—mainly women—have to do when they live in rural and remote areas. This is what one woman said:

My husband actually went away working from October until March this year and when he was away it was me. The kids were out doing the feeding and the watering ... we were running the fence lines that needed to be checked ... We're doing what we can without employing anyone. ... [and he went away] purely to get education money.

Here is what another said:

For most of our families these days you are the jillaroo as well. You're the one that answers the phone, you're the one that does the books. ... If there are people there working you're doing the extra feeding—and that's the thing, if you could go in and just do the school and that's it, it would be fine and you could keep up. But because we're not in that situation ...

There are some issues that we would like to reinforce today in relation to this inquiry. I will hand over now to Bernadette.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—There are a couple of issues that we would like to highlight, one of which is the possibility of recognition of the work that home tutors do in teaching their children at home, in the form of being paid. Women would be able to use these funds that they would get paid to teach in the schoolroom to get relief—to pay someone else to come and do their job, to employ a governess to give relief. This would give real recognition to the unpaid work that a lot of young women have to carry out in the bush.

The other thing that we would like to suggest is that the governess's wages, for all people who do not have access to a daily school, be tax-deductible. That would give women the choice to employ someone to take over their role in the schoolroom and they might then be able to go back to work in their field of expertise. At the moment that is not an option if you are teaching kids at home.

CHAIR—How many people are we talking about? How many children in South Australia are isolated?

Mrs Crawford—We are talking from a federal point of view here.

CHAIR—How many are there federally?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—How many get AIC? That would probably be it. I do not know the number.

Mrs Crawford—The number would be around the number of children that receive assistance under the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—We are only talking about hundreds, aren't we?

Mrs Crawford—I think probably around 6,005 students receive all the components of AIC.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Thousands? We do not know that figure.

CHAIR—Can you find out?

Mrs Crawford—Yes.

CHAIR—These are your constituents we are talking about. How many children and how many families?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—The federal government would have the figures for the number who receive AIC.

Mrs Crawford—But you get AIC for various reasons, so—

Ms GEORGE—The Commonwealth department would have the figures, surely.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They do.

Mrs Crawford—DEST would have them.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It would not be difficult. DEST would be able to give you that figure.

Mrs Crawford—I will note it anyway.

Ms GEORGE—And anyone in South Australia?

Mrs Crawford—I can tell you that there are probably about 65 families involved with School of the Air at Port Augusta. There has been a significant drop in the last 10 years. They would have had 120 families before. That is how the bush is dwindling.

CHAIR—That is because of consolidation, isn't it?

Mrs Crawford—I think people are just being forced off the land, particularly if they are employed by someone. They often leave for the very reason that coping with educating children is just all too difficult. It is not only just teaching children at a primary level. These students need to go away to school for secondary education because often the mother feels totally and utterly incapable of teaching a student at high school level.

CHAIR—She probably is.

Mrs Crawford—Yes. Frequently these women have had a limited education themselves.

CHAIR—Yes, I was going to ask you about that. How competent are they to teach anyway?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Since the changes in the way that kids are taught now—they are taught in computerised classrooms—a lot of the young mothers have really had a battle to have the confidence that they can teach their children.

CHAIR—I guess that, if we do not know how many we are talking about, it is hard to gauge the size of the problem, isn't it.

Mrs Crawford—From my recollection I think there are about 6,005 students or kids that get an AIC. But there are several payments there. If we are talking about families that are doing distance education and receiving the AIC—

CHAIR—How much is the AIC?

Mrs Crawford—The distance education allowance—that is, for students who are doing distance education home—is \$3,075.

CHAIR—Per child?

Mrs Crawford—Yes.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It is specified that that payment is actually to recognise the cost of setting up a schoolroom—buying the computer, airconditioning the schoolroom out west and taking the kids to camp and that sort of thing. It is not a payment for the work that the mum does.

Mr FAWCETT—Is that a once-off payment for each child or is it an annual amount?

Mrs Crawford—It is annual. It might seem to you to be a lot, but it is not. I have been in a situation where I have had three children to teach in my schoolroom. Of course, the payment was not \$3,075 years ago. It is an absolute commitment. Because of the economic situation with the land at the moment, there are people who are really struggling to educate their kids or find the time to do it. Just to give you an example, I was running a property by myself. I had one child at home and two at boarding school here in Adelaide. With all of the things that happen on a pastoral property and with the daily things like the phone ringing or stock agent calling in or whatever, I was really battling to get things done.

CHAIR—Is there assistance with fees for boarders?

Mrs Crawford—Yes, there is.

CHAIR—How much is that?

Mrs Crawford—That is \$6,150.

CHAIR—Each?

Mrs Crawford—Yes.

CHAIR—When does that cut in?

Mrs Crawford—As soon as a child is sent away to either a boarding school or a school term hostel or they go and live with granny to access a high school.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They can only get it if they do not have daily access to a school.

Mrs Crawford—There are certain criteria that they need to meet.

CHAIR—It is not means tested though?

Mrs Crawford—No—thank goodness.

CHAIR—Nor should it be!

Ms GEORGE—So in the typical situation, say—and pardon my ignorance, because I do not know much about people’s lives in the bush—if you are on a remote property and you have one child and that child is part of the distance education program, what is the role of the parent? You talked about having to establish a schoolroom, but can you explain the daily responsibility of the parent in that situation?

Mrs Crawford—The parent needs to be there to supervise the child—

Ms GEORGE—While the lessons are going on?

Mrs Crawford—Yes, but understand that children who are educated in this manner would have only one what we call ‘air lesson’, although it often comes through a computer these days. They would have only one lesson like that a day.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—For how long?

Mrs Crawford—For probably half an hour. So for the rest of the time the parent needs to be there to supervise. You can imagine a new child starting school. You cannot just say, ‘Here’s the book, darl; get on it.’

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They work through—

Ms GEORGE—It is like a full school day?

Mrs Crawford—It is a normal school day.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It is.

Ms GEORGE—Yes, but the tuition that is coming to the child is for only part of the day?

Mrs Crawford—Yes, it is full tuition.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They work through the worksheets and the mother has to organise the subjects for the child: ‘This is the worksheet you do.’ It comes into the schoolroom, the program is set for the day and it has to be gathered up and put back through the distance ed offices. So the mother does have to be there.

Ms GEORGE—So the mother is acting as an ancillary person in the educational process?

Mrs Crawford—Yes, and—

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Like a teacher’s aide, I guess, isn’t it?

Mrs Crawford—I would say she was more like the teacher. She is the one that initially teaches that child to read. You cannot just say to the child, ‘Here’s your book for the day.’

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—So, if the kid does not understand it, mum has got to help.

Mrs Crawford—Yes. And, if mum does not understand, it can be quite a difficult situation. As I said, it is a normal school day. Quite often the lessons are sort of programmed so that the mother is required to do maybe three-quarters of an hour, an hour or an hour and a half of preparation for the school day.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—On top of that, often they can have a couple of classes in the same schoolroom, and a toddler—

Ms GEORGE—That is if you have got more than one child and those children are at different levels of education.

Mrs Crawford—Well, I had three.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—And you can have a toddler and a baby, and if the phone is ringing and your mate wants a sandwich as well, and there could be a fire happening—

Mrs Crawford—Or the machinery is broken down or something.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It is a high-stress position for a lot of these young mums.

Ms GEORGE—At what age do children leave rural properties to go to boarding school?

Mrs Crawford—It is usually when they finish their primary education.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Usually grade 8

Mrs Crawford—It depends on the state we are talking about. In most states it is year 8, but I think it is year 7 in New South Wales.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—And for mums who just cannot teach their kids, and some mums cannot; there is a personality—

CHAIR—There has got to be some of those.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—There are. My next-door neighbour was one of them. She could not get the little boy from under the schoolhouse. He would not come inside the schoolhouse.

CHAIR—Some of them might not be capable of teaching either.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Exactly. And because there is no possibility of a tax deduction for a governess or of the mother being paid for the work that she does, to bring somebody else in who may be more capable of teaching that child, those two children have now been sent away to boarding school in grade 4, which is tragic. She had no other choice, because she could not teach them herself.

Mrs Crawford—And that puts huge financial pressures on the families as well.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—That family now have four children at boarding school. They have taken a loan with that boarding school over 30 years, and they cannot make one repayment on that. The school rings every six months and says, ‘Can you make a repayment?’ No. I spoke to this woman about it and she said, ‘We will be 30 years, 35 years, paying back the debt that we have with that boarding school.’ But she did not have a choice.

CHAIR—Did she use the \$6,000 to make the payment?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, but that does not cover the full cost.

CHAIR—But it is a payment.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, she uses that, but that still does cover the cost of sending your children to boarding school.

Mrs Crawford—When my last child was at school, which was probably three or four years ago, he went to a Catholic school here in Adelaide. That \$6,000 came off the \$20,000 that it was costing me. It is pretty tough.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—My girls have just finished. I was getting the \$6,000 for each child and it was costing me \$15,000 for each child, so I still had to make up more than half, and that does not include the pocket money that they need.

Mrs Crawford—Or the formal gown!

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Or the formal gown.

CHAIR—But everybody has those expenses.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They do, exactly right. It does not cover the trips down to see them, because I miss them like blazes and it is an eight-hour drive for us.

Ms GEORGE—Is the allowance indexed annually for the cost of living?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It is, but it is way behind.

Mrs Crawford—It is about \$6,000. It is linked to the CPI, I think.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—But boarding school fees have jumped a lot in the last couple of years. I am pleased mine are not still at school. The place mine went was costing me \$15,000. I think it is up to \$25,000 now.

CHAIR—What are your children doing now?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I have one who has just started nursing, and that is another story in itself. She has decided to go through TAFE to do her EENs for the first 12 months, because she was not sure she wanted to be a nurse and she did not want to invest the whole three years.

CHAIR—She is doing a level IV certificate? She will come out a level IV EN?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes. She thought that, if she does not like being a nurse then she can work as an EEN and she has not wasted the 12 months. But it has cost her \$10,000 that she had to earn herself to put herself through TAFE.

Ms GEORGE—It cost her \$10,000 to go through TAFE?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It cost her \$10,000 to put herself through that EEN course at TAFE, yes.

Ms GEORGE—For a year?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—For a year, yes.

Ms GEORGE—Here in South Australia?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—No, in Queensland. And you cannot get a HECS debt for a TAFE course—but we are getting off the subject of the submission and onto tertiary access.

Ms GEORGE—I have never heard that.

CHAIR—Did she do it in the private system or did she do it through the public TAFE system?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—At the Shafston TAFE college in Brisbane, which specialises in EEN training. She worked for 12 months and earned enough money to be independent and saved the \$10,000 to put herself through this year, and then she will go on and do her RN over the next two years—hopefully, if she likes it.

Ms GEORGE—It is little incentive to addressing a critical area of skills shortage, isn't it?

CHAIR—It is cheaper than doing it at university, though. Actually, it is an option that some people are using. They will do the preliminary stuff at TAFE, which is cheaper, and then they get accredited with those subjects towards their degree and their HECS debt is less.

Ms GEORGE—I think it is a sensible option. I am just surprised at the cost.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Her course will still only be three years. But she cannot get a HECS debt for that \$10,000.

Ms GEORGE—No, but it will be cheaper than having a HECS debt.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It will, you are right. And my other daughter is doing early childhood in Toowoomba. She is in her second year at university and she is working casually in a child-care centre to help put herself through as well.

Ms GEORGE—They do not want to follow in mum's footsteps and go back to the farm?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—They possibly will eventually. I am a nurse as well, and I have always said to the girls that they need to have something else behind them just in case it goes pear shaped.

Ms GEORGE—Coming back to child care, just so that I have it clear in my head: before they do the schooling you get three to four weeks in-home care per annum.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Sometimes.

Mrs Crawford—In some places. In South Australia you do. Actually, the situation in South Australia with child care for remote and isolated families is not bad. They can get some in-home child care. In some areas throughout Australia—Western Australia or wherever—it is pretty appalling.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Some places do not have any.

Ms GEORGE—You say that families in remote areas need access to mobile in-home child care. Can you explain what you have in mind?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—In my situation, where I live, we are 50 kilometres from our nearest town and we have 25 kilometres of black soil track and need a four-wheel drive to get there. The road is absolutely atrocious. Quite often you lose a muffler and take out a few kangaroos, and to drive into town to access child care would be totally impractical. If that child care were mobile—say one of my daughters decided to come back to our property to live and she had children, if she had one in the classroom and a toddler or if she were pregnant—the mobile child care would be able to come to the property and assist her as a home teaching mum. It would not be practical for her to pack everything up and take them into town.

CHAIR—Isn't that what happens now with in-home child care?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Some states get it but not all.

CHAIR—But it is part of a federal package.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, it is, but not all areas get it. It has not been set up in all areas. But it is an excellent system. It works well, if you can get it.

CHAIR—So we have to find out why.

Ms GEORGE—You are talking about some services that do not attract the CCB. What childcare services don't you get the benefit for?

Mrs Crawford—If you do not have child care, then you do not attract the benefit, do you?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—If there is no child care available—

Ms GEORGE—Yes, but you say some of the limited services available that meet the needs of rural and remote families do not attract the full childcare benefit.

CHAIR—Is that a nanny situation?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It was another councillor who put this together. She was an absolute whiz on child care, but she is no longer on federal council. Maybe they are not accredited childcare centres.

CHAIR—No. There are two types of child care: there is registered and there is approved. Approved child care, which is basically institutional child care of one form or another, gets the CCB and will attract the 30 per cent rebate. Registered child care is a very limited payment, and will not attract the 30 per cent rebate. I think in-home care is registered care.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I agree with you, I think it is. And I think some of them also only have a playgroup option, and I do not think that attracts a childcare benefit.

CHAIR—No, thank goodness. Family day care does, but you have to be approved for that and supervised and all sorts of things.

Mrs Crawford—You have to understand that a lot of these families have no access at all to any form of child care. I guess with the economic situation and the way fuel prices are going, people are starting to limit going to their local town. Instead of going once a fortnight to do their grocery shopping, they might be doing it once a month.

CHAIR—How many children, on average, do women who live in isolated areas have?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—That is an interesting question.

Mrs Crawford—How many do they have?

CHAIR—What is the birthrate for this group of people?

Mrs Crawford—I do not know that figure, and I do not know how I could determine it.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I can only go on what is happening around where I live. The young ones around us are having two, and they are spacing them so they do not have them both going to boarding school at the same time, because they cannot afford to pay the fees.

CHAIR—But they would have two children?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—And they have them six or seven years apart.

Mrs Crawford—I always tell young people who are having children, ‘If you’re going to have children then have them close together, otherwise you’re going to be in that schoolroom forever.’

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—It is a real problem when they go to boarding school, and that is being recognised around where we live; they cannot afford to have more than two away at once.

Mrs Crawford—Going back to that teaching situation, I had three children reasonably close together and I spent 12 years in my home schoolroom doing a service for the education department of South Australia, which is pretty tough at times. Most mothers, say if they had three children, are looking at 12 or 13 years in the schoolroom. I know of families who have spent 20 years in their home schoolroom.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—The other thing that is happening around us is that if they do not have access to a school bus, they will not live there. They will not teach their children at home.

Mrs Crawford—They find employment elsewhere.

Ms GEORGE—So what happens to the children?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I have had people come to my property and say, ‘Oh, what a beautiful place, and this is great and wonderful,’ and the mother says: ‘Forget it, buster, I wouldn’t live here. There’s no school bus. I would have to teach my children.’ I guess women are voting with their feet then; they will not live in isolation.

CHAIR—How do you get on for medical services?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—We are very, very lucky where we are. We have a very good doctor, and we are serviced by the RFDS as well. The doctor is leaving at the end of the year because he does not want to send his children to boarding school, so it might be interesting. Ask me the same question this time next year.

Mr FAWCETT—Where do you live?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I am north-west of Augathella, between Augathella and Tambo in far western Queensland.

Mrs Crawford—In South Australia I think remote families are fairly well serviced by the RFDS. When I lived on a station between Peterborough and Broken Hill there was a clinic once a month and there were several services that they would bring. They might bring an early childhood nurse or a women’s health sister so that women could have pap smears and not feel intimidated.

CHAIR—Maybe a nurse practitioner?

Mrs Crawford—Yes.

CHAIR—It is starting to happen.

Mrs Crawford—It is starting to happen.

CHAIR—Doctors will let it happen in the places that they do not want to go to.

Mrs Crawford—Yes. I guess there can be pockets anywhere; it depends on the health of the community, I suppose. There are areas of Australia where the health of people is not good at all. I could probably say that there are quite a few Indigenous areas and other pockets of the population where the total wellbeing and health of communities is not up to scratch.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Our town of Augathella is atrocious in terms of its cases of obesity and diabetes.

Ms GEORGE—You are a Queensland resident, are you?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I was born in Orroroo here in South Australia.

Ms GEORGE—But you have come down from Queensland.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, I came down yesterday.

Ms GEORGE—I was confused. When you said your daughter was studying in Queensland, I wondered why.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I am sorry. I am from Queensland.

Ms GEORGE—Thanks for making the effort.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Sorry—I should have clarified that. We have lots of things we could say about tertiary access, but that is not what this inquiry is about.

CHAIR—No. We are looking at children and birthrates and balancing it all up.

Mr FAWCETT—I have one question that could almost get you shot out in parts where people are living and doing the hard yards. You have talked about the fact that people are voting with their feet and moving to centres as opposed to still living and working on properties. Is that something that people are going to look towards as a model, a bit like how mines are operated now with crews that fly in and fly out et cetera? Do you think people are going to look towards that, particularly if you look at there being more managed properties as opposed to families running properties, or do you think there will always be families who want to live there and will always be needing support?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—No. It is happening now around us. A property at the back of us, which had been in the one family for four generations, sold last week. That is another family that has now gone. We have nearly 200,000 acres around us now with not one person on it. When we first went there there was a family on every one. There are seven families that have gone. The big conglomerates are buying the places and are putting one man way over there to manage all of it and then they bring in contract musterers or helicopters. The whole dynamic of our community has changed. It does not really hit home until there is a bushfire and there is no-one to help put it out.

Mrs Crawford—In our area in South Australia properties are still pretty much held by individual families, not huge conglomerates or corporate types like the Packers. We have some

pretty big pastoral families within South Australia anyway. We consider them to be families, not your corporate type of people who come in. The bush is dwindling, let us face it. A lot of the reason for that is that people cannot financially justify being there any longer. The other reason is that families do not want to live out in the bush anymore because of the need to educate their children. It is a huge hip pocket replacement.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—That message is not just coming from those of us who live in rural Australia. I also sit on the council of the National Rural Health Alliance and it has been interesting listening to their meetings and being part of them and hearing that the allied health people and the doctors are unable to fill skill shortage places in quite big rural towns. The major disincentive for people to go out there is access to education.

CHAIR—It is more than that, though.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, it is, but that is one of the reasons.

CHAIR—Access to amenities and the lifestyle that they want. Very often it is not the practitioner who does not want to come but the wife.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—That is right.

Ms GEORGE—How common is the situation that is referred to in the submission about people going into the big town, doing some casual work and staying for a couple of nights?

Mrs Crawford—It can be quite common.

Ms GEORGE—Is it mainly women who are doing this?

Mrs Crawford—Yes, it is women who are going back maybe doing some teaching or, particularly, nursing. Nursing is probably the big one, I would think. Often those women are doing those jobs almost under sufferance because by the time they have done the trip, blown the tyre on the four-wheel drive vehicle on the way home and what have you, it is almost not economical for them to do it.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I actually did do some casual work in Augathella. We have a little 10-bed hospital there. As I said, it is a 50-kilometre drive for me. To go in on night duty I would have to leave home by half past nine to be in for work by 11 o'clock, and dodge kangaroos going in. Coming home, after not having had any sleep, was downright dangerous at seven o'clock in the morning, when you have worked eight hours. When you are on shift work it is nearly like being drunk. It is a dangerous situation. I actually stopped working because of the distance that I lived out of town. I would have stayed in town if I could have got accommodation, but the nurses quarters was always full with fly-in fly-out allied health people, so I could not often get a bed to stay in town. I was not going to pay to stay in a motel. It was more worth my while to stay home.

Mr FAWCETT—You have talked a lot about education and the children's side of it. How about aged care for people who have retired who do not yet need actual aged care facilities or supported care? Is curtilage, for example, an issue for people?

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Is what?

Mr FAWCETT—Curtilage—the fact that somebody might have passed on the majority of their working property to a son or a daughter but kept 10 acres and a house to live on. So it is not big enough to be commercially viable but it is too big for them to access any pension or other benefits. In balancing work and family, obviously accessibility of grandparents is a factor in working when you have kids. But if the grandparents cannot afford to be there, there is not the care—and that all comes into the equation. In your experience, as people age in remote and isolated areas, what is the current situation? What is the future?

Mrs Crawford—That is a bit hard for me to answer, but maybe Bernadette can.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—I do have a couple of examples that I can think of. Often it is quite tragic. The son may have worked on the property into his 40s and 50s, and then dad decides to sell and take it all. I do know a couple of cases where that has happened around us, and that has been tragic. That fellow has worked for next to nothing for most of his working life.

CHAIR—That is the expectation that he had.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, and then he does not.

CHAIR—That is why family trusts are important.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes, and dad goes off to Mooloolaba with a few million dollars and—

CHAIR—A new bride.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes. That happens. There is another one beside us whose mother and father are still involved in the property. They do not get any in home care at all and they are both quite unwell. The daughter-in-law does all the caring—the same woman who had to send her twins away to boarding school. That lady was just about off her head because she was caring for the grandparents as well. There are others I know of that live in the town and do get in home care. There are two women in Augathella who try to care for all of those old people. It is actually quite a crisis situation. There are no nursing home beds available in Charleville. There are none left in our hospital. There are people at home who should not be at home, and there are two women who are trying to care for them. I was talking only last week to Jenny, the policeman's wife, who does it. They will even take these people in their own car to Charleville for a doctor's appointment because there is not enough fat left in the coffer to fund the bus to take them down. In our country town it is actually at a crisis point. There are a lot of aged people, and they need more money and more carers.

Mrs Crawford—Can I just make one more point? Because people who live in rural and remote areas do not have access to child care, children are frequently put in quite dangerous situations—there is just no alternative. All too frequently, accidents sometimes happen on the farm because mothers are stressed and they have had to take children with them to do whatever. You know what can sometimes happen. So the lack of child care and any support is a real problem. When you live in an isolated area, you do not have the neighbour down the road, or

you do not have your friend close by who can maybe look after your children for a couple of hours while you attend to something.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—If you ever want to come out and have a look at where we live, you are most welcome. You can stay at my place and I will show you.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Sometimes being there helps.

CHAIR—It gives you a different view.

Mrs Devenish-Batzloff—Yes.

CHAIR—We thank you very much for coming here and giving us some insight into the pressures that people face in isolated areas. We are grateful to you for coming. It is moved that we accept that document as an exhibit.

Mrs Crawford—If we can help with anything else, just give us a call.

CHAIR—Thank you very much; we appreciate that.

Proceedings suspended from 12.22 pm to 12.31 pm

FUDGE, Ms Elizabeth Anne, Project Manager, Children of Parents with Mental Illness, Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association

MASON, Ms Paola Untonia, Co-Convenor, Children of Mentally Ill Consumers

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make about the capacity in which you appear?

Ms Mason—My organisation, COMIC, Children of Mentally Ill Consumers, works as a team with AICAFMHA, the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association, and the COPMI project.

CHAIR—The which project?

Ms Fudge—COPMI—Children of Parents with Mental Illness project. We have lots of long titles so we use acronyms.

CHAIR—We have your submission, for which we thank you. I invite you to make an opening statement?

Ms Fudge—We are obviously concerned about the children of parents who have a mental illness. We are concerned about the whole family but our main focus is on the outcome for the children. It is well known that people with a mental illness face discrimination in accessing employment and we are most concerned about the impact on children when parents with a mental illness cannot access employment. We are also concerned about young carers who provide care for their parents with a mental illness and about the poor access those children have to employment and training opportunities or to social opportunities which potentially will allow them to fulfil their own parenting dreams and aspirations.

We are aware through our involvement with the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association of the importance of the early years and the strong attachments in those early years, but we are also aware that unemployment can exacerbate mental illness. So we are concerned, as you are, that there should be a good balance between work and family.

Ms Mason—From COMIC's perspective, we do not necessarily have an age group; we go from zero right through into adulthood. I am a carer: I am an adult child and I am caring for my parent who has a mental illness. I have cared for my mum from the day she was diagnosed, when I was six, but I seriously undertook the caring from when I was aged 11. So I am the lived experience, in a sense.

CHAIR—What is the nature of the mental illness?

Ms Mason—Schizophrenia and manic depression.

CHAIR—You had a dad?

Ms Mason—Yes.

CHAIR—Did he help care?

Ms Mason—My father was your very typical dad back in the sixties and seventies: he was out working a majority of the time.

CHAIR—So he escaped!

Ms Mason—Yes.

CHAIR—Did you have siblings?

Ms Mason—Yes. I have a younger sister.

CHAIR—Did they help?

Ms Mason—I am the eldest and I took on the primary caring role.

CHAIR—Did you work as well?

Ms Mason—I got my first job at the age of 15. Any job that I have undertaken has had to be close to home. Whenever my mum became unwell or I saw symptoms of her becoming unwell I found it very difficult to stay at work. I describe myself as a jillaroo of all trades. I have had many jobs; I have taken on all sorts of casual positions because my primary role is caring for my mum.

CHAIR—So it stopped your education; it stopped everything.

Ms Mason—It is a challenge for me. I left school at 15. I am sorry if I get emotional. That was something that was difficult for me. But I have always worked hard. I re-entered the so-called educational field last year, which I found very challenging. Finding the balance between working, caring and parenting—I am also a single parent—is a real challenge. It is a huge challenge. I survived and got through last year, and I passed.

CHAIR—What are you doing?

Ms Mason—I undertook community services in youth work. I also undertook community services in non-clinical mental health.

CHAIR—You have a good deal of experience.

Ms Mason—Yes, it is funny about that.

CHAIR—Do you have one child of your own or two?

Ms Mason—I have one son.

CHAIR—And you have done that on your own too?

Ms Mason—Yes.

CHAIR—How old is he now?

Ms Mason—He is 17.

CHAIR—You are quite remarkable.

Ms Mason—I do not necessarily think that.

CHAIR—I do.

Ms Mason—Thank you.

CHAIR—In your submission, one of the main things you raised is this issue of mentally ill parents being worse off if they do not have employment.

Ms Fudge—Yes, as long as they are supported. But it can exacerbate a mental illness to be unemployed. There is plenty of evidence. We have a list that we took from websites—Auseinet, for example, which is an Australian government supported website—that look at the impact of unemployment on people with mental illness. Being unemployed can exacerbate mental illness. There are studies from the UK that show that, if a woman is in a lower socioeconomic group, has children, is unemployed and has depression, unemployment is an exacerbating factor in that mental illness.

CHAIR—So it means that those circumstances can make her depressed?

Ms Fudge—Yes. Factors which protect working-class women with young children who experience depression from further exacerbation of that are things like a confiding relationship with a partner and paid work outside the home. In those studies they looked at these young women who had depression. Exacerbating factors to that depression were having young children, not having paid work outside the home and not having a confiding partner. There were other factors as well. Having three or more children is an exacerbating factor of depression for young mothers. One other major factor was having lost their own mother at a young age. That is a precipitating factor.

CHAIR—Would some of this be postpartum depression?

Ms Fudge—Yes, certainly. We recognise the importance of employment to people with mental illness. We also know that unemployment can exacerbate the problems of the children of parents with mental illness because they can become more socially isolated if their parent is not in employment.

CHAIR—On the other hand, the difficulty for the employer is quite considerable.

Ms Fudge—Absolutely. The flexibility required is extremely difficult.

CHAIR—Sometimes you are really asking the employer to be the provider of welfare services.

Ms Fudge—If people are well supported in workplaces then the employer does not need to be the provider of the supports. Other supports can be provided outside of the employer's scope so that those people can remain in work.

CHAIR—Basically it means a big employer, doesn't it. You could not expect a small business person to do that.

Ms Fudge—If community supports are in place to support that person accessing work, it does not need to be. I do not have enough information to know exactly whether that is a problem, but I would not see it as a major issue if the person with mental illness is supported to be in the workplace.

CHAIR—What is the position with something like manufacturing? If someone has an incident of mental disease, it could put everybody else's safety at risk.

Ms Fudge—If and when they are unwell—

Ms Mason—If they are well supported—

CHAIR—That could happen in the middle of a shift.

Ms Mason—There are symptoms that usually lead to unwellness.

Ms Fudge—Those can be identified. In fact, young children usually identify quite well their parents becoming unwell, so it is not hard to identify those symptoms.

CHAIR—I was talking fairly recently to somebody who introduced herself to me and we had a discussion. She said she was bipolar and that she had got herself into a work situation and was doing well and enjoying it when suddenly she felt the illness come on and she had to go to hospital for four weeks. That was the end of that.

Ms Mason—The same goes for anyone who may have any other disorder such as diabetes. They may not necessarily be looking after themselves so well owing to some kind of hypo condition and they become unwell for quite some time.

Ms Fudge—There are similar physical illnesses which can be episodic.

Ms Mason—Yes, there is epilepsy and others. Mental illness is just one illness.

Ms KATE ELLIS—You said unemployment can be a key trigger of depression. I want to explore the opposite of that: somebody with a mental illness going into the workplace on inadequate wages and conditions; obviously that would have a major impact. Have either of your

organisations had a chance to have a look at the Welfare to Work legislation and any of the consequences? Are there any concerns?

Ms Mason—It would be better to speak to someone from the Mental Health Coalition of South Australia. There is also the information that Elizabeth was mentioning through Auseinet. That information would be available to you. There are consumer networks that would be able to feed that information to you.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I will turn to a completely different issue. I refer to your personal story, being representative of many similar stories all over the nation. What do you think is the best way that the federal government can help in those situations? We have some discussion from time to time about carers in our community, their worth to our community and whether or not they are adequately recognised. Is that something that you would prioritise as a good measure to help in those circumstances? If not, what would you want us to do if we could?

Ms Mason—What would make my world perfect would be recognition. Carers of the mentally ill have not necessarily been able to come up to a level of recognition with places like Centrelink et cetera, mainly because their level of caring is quite different to the level of caring for someone who has a physical disability. I would challenge that. It is very difficult lifting someone out of bed when they have got a physical disability. It is the same when they have a mental illness and they are chronically depressed.

I feel the tools that are used in assessing carers need to be reviewed and I think that they should be more accepting of carers, particularly young carers, of the mentally ill. I also feel that there is a need to look at flexibility. Not all of us can go and work from nine to five. As a single mum, the perfect hours for me would have been 10 to probably three. There needs to be a decent assessment of carers. There needs to be flexibility in the workplace. I think that the federal government could probably start to orientate some workplaces to perhaps take on board more things like job sharing so that there could be more capacity for mums in particular to be able to engage in work, even if it is not on a full-time basis but is on a part-time basis. For people with a mental illness—and I give them credit for this—if they choose to go back into the workforce full time and they have the capability, let us give them that honour. But we must also be very aware that perhaps the part-time jobs, the casual positions, really need to be looked at and offered to them as an ease-in, so they do not necessarily have to fit all the prerequisites of what Centrelink or job status or network places want.

CHAIR—What I have written down here is that you are identifying a problem with the Centrelink appraisal tool for carers of the mentally ill. Does that sum up the problem?

Ms Fudge—Yes, it is huge.

CHAIR—Paola, could your mum work?

Ms Mason—My mother has worked for about two weeks in her life.

CHAIR—Despite medication?

Ms Mason—I come from a non-English-speaking background. My parents were immigrants. I come from a culture where the wife stays at home and rears the children and all that sort of stuff, so that was an influence. My mum did try to connect when she first migrated out. She got a job polishing floors, but she polished them so severely that customers would slip, and she got sacked. We have had some pretty rough patches with her mental illness, especially early on. But, within the mental health arena, and with the community discrimination and stigma, it was very hard for her to engage. You do not have supports. Mum never had family support around her; they were all back in Italy. People with mental illness do not necessarily conform all the time and it is very hard to engage them. If I wanted mum to connect with a community or a program, she would not go unless she was physically taken. I could get some kind of service to pick her up, but she would not go with them unless I took her. My mother never connected with anything until I took her. I was the only one in the family to drive and have a car.

CHAIR—Your father did not drive?

Ms Mason—No, he never drove. We rode bicycles everywhere. We were a very environmentally friendly family. So there are lots of issues. People with mental health issues require a step-by-step introduction back into the workforce after they have been unwell. Then there is the question of how you keep them connected. Transport is a huge issue. Denial of illness is a huge issue initially because it is quite confronting not only for the person with the mental illness but also for the carer because you do not really understand what you are dealing with.

Ms Fudge—Mental illness often leads to marital breakdown, so a lot of young people caring for their parents are in a sole-parent situation.

CHAIR—That is true wherever there is disability; men are very prone to walk away.

Ms Fudge—Yes. A lot of those young people do not recognise themselves as carers. Even when there are young carer programs and things like that, they do not see that as what they do because that is just what their lives are.

Ms GEORGE—Elizabeth, I am finding it a bit difficult to follow the logic in point 3 of your submission. You say that preschool aged children in situations where parents have a mental illness are very vulnerable and need early intervention. You go on to say it is therefore vital that parents be given the opportunity to stay at home with their children.

Ms Fudge—If they wish. I guess that is about the quality of the time. They are isolated and at risk because they may have had poor attachment as children, so they need quality support. Often, for example, a parent has a mental illness after a birth and that is not picked up for some time. So a lot of work needs to be done to ensure that a secure attachment occurs between the child and the mother, and support for the early years—

Ms GEORGE—But, where parents have a mental illness, is it sound logic that the parents choose—

Ms Fudge—If they are well supported to do so, that is fine.

Ms GEORGE—Is it good for the children’s development to be in that situation, pre-school?

Ms Fudge—No, that is not what I am saying.

Ms GEORGE—That seems to contradict the argument a bit.

Ms Fudge—There are a few programs around which support young mothers who have a mental illness by ensuring they have secure attachment. They go to things like supported playgroup services. They are accessing child care and things like that, but they are working hard on their attachment with their own child through therapeutic playgroups and things like that.

Ms GEORGE—But if a child in that situation is, as you say, very vulnerable, doesn’t being constantly with parents with a mental illness, without any other intervention, exacerbate the problem for the preschool aged child? I would think that the child too would need respite at times.

Ms Fudge—At times they do. But we are trying to restore the parent-child relationship, so we are working on that. Yes, of course, respite is important for everybody. We all need respite from our families from time to time. We are often working on restoring the parent-child relationship through therapeutic playgroups or other associations but, yes, respite is appropriate as well.

Mr FAWCETT—You talked about redeveloping the tool to recognise carers of people with a mental rather than a physical disability. One of the problems I have heard from people who are already beneficiaries of the tool, from both the mental and physical side, is that it is needs-based in terms of identifying the level of disability. I have had feedback from a number of people who say that it is fantastic that they get it but that it is actually a disincentive, particularly for those with a physical disability, to actually strive to see what they are able to do, because they are afraid that if they are seen to have an increasing level of ability they will miss out on the payment. If we were to throw all the cards in the air and try and re-sort a tool that also took into account mental disability, how would you like to see people assessed? What kinds of metrics would you like the government to use to say, ‘Yes, we need to support this person in their caring role’?

Ms Fudge—In my project, I am talking mainly about the under-18s that are caring for their parents. It is more about looking at what supports need to go in place to help that carer achieve what they are doing. If a support is in place for them to access education, exams, after-school homework environments and things like that, it will help the carer to—I will not say ‘reach their potential’ because that is a glib term—follow their dreams and do the things that their peers are doing. It is about looking at the needs of the carer when they are fulfilling their caring role. A lot of people want to fulfil that role—they see that part of their role is to care for their parents—but they need support to also access the social situations and training and education that their peers access. But they do not feel they have that access. I would want a tool that would look at how we would support this person if they wanted to continue as a carer but also access the things that are important to them, like social situations and education and training options. Does that answer your question?

Mr FAWCETT—Partly.

Ms Mason—If you are questioning from an adult perspective, the only way I can describe it in my terms is this. I cared for my father, who was terminally ill and passed away. I qualified for a carers pension and I was on a carers pension for about six months. I have never qualified for a carers pension for looking after my mum, and there have been times when my level of caring has probably been as high if not higher than the level of care I gave to my dad.

I have another very good example of a system being a bit silly. We are now looking at aged care for mum—which is a new arena away from mental health, and I am learning a lot from that. We are involving mum in the process and she is looking too. We walked into one nursing home and they had this advertisement up that said, ‘Carers wanted’. I turned to my sister, who is a qualified nurse, and said: ‘Wow. All I need is my certificate in manual handling and that’s it. I am a carer that’s wanted.’ I could go in, apply for a job and actually be paid an hourly rate to look after my mother in a nursing home.

CHAIR—And others.

Ms Mason—And others, yes. I thought, ‘Isn’t it ironic that this seems to apply.’

CHAIR—But there is now care by carers in your own home—the community aged care packages.

Ms Mason—We have now received some packages for care for my mum. She is requiring more than that because she—

CHAIR—So now she is at the next stage?

Ms Mason—Yes.

CHAIR—Well, that is the system. But having that care enabled her to stay home longer than—

Ms Mason—Correct, but I am also at the point in my life—and it is the first time—where I actually would like to be able to work. I would like to be reliable to an employer. I would like to move beyond just my caring role. The other thing that frightens me is: when my mum goes, what qualifications and expertise have I got behind me? I have been caring and I am 46 now.

CHAIR—One of the things you can do, if you are interested in being in the aged care industry, is get more and more qualifications—level II, level III, level IV—and you can do that while you are working in a facility. That is part of the accreditation system which I put in place, so I know a bit about it.

Ms Mason—I am very aware of that, but I have cared for a majority of my life. I do not necessarily now want to go into aged care.

CHAIR—That is a matter for you.

Ms Mason—Precisely.

CHAIR—You actually have experience which is valuable.

Ms Mason—Yes, I know that. I will not go into it personally, but I really do love the idea of working towards carer issues at a different level.

CHAIR—That is your choice. That is an option that is open to you which acknowledges your experience. There being no further questions, thank you. You have told us an amazing tale. We are grateful to you for sharing it with us. Thank you for coming and giving us that information, which will be useful for us.

Ms Mason—We have some information here for you. You can take that away and you can read it and look at some nice pictures.

Ms Fudge—That is about the Children of Parents with Mental Illness project.

CHAIR—Does the committee wish to receive the exhibits as tendered? If being so moved and agreed, they are accepted. Thank you.

[12.58 pm]

DUNCAN, Mrs Jody Lee

HARVEY, Mrs Annabelle

Caroline

CHAIR—We now come to the section of our hearings which we have introduced called community statements where we just let people know that we are here and want to hear their story. We welcome contributions from members of the public. This is less formal and we do not swear witnesses as we do during the formal proceedings. Nonetheless there is an obligation that you be truthful with us. We have three contributions from community members today. We will allow five minutes per person to make a statement and then we can go on to have a discussion. We have one a written statement as well. We are grateful for you to have come to take part in this part of our hearings. Who would like to begin?

Mrs Duncan—I will. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to come along today. I feel extremely privileged to have been asked here and sincerely hope my story will assist you with your inquiry. I began my career in 1996 when I was in my mid-20s with a prominent travel retailer and held various positions with them including retail consultant, assistant manager and account manager. I was also a novice trainer for them in head office and also recruitment manager for South Australia-Northern Territory head office. I was also a state sales manager for the insurance side of things with the company.

Six months into my maternity leave the travel insurance company confirmed that they were unable to offer me a part-time position. I was not prepared to work full time with my son, so I was unable to return to my position in any capacity whatsoever. I was, however, asked to return as a novice trainer on a casual basis one day per week and then two days per week four months after that. In May 2005 after a company restructure I was advised that the casual staff would no longer be accepted by the company. I was offered a permanent part-time position of two days a week. After many discussions regarding wages and hours I accepted this position verbally and began my part-time position on 1 August 2005.

After accepting my position the company then placed an expectation on me to perform various interstate trips to conduct interstate training sessions in Darwin as well as various other trips including Melbourne and Brisbane. These trips were for periods over and above my agreed two days of work and at times were up to five days. This ultimately left me in an impossible situation, as I had confirmed two days child care arranged for my son. My husband worked full time and I have no family support network to assist with child care.

In desperation I attempted to negotiate some workable solutions. However, these suggestions were dismissed outright without further discussion. My team leader and the company gave me an ultimatum to perform the travel requirements verbally and compared my child-care issues to that of looking after a dog. I was therefore forced to resign from my position due to family responsibilities. I was personally and professionally devastated.

My family was left financially crippled. My two days a week position paid for 70 per cent of our mortgage and my career was severely damaged. I consider myself extremely employable and experienced and was confident of finding another well-paying part-time position in either sales, recruitment, travel or insurance. I was soon to find out that this was not the case. After five months I was re-employed as a corporate account manager with a new agency owned by a previous boss of mine from the industry. My new employer has been extremely supportive and, as a family man, completely understands my worth and my family responsibilities. I am extremely grateful. I feel I have been disadvantaged as a working mother due to my family responsibilities and the fact that I am not prepared to work full time or to travel.

From a financial perspective, having a child has been extremely difficult. Since ceasing full-time employment our income is now less than half. I feel that this is a significant factor for many women and families as women become more prominent in the workforce and begin to earn larger incomes. I have looked at the prospect of increasing my employment to three days a week. However, after looking at the figures, I quickly realised that my child-care costs would obviously increase, my child-care rebate would decrease, my family tax benefit would decrease and I would also jump into the next tax bracket and pay more income tax, thus making the exercise barely viable.

My role as a mother has been the biggest challenge of my life. Combining parenting and career and financial pressures and commitments have been a massive upheaval. I never would have considered myself to become someone who would be disadvantaged prior to having my son. My husband and I are considering having another child, but we are left quite disillusioned. After paying child-care costs for two or more children it would make my employment efforts barely worthwhile. Hence we are still trying to figure out how we can actually afford to do it. My son is my greatest, treasured achievement in life. In conclusion, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story with you today and I look forward to hearing the outcome of your inquiry. I wish you luck in your endeavours.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. If it is okay I think we will hear from each of you and then we will come back and discuss it.

Mrs Harvey—Thank you very much for your time. Ten months into my 12 months of maternity leave my employers asked me what my plans would be for returning to my two day a week position as a mental health support worker. At the time I felt a strong desire to continue to be my son's primary care giver and not to have to put him into child care with strangers. I had thought at an even earlier stage during maternity leave of being able to work from home. Around the six-month mark I had some discussions with friends who worked in the women's health sector and ask them would it be ridiculous of me to ask my employers if I could work from home. The answer came back no, so I felt encouraged and contacted the Working Women's Centre for some assistance. They were really helpful, very professional and gave reasoned advice. They asked to look at my job description and we went through it point by point to see if my role could be fulfilled from home. They helped me to cover all the bases and we formed a very reasonable proposal which we could submit to my employers. I felt clear, hopeful and felt that I could fulfil it.

Even though I had this feeling, there was a niggling feeling that they would not view this proposal in a positive light. So I arranged an informal meeting with one of the longest-serving

board members to run this idea of my proposal to work from home by him. He suggested that perhaps they could hold my job a while longer for me until I felt ready to put my child into child care. I felt insulted at this remark and very misunderstood. My belief in my proposal dropped somewhat, but with the continued support of friends and the Working Women's Centre I pressed on.

A board meeting was scheduled that same week, and as a member of the board I should have been there. However, with the loss of confidence, I avoided the meeting. I wanted to meet first of all with the executive to put my proposal to them rather than have it heard immediately by the whole board. The day after this board meeting, I was informed by the community officer that they had discussed my wish to work from home and decided that it was not possible. I felt really let down. They had discussed this matter without me being there and without it being on the agenda. I expressed this to them, and they agreed to meet with me to discuss the proposal. However, in essence, they were against the idea from the word go. They rejected the proposal. I felt that pursuing it any further would cause too much stress for me and my family, so I resigned from my position.

The non-government organisation—funded by the government—that I worked at funds a full-time position and a part-time position, which I held. Its mandate was to provide information, support and referral for people with eating disorders, their carers and the community in general. Ninety-five per cent of that work was done via email and over the telephone. Any face-to-face work was done via appointment, and the number of drop-ins would have been about one per month. So the executive decided that the office needed to be manned at all times, and thus rejected my proposal to work from home.

For the last three years that I worked there, there were many times that the office was not manned. The one full-time employee was out attending meetings, so the office was frequently manned by the answering machine. Their being intent on having this office manned seemed like a very bureaucratic response to our mandate and did not consider the reality of the job that I did, which was covered mostly by phone and email. My proposal to respond to calls and emails from my home and to continue advocacy work—about which I clearly stated to them that I could attend meetings around the work that I did as a mother—and regularly debrief with the community officer was rejected. They needed me in the office.

They rely on professional people with a sensitive understanding of the issue of eating disorders, and I was an inspired worker. I was dedicated, professional and had a lot of initiative. These qualities, I felt, were not considered or respected at the time I put the proposal forth. I felt mistrusted by my employers. They seemed stumped at how to deal with a new mother who wanted to be with her son in formative years. They had not had to face this situation before and therefore resorted to old ways of thinking, which I felt were narrow-minded and did not help to solve the problem creatively.

I am very sorry that it all happened. I want to be able to follow my instinct on how to best raise my son, and that is to be able to be very close to him at this point in time. I do not believe that wanting this had to preclude me from doing part-time support work in the community for people with mental health problems. The rejection of my desire to work from home was a loss for our community, I feel. Thank you very much for listening.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Caroline—I am one of the lucky ones—particularly after hearing both of your stories. I have recently returned to work on a part-time basis after the birth of my second child. I really want to raise three issues. The first is culture. My husband and I each took six months leave from work to care for our first child until he was one. My husband was not able to do that with our second child because he had already taken parental leave—even though obviously he is entitled to do so—so I had to take more leave from my work. Obviously, he has also had to deal with a little bit of ribbing within his workplace because he has taken on parenting roles. I think we need to be very careful that this is actually not about women’s issues; it is actually about parents, because until men are able to legitimately take these roles women are always going to be wearing the burden.

With child care, we have been lucky, in that we have a friend who is a director of a child-care centre, so we have been able to get places—and I hate to think what our situation would have been if we did not. However, we have even had difficulties with that, in that the system effectively works on the basis of school terms. Places only become available when someone graduates and the system rolls back. The time when we need child care does not coincide with the school term, so we are paying for child care that we are not using, and that also means that someone else is not using it for that time.

One of the peculiarities in South Australia is that children can access kindergarten, but parents who have their children in child care full time are not doing so, because they are at work and they are not able to take their children from child care to kindy. So there is a block in the system which is not relieving places down the chain.

The other issue is finances. When I returned to work, I made the decision that I wanted to work part time. I was very lucky that my employer was amenable to that. However, I did have a look at whether I would work for three or four days, and marginal tax implications plus child-care costs meant that it was not worth me doing so. At the same time, networking with my friends who have children, it also became apparent that families who have one person staying at home would get family tax benefit B, even when the income earner was earning more than my husband and me combined. That stings! When you are doing the right thing—going back to work; and I am lucky that I am qualified, have skills and have secure employment—that seems to be an unfair anomaly in the system. It does not send the right message about the fact that we do want people to return to the workforce after they have had children.

CHAIR—So did you return to work?

Caroline—Yes, I am working for three days a week, and struggling. There is a fourth point. I think there is a skill set to working part time. I have gone back to the same role I had before, which was full time, and I was busy then. Nothing has changed, except that I am at the workplace for only three days, so I am bringing a lot of work home. I am actually starting to look at what models there are, how I get information on how to do this and to change the work so it is manageable within the time that I am at the workplace.

Ms KATE ELLIS—Is there someone else doing the other two days?

Caroline—No, there is not.

Ms KATE ELLIS—So they have replaced a full-time position with you do doing the same job for thee days.

Caroline—Yes. It is a full-time position but I am only doing three days. I have a team that I look after and I am delegating as much as I can. However, it is also a learning experience for the people who are working with me, because they are used to having me around full time and so they are having to get used to it as well. It is not something that I had anticipated, because, until I had children, I had not worked part time. Thank you.

CHAIR—Mrs Duncan, you had difficulties with getting part-time work. You have said that you would like to have a second child but you are really thinking hard about it. Could you tell me a bit about that?

Mrs Duncan—My son is two, so, even if we were to have another one straightaway, I would have two in child care. Obviously, we need a second income to be able to support ourselves. I would be paying the majority of my income from my two days a week job—it would not be worth getting up and going to work. We need the money from those two days of work. Obviously, as the children get older, they will be in school and things like that, but to have that time out of the workforce is difficult. Even after five months out of the workforce I realised how hard it was to find another, reasonable part-time paying job. Being out of the workforce for three to five years, or however long, until they are in school would be horrendous.

CHAIR—And you do not want to lose your skills—you want to stay in.

Mrs Duncan—Absolutely.

CHAIR—With your situation, when the 30 per cent tax rebate comes in, will that help you?

Mrs Duncan—For child care? Absolutely, yes, it will.

CHAIR—It will help you a lot?

Mrs Duncan—Yes, it will help.

CHAIR—If you had tax deductability for your child-care expenses, how would that help?

Mrs Duncan—Are you saying that it would not cost anything for child care?

CHAIR—No. You would be able to deduct what you pay from your tax—

Mrs Duncan—At the end of the financial year?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mrs Duncan—That would definitely be very beneficial. We manage at the moment with one child in child care, but obviously that cost is going to double—and we would be looking at having only two children. It is just a matter of getting through the years until you get them into school.

CHAIR—If you were able to have a nanny, for instance, and that was tax deductible, and you would have her in your own home, how would that be?

Mrs Duncan—It would certainly be a possibility I would look at. We got over the hump of Charlie going to child care. It was initially hard to get him used to it, but now I look at him in care two days a week and it is a beautiful balance. Two days a week is nice. He adores it and he is getting so much out of it. He now waves me goodbye. At this stage, I would feel guilty about not letting him go, because he asks to go, saying, ‘Can I go?’

CHAIR—He is two?

Mrs Duncan—Yes. Maybe with a second child, who knows? Every situation is different; every child is different. Prior to having a child, you do not realise how you will feel about things. Before you have a child, you think, ‘Just slap them in child care, I’ll be right, and I might even work five days.’ But, when you have this child, everything changes and you think and look at things completely differently, and you are also looked at differently by your employer.

CHAIR—If you have a second child—and your first one is doing fine in child care, because he has grown up a bit and he is learning things—to keep your two days a week, that would mean putting a child aged between nought to two into child care, whereas if you had some care in your home—

Mrs Duncan—That is right.

CHAIR—What do the others think about that?

Mrs Harvey—I am a great supporter of in-home care. To me, it seems that child care is gradually becoming depersonalised with the large organisations taking over and I think home care is fantastic.

Caroline—My son is two years and four months and I have a 10-month-old, and they are both attending community based child care. I like the fact that they are developing socialisation skills as part of going to child care. I am part time, so they also have home time with me one on one, but that may not be the situation for all families where both parents have to work full time.

CHAIR—That is exactly what we are hearing here. You all want some choice, don’t you? You do not want to be told: ‘This is the system; you get your life around it, and you have to meet it.’ Wouldn’t we like a system that is meeting your needs?

Caroline—Yes.

CHAIR—So that you could have a different option: you could have in-home care, you could have institutional care and you could have some choices.

Caroline—That is relevant, provided you know that the quality is assured across all those choices. I think that would be beneficial.

Mrs Duncan—And also beneficial for zero-to-12-month children as well. I do not know about anyone else but, putting a child under six months in child care, the health issues are horrendous.

CHAIR—They are.

Mrs Duncan—I was on a casual basis at the time. If I did not work, I did not get paid, so my husband and his employer had to be flexible for Brett to stay home to look after Charlie, because he was constantly ill every week.

CHAIR—For what sort of things?

Mrs Duncan—Croup and constant ear infections. He was constantly in pain. He would just pick up a little cold bug at child care and he would get an ear infection straightaway. Rotavirus—he was in hospital on a drip for up to a week—and also gastro. So these poor little babies, who are under 12 months old, with no immunity, are getting thrown into these child-care centres. The medical costs are huge and the time out of work is huge.

CHAIR—That is an interesting point. We have not touched on that before.

Mrs Duncan—Some children cope with it a lot better than others. My child, unfortunately, struggled.

Ms GEORGE—In that first year, do you think a lot of mums would prefer in-home care, if they could get it?

Mrs Duncan—Absolutely.

Ms GEORGE—What do you think, Annabelle?

Mrs Harvey—Yes.

Caroline—To be honest, I do not think you could say that more people would prefer it. It really comes down to the individual, and I have not seen anything that says, ‘definitely want in-home care’. People whom I mix with who have children who are older who are going to school have experienced the sickness issue when the children go to school if they have not been in child care, so there is some force in the argument that you are going to experience it; it is just a matter of when. But there is probably also some validity in the fact that children under 12 months are less well developed.

CHAIR—You could have both, couldn’t you? That is, people who can breastfeed and also people who cannot breastfeed. If I remember, I was breastfeeding for three months and you give an immunity to the child.

Mrs Duncan—Charlie was breastfeeding until 10 months and it did not make much of a difference.

Ms KATE ELLIS—This is a very broad question, but all three of your stories refer to a need for a change in attitudes, whether that be—in the first two cases—of the employers or, in the third case, within the community, allowing fathers to feel comfortable taking up their rights that they are entitled to. I wonder whether you have any ideas as to what might be the best way to stimulate some of those changes in community or employer attitudes. What do you think that we as a committee should recommend which would prevent similar cases in the future?

Mrs Duncan—I think more awareness in general and advertising—for example, I saw things on the *Today* show a few months ago; they gave out awards to the top 10 companies within Australia who were family friendly, and I took a real interest in that story—just getting things like that across and giving those companies credit.

Mrs Harvey—I think an open-mindedness and a willingness to negotiate and open things up a bit more—creative thinking around the problem rather than saying, ‘This is as far as we’ll go.’

Caroline—I think there are possibly two areas—one of them only just occurred to me. The first one is the value statements underlying some of the policies—and I have to go back to family tax benefit B: paying people to stay home in situations where it is not justified where there is enough income in that family to support someone staying home without assistance from the government—and things like maternity leave. Australia is the only country besides the US that does not have a national paid maternity leave scheme. Therein lies some values about what is important to Australia.

The issue that has just occurred to me is cultural change. A lot of things happen in primary and secondary school, so we are educated about the environment et cetera. We probably all need more parenting skills, so maybe there is a curriculum opportunity. It could be given to both boys and girls and be recognised as a legitimate life skill.

CHAIR—It is pretty amazing when you realise that you are actually bringing them up, isn’t it?

Caroline—You say we all survived but, then again, there is no reason why we should not make it easier. I can remember the fears I had with my first child—some were unfounded—but we do not get a lot of the knowledge any more. You are at work and you are not involved in caring for children, and so you have to learn it. It is a skill. It is trial and error the first time and you are better at it the second time.

CHAIR—I want to go back to your comment on maternity leave. By the time we get to the next financial year it will be \$5,000 maternity benefit and you immediately get family tax benefit part A and B if you are still at home.

Caroline—Family tax benefit A is means tested, isn’t it?

CHAIR—Yes, it is, but B is not. If you are going to be home in the beginning for the first year, you are getting quite a large sum of money out of the taxpayers.

Caroline—You can argue that the payment is a large sum but it depends on when you have your child as to whether you get the tax benefit. I had my first child in January which meant six months at that time out of the workforce for me and my husband took six months out of the work force in the following tax year. If you looked at it in a calendar year we probably would have been entitled to family tax benefit A but because it was across tax years we were not entitled because our child was born in January.

CHAIR—That is a bit odd.

Ms KATE ELLIS—Have any of you had experiences within your workplace with colleagues—I know it is probably a bit different in your case in such a small organisation? We hear stories anecdotally about not just problems with employers but problems of coworkers resenting people leaving to look after a sick child. There is an endless stream of stories which imply that we need to do a lot more than show up the good employers; we need to get out a message of why it is important to help families to balance their responsibilities.

CHAIR—There is a difficulty there, isn't there? Not everybody wants to hear about baby pictures.

Mrs Duncan—If you worked with a group of people like I did, I was the only mum—there was one other woman who was a mum; she was in a different department but under the same different umbrella. I was constantly compared to her. Her children were slightly older—one was of school age—and she could manage the travel requirements. She had family support, and my team leader would sit me down and say, 'She can do it. Why can't you? What is your issue?'

CHAIR—We cannot go about legislating that people shall be nice to each other.

Mrs Duncan—No, but I find you get more understanding working with other mothers. My employer at the moment is a dad. He has been supportive of this whole experience and my lodgement with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It is a refreshing change working for someone with a bit of understanding—it is incredible.

Caroline—I have not experienced any of this in the workplace but I have heard other people's stories of similar situations. It is also in the community because you get judged for going back to work and you also get judged for not going back. It comes down to you choosing what is right for your family but it does not matter what you do because there is going to be criticism from one side of the fence or the other.

Mrs Harvey—I want to give you a bit more background information. When I was younger I had an eating disorder. That inspired me to go and volunteer at this place and turn that into paid work. From many years back I have had to learn about caring—first of all, about caring for myself. Caring for others has been a continuous theme in my life. It has been a bit of an issue because the worth placed on caring in our society is not great. That has been an issue for me the whole of my life—this sense of value and feeling valuable because I care. Now I have been doing that in my work and I do it with my son. I love it—it is the most important job. I inquired about another job supporting people with mental health issues. I just phoned up and said, 'Would it be all right for me to apply for the job if I worked with my son.' It was a totally stupid notion. That to me was sad, because the care that I give my child is very similar to a lot of community

nurturing. Community care is very similar. That maternal care translates into community care. Feeling that that is not very highly valued hurts. It is hard.

CHAIR—I do not know that it is not valued. Isn't it merely expected?

Mrs Harvey—Yes.

CHAIR—It is expected in that, if you have a child, you are expected to care.

Mrs Harvey—Yes. It does not necessarily come that easily. It is almost like you said about skills. You actually have to learn to care when you a child.

Caroline—My experience with people who are my peers in the workplace and who have not had children—I guess particularly perhaps with women—was that there is a sense that actually staying home and looking after children is not valued compared to being in the workplace and doing what you did your training to do.

CHAIR—Do you think it is reasonable to compare? Aren't they two different things? What the government has tried to do is put in place finances so that you can exercise that option to stay at home if you want. That is what family tax benefit B and the maternity allowance are all about. But we have other things. If you look at the surveys that we have here, you see that 85 per cent of women want to have a family and work as well. If you have had an education, you want to use those skills, don't you. You want to be in a paid workforce using those additional skills. I think perhaps we make a mistake when we try to equate them or compare them. To me they are two different functions. I know I hear it a lot that we do not value looking after children. I think we do really.

Caroline—Sometimes it is even just subtle stuff—for example, you have conversations with mothers that you do not have with your colleagues or friends who are working. If you are actually not doing both you actually do not engage on the work side because you are staying at home. So it is that sense of not being able to contribute, I guess—being alienated from the workplace and not part of it anymore while you are at home. I was fortunate in that I was able to take leave from a job and go back, whereas it would inevitably be more difficult if I was not able to do that.

CHAIR—What sort of job do you do?

Caroline—I work for the state government.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Your friend who is the director of the child-care centre must be very popular.

Caroline—Yes, or I become popular because of that! But they have had to say, 'Don't tell your friends about us—we cannot give the places.'

CHAIR—We are very grateful to have had your statement. There is a witness statement that was left by somebody who could not stay. We will deal with it as a submission. Thank you for

coming. It was really valuable to us to hear from you personally about your experiences. Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 1.30 pm to 2.12 pm

McINNES, Dr Elspeth Margaret, National Convenor, National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

TAYLOR, Ms Jacqueline Sharon, Executive Officer, National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—We have your excellent submission. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr McInnes—I will open on some points and then defer to my colleague, Jacqueline. I wanted to open by making note of the raft of legislative changes that have occurred since this submission was written which we think will be impacting on the outcomes of balancing work and family, particularly for single-parent families. Specifically, the Welfare to Work legislation—which includes the capacity to breach or remove income support from single-parent families—and new requirements on mothers of younger children to engage in paid work will create pressures, along with the reductions in the income support payment to the Newstart rate and the increase in the taper rate on payments against earnings, which mean that people who are subject to the new regime for Welfare to Work after July 2006 are going to be economically much more pressured and also face increased drivers to make them engage in paid work. That might mean that they have to take work which conflicts with their family responsibilities. Against that, also, the industrial relations reforms bring in the opportunity for wages and conditions to change and for women to lose access to family-friendly provisions which may be a feature of their current employment but may not be if they have to take up new positions under new Work Choices agreements.

We see those two changes as being significant in terms of the kinds of working conditions and skills and training that they can access to get better jobs and of the risks and pressures created under the changes to the income support system that impact on them. I note that it is single-parent families who are at the highest risk of poverty and that the reductions in the income support rate from PPS to Newstart are going to increase the risks of that poverty outcome.

Our other legislative concerns are about family law changes that will mean children are more likely to be shuttled between parents on a regular basis. Again this will create pressures on parents to make sure that their children are available at the right place, at the right time, as well as parents meeting employer demands.

Further, in July 2008, the child support changes to the formula will kick in and, as a result, there will be a much greater poverty trap against earnings. It will increase the reductions in child support owed and further reduce the take-home incentives for engagement in paid work.

We are very concerned that single parents are facing an adverse set of circumstances which I have identified under the new legislation regime. A further concern is that one of the main problems we face is the widespread exposure to violence amongst this community. Some estimates are that between 40 and 50 per cent of single-parent families have experienced histories of domestic violence. I will defer now to Jacqueline to take up that point.

Ms Taylor—I want to talk about women's safety and the difference for women who have experienced violence compared to those who have not in making the transition into paid employment. We have quite a bit of research that demonstrates that women and children who have been exposed to violence face a great deal more disadvantage and find it much more difficult than those who have not been exposed to violence to make that transition to economic independence. This is because of a variety of factors.

Obviously, there is a considerable amount of trauma when you are coming out of a domestic violence situation, not just for the mother but also for the children. We know from copious research that there is a strong link between domestic violence and the mental health outcomes for women. Often these women are forced to relocate. They are socially isolated. They do not have support networks. They do not have informal forms of child care because of the relocation and social isolation. So they are reliant on formal child-care, if it is available and if it is affordable. But, quite often, because of their experiences and the impact that violence has had on their children, they are not trustful of child care. So formal child care can be quite unsuitable and certainly not what the mother wants.

Importantly, violence does not end just because the relationship does. So, with the sole parent community, we are dealing with women and children who are quite often still experiencing violence. The Family Court mandates contact. Quite often, mothers have to facilitate contact to a parent that they fear and that their children fear. They deal with that every week. There can also be ongoing Family Court dramas in the form of litigation abuse—things like stalking et cetera. So it is really important that we remember that, because the relationship is over, it does not mean that the women and children are free from violence.

Obviously this seriously inhibits their road to recovery. As I have mentioned, they have less access to child care and have an increased family demand. The stresses on women and their children are much higher. They have behavioural issues with their children as a result of the trauma that they have to deal with. We also know from research that women who have experienced violence are more likely to be in public housing, which is where your effective marginal tax rates kick and which makes it in even worse for them. This is the paradox of the poverty trap. Their public rental increases when they start earning market earnings and they actually end up being worse off than if they were a sole parent who could afford private rental or a mortgage.

If they have had abuse in their past as children, they will often have left home early. We know from the sole parent population that education levels are quite poor for many of them. As we know from the Access Economics report, domestic violence costs \$8.1 billion, but most of that cost is borne by the victim. So the woman also pays for being abused. She has lost the assets, she has lost income, she has lost savings and she has lost the ability to earn money until she is able to heal. She has let go of property settlements. The research also shows that when women have been exposed to violence, the property settlement does not compensate her for the abuse and that she often lets all that go so that she can get away.

The thing I am really concerned about and wanted to bring to the committee's attention is that, when we are looking at this population and at just how severe domestic violence is—and we all know how severe it is in our community—we need to factor that in and have legal and social

responses to enable these women and their children to move on before we can even think about balancing work and family.

CHAIR—I think I last saw you both at your annual conference, which was also here in Adelaide. On that occasion we heard the personal stories of a lot of women. When we were discussing child support, I think it was expressed to me that single mothers had been so busy trying to cope with their lives that they had not really got themselves together to lobby in the child support debate. Would you like to add to that?

Dr McInnes—I will start by agreeing with you that to lobby takes resources and it takes time and energy—and they are all the things that mums lack. Our organisation receives just over \$50,000 in annual funding, which does not enable us to employ even one full-time staff person at an appropriate level. So the lack of resources is reflected at an organisational level as well.

When the child support system was introduced, it was such a great step forward in outcomes for women's access to child support after separation, even though there were problems with collection and transfers et cetera. The research has consistently found that the child support scheme has been effective in alleviating and stopping child poverty in households when it was collected in time and in full.

It has been a very effective system. We are in the invidious position of having something that has worked very well where it has been enacted as it should be, and wanting it to stay the way it is is a harder argument in the face of the high pressures for change. I guess, too, the transfer of the threatening behaviour that women experience on a personal level from many of the ex-partners has been transferred into politicians' offices and into services where it is part of the public expression. One of the things that we would note is that engaging in threatening behaviour—shouting or being abusive—as a way of getting what you want has been effective in winning change rather than it being seen as an inappropriate and potentially dangerous form of public lobbying. I think the men have been much more willing to use those tactics, and I think they have been effective.

Ms Taylor—I will just add to that. I talk to sole mums every day; that is what I do. Most of women that we deal with get very little, if any, child support. They certainly do not get the full amount and on time: 40 per cent of payers pay \$5 a week. But women overwhelmingly say that they will not chase the child support because they are too scared of their ex and that it is not worth it because they will pay a much bigger price if they do so. After working every day in my job, my feeling is that one of the reasons women stay under the radar on this is that they are actually trying to stay under the radar of a violent ex, and that is what we need to address.

Dr McInnes—The problem is that, if there is violent behaviour, it is the children who will wear that. They will wear it alone; they will wear it in private; they will wear it behind closed doors. A mum who says, 'All right, I'm going to take him on,' has to recognise that she is putting her children in the centre of the firing line.

Mr FAWCETT—But surely if we have a system where 40 per cent of the people have wilfully or for some other reason decided not to participate and contribute that does not sound like a successful system. The core of the change is to say, 'Let's remove obstacles, whether they be legitimate or perceived obstacles, to being involved in paying and let's pursue those who are

just wilfully not paying.’ I think the changes go down that path. We have discussed this before. I just want to put on the record that I dispute that the existing system, or the system as it was, was actually all that successful.

Dr McInnes—I agree absolutely that it had flaws, largely to do with the willingness to collect, which, over time, was steadily eroded in its implementation. There have been many promises to be better at collection. To me, it is striking the difference between how debt for child support is treated as compared to other forms of debt to the Commonwealth, such as Centrelink benefit overpayments or tax debts, where there is quite a regime of collection which is very hard for people to avoid. For child support, for some reason, it does not operate in the same way. It confuses me why that is so.

I read a report from the UK arising from their amendments to their child support system which followed the same logic as you propose—that is: ‘If we make it so that the system is perceived to be fairer by the payers, they will be more compliant.’ The outcome of those changes was reduced compliance, because the message was: ‘Hey, it’s not real debt, it’s child support—and we’re just going to keep easing it up.’ While it becomes easier, there is then less incentive to pay. If a bill can be put off indefinitely that is what some people will do, even if the bill is going to their own children. I preferred the system in New Zealand, where they paid the money to the parent and children and then they collected it. I think that is more effective.

Mr FAWCETT—I have to say that the majority of men I have spoken to who have had funds garnered out of their accounts or pay packets with no input from them find the collection system is very effective in terms of the government enforcement of it.

Dr McInnes—However, you cannot get onto the collection system as a payee. You cannot ask to be put on a collect case; that is the decision of the Child Support Agency. And that decision is normally made after a protracted series of attempts to negotiate positively, with some kind dialogue occurring. In the early days it was much more a case of garnishee first—but that is going back at least 10 years, if not 15.

Ms GEORGE—Turning to the Welfare to Work legislation, which comes into being pretty soon, I know that there is only one centre in the southern area of my electorate that has before school care. There are no vacant places for the under twos in any of centres. The government has made the general comment: ‘If you can’t find suitable child-care arrangements you won’t have to be caught up in the transition to paid employment.’ How will that operate? Are there specific guidelines or is it going to rest on the discretion of the Centrelink or Job Network person that you are dealing with?

Ms Taylor—It is in the legislation; it does define what is suitable child care. It is a definition that we are uncomfortable with. It has three parts to it: child care is deemed to be suitable if there is an approved child-care place available, as through the system through FaCSIA; or if there is informal care available that is satisfactory to the parent; or if it is during school hours and the school is providing the care. Our concern with that is that, as you said, there can be areas where there is only one facility for before school care. If a parent does not think the care there is of a certain standard or they know that their child is being bullied there or there has been interaction with another child that has not been healthy for their child, then unless they can convince their employment consultant or the Centrelink officer that that does not fulfil ‘suitable’ care—because

that is at the discretion of the secretary, if it is an approved place—they have got no say in it. Therefore, if they were to knock back what is called a ‘reasonable job offer’ they would face an eight-week non-payment period. So I think it is quite alarming that parents are not actually going to be the final determiners of whether or not child care is appropriate for their children.

Dr McInnes—And there will be no requirement within that for the Job Network officer, for example, to have any skills or knowledge base around child development, children’s needs or the special needs of children or a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of care services and contexts. I make the point that a family day care place can be really suitable for some children and really unsuitable for others, depending on the needs. For instance, one of the problems with family day care is that it is very isolated. Your carer gets sick, has holidays and has life crises, just the same as any other worker, but that is your place, and if you cannot use it because the carer is not available on that particular day at short notice then your whole compliance falls to pieces and you place yourself at risk. How that information about the crisis in your family day care provider’s life is going to translate into you not being punished by your Job Network provider or your child not being forced to go to a service that is distressing to that child is not really clear. There is a lot of a wing and a prayer to say that it is all going to be all right on the day.

Ms GEORGE—The other issue my constituents in this position have raised with me is that a lot of the women have been out of paid employment for a long time and they feel a lack of confidence. They do not have the skills. What programs are being put in place? We heard this morning from the South Australian government that they had a skills type of preparedness course, and that has been oversubscribed, so it is not running into the future. What kinds of transition programs are going to be put in place for women who have been out of work for a long time, to upgrade their skills to be job ready?

Ms Taylor—Once again, this is another area that we are concerned about, because in our view there has been a reduction in what has been available. In the past, we have had the JET scheme and the Transition to Work program. Training under JET no longer exists—we are only left with JET Child Care—and the Transition to Work program will end on 30 June this year. It is being replaced by something called Employment Preparation, which is something Job Network services will take on. They will do it at the beginning of the active participation model, which is something that each job seeker has to navigate their way through.

Unfortunately, Employment Preparation does not have with it the same services that something like Transition to Work did. Basically, you will simply meet on perhaps a monthly basis with a consultant for a few sessions, and then you will proceed into Job Search training. It also comes with \$300 in a job seeker account, but that once again is a notional account, so the Job Network member can decide, ‘Well, we might spend \$900 on one and nothing on two.’ That is not something that the client themselves has any control over. We know from how job seeker account money has been used in the past that that is exactly what does happen. So there is no guarantee that any training money would be available for a parent. The maximum amount of training money available will be a mere \$300, and that is not just for training—unlike, say, JET, where it was dedicated money for training. This also will have to purchase interview clothes, employment clothes, transportation, child care—I do not think \$300 is going to go a long way.

So we are concerned about the level of service. We are concerned about the amount of money available for training in particular. We are also very concerned about the generic nature of Job Network. Having worked in that industry for some time myself, I know that Transition to Work tended to attract employment consultants who had greater life skills and professional backgrounds, because they were working with a particular target group. With the Job Network, it is far more generic, where you have anyone who is unemployed, and it really is on the basis of the individual, able-bodied person who is ready and does not have the barriers to employment. Of course, with a sole parent, that is by definition not true. So I am not sure where the Job Network staff are suddenly going to get the capacity to understand what children's needs are all about, understand what a mum might need or understand that, at the same time this is happening to her, the relationship has broken down, which is overwhelmingly how you become a single mother. Sole parents are also battling with the Child Support Agency. They are battling with family law processes. They are juggling their Job Network requirements. They are juggling Centrelink. It is an awful lot.

I know the amount of misinformation I have heard over the last year from different workers in this area. They are going to have to know an awful lot. They are going to be highly skilled. And that is just not how Job Network operates. There is no mandatory training or professional background for anyone in Job Network. A Job Network agency is free to employ anyone into that position. You do not have to have a certificate for employment services, for example. So they have a huge array of qualifications, values and training. They also have an inordinate amount of discretion to make decisions, even more so with this new Welfare to Work legislation, where several of the legislative protections have been removed from the legislation and put into the guide. So they have an enormous amount of power and very little accountability.

Ms KATE ELLIS—As you would be aware, there has been quite a lot of public debate in recent times about family tax benefit B. I am wondering whether you can expand upon the attitudes of some of the sole parents that you are dealing with towards that benefit and also upon any suggestions that you might have for how such a benefit should be reformed.

Dr McInnes—Family tax benefit B was an outcome which bundled together payments which had previously been dedicated to sole parents into a payment for single-income households with young children under 15. When it was first packaged, a lot of the funds that had gone to sole parents were shared across a much wider spectrum of society. As we know, there is no means test on family tax benefit B, so there is some irony for us in that a parent on minimum income support payments receives the same amounts as a multimillionaire in Lane Cove. It challenges some of the models as to why you might have an income and family support system.

Another consequence of family tax benefit B concerns the role of fathers in families because in a couple family the parent who is in the workforce earning the single income has more incentive to expand their hours into very long working hours if the family needs more money, rather than having the other party start to work, lose the thousands of dollars embedded in FTBB and probably generate a debt, historically so anyway. That is rather than the couple having her earnings to get extra money. So just in the way that families make decisions about who the earner is going to be, the family tax benefit B drives the main breadwinners, mainly fathers, into longer and longer hours. When the couple's relationship breaks down, that then has consequences in terms of his availability and connectedness and ability to engage with his children in ways that might be desirable.

The other point is that FTBB and the way it is structured basically inhibits couples from making decisions about how they will organise their wage earning and family life. I would argue that the people who should be making the decisions about when they are working and when they are with their family are parents themselves, be they a single parent or a couple parent. To valorise a particular model challenges some economic outcomes where you might want higher labour force participation amongst couple mothers, but it also organises family relationships in ways that polarise the partners—you are the stay-home one and you are the earner one—and make it much harder for both parties to enjoy a more balanced arrangement, if that is what they choose. I think it should be about how families choose to arrange their working life balance.

Ms Taylor—The other thing it does is encourage one person to seek the market earnings. That is usually the father, which means that the mother becomes detached from the labour market, which means that if they do separate she is actually penalised again because she has the lost opportunity cost and she has to try to re-engage. She is disadvantaged because of her skill levels not being up to date.

CHAIR—All of that is absolutely true, but people are entitled to choose to do that if they want. With regard to a family having a single income, when you criticise there being no means test you overlook the fact that just because there is one income coming into the family there is no guarantee it is equitably distributed—none at all. At least the family tax benefit B payment is paid directly to the mother and at least she has that. I think it is very important to know that many households you think might have a lot of money coming in actually do not. The money is not being spent on the stay-at-home parent, the mother, and the kids. I think that is a real factor as to why it should not be means tested, just as child endowment was never means tested.

Ms GEORGE—There is a double standard operating here, isn't there? On the one hand we are saying that if you are a sole parent once your child turns eight you have to go to work but if you happen to have the privilege of being married to a wealthy man who works you have got no mutual obligation on you for government support.

CHAIR—That is not the point I was making.

Ms GEORGE—No. But it does seem to me that, in terms of family policy, it is not a consistent position. On the one hand, you are encouraging one type of family to arrange its domestic situation in certain ways to take advantage of money coming in; on the other hand, you are telling people who are less able to make those arrangements—people who are often just above the poverty line—that they have no choice and have to go to work.

CHAIR—They will still receive that \$3,000 and also family tax benefit part A. They will still get both of those payments, which people tend to overlook.

Ms GEORGE—But when you look at what they are losing in entitlements and the tax they pay, a lot of single mums will be working for the equivalent of \$3 or \$4 an hour.

Dr McInnes—I think it is 68c in the dollar by the time you add up all the clawbacks against earnings.

Ms GEORGE—That they lose?

Dr McInnes—That they lose—once you take into account reductions in PPS or Newstart payments, family tax benefit part A and income tax itself.

Mr FAWCETT—Is it still not a fact that, at the end of the working week, even at the minimum wage, they would still be better off financially than if they were purely on welfare? Is it not also true that, longer term, getting reconnected to the workforce is the first step to regaining the confidence and connectedness to look at further study, further job opportunities et cetera?

Dr McInnes—I am delighted that you ask that question because we have had that argument put to us a number of times. When a person in part-time paid work goes off payment and then back onto payment because, for some reason, they are not eligible for PPS for another 12 weeks—it might be due to their earnings or changes in their care of a child or a whole range of things—they go back onto Newstart. They have been working all the time; this is a part-time worker. They go from a payment whose basic rate is \$35 higher a week than Newstart and has a 40c in the dollar taper rate against earnings to a payment that is at a lower rate and has a 60c in the dollar taper rate against earnings. They are the same worker all the way through but, because they have had this 12-week hiatus, they go from one set of circumstances to the other.

I work in a university. When we have long semester breaks, casual tutors do not get work. In semesters, they do get work. This is an example of where you might earn very well for a short period, go off payment and come back on, and your circumstances changes. Your argument holds true only if a person is fully on income support at the Newstart rate and gets some work; then they will be better off. But, compared to the current PPS worker and the circumstances that person would face if they wanted to go into the workforce after July 2006, there is going to be a great disadvantage relative to the current PPS circumstance. So whilst in that very limit circumstance of having no earnings and going onto Newstart a person who gets some work will be better off—they are the same as any other worker—when you compare them to the current status, they will not be better off.

Another thing we have found is that sole parents really want to work. I have listed the inhibitors to work on page 13 and 14 of our submission. One of the things that came out of our research is that it is about something much broader than simply a job opportunity or skills. It is about having a house and access to transport. In certain locations, you cannot access transport very easily, and we know that this population has less access to a car. So, yes, under very limited circumstances, like any other worker, when you go from unemployment to employment you are going to be a bit better off; but, compared to how sole parents are treated now, we see it as a big disadvantage.

Mr FAWCETT—But those comparisons can be made at any time there is a transition from one set of arrangements to another. No matter which section of the community you look at, some groups may be better off or worse off in future; but, if you are comparing apples with apples, in 2010, when this policy will be operating, a person who gets a job will be financially better off, despite the 68c in the dollar taper rate, than a person who stays on welfare.

CHAIR—Isn't the problem though, as we know from what evidence we have taken, that the people who are basically affected by this policy are lower socioeconomic people with very little skill, so that the job that they are going to be appropriate for is, by and large, casual? That means

that they can be in and out of the workforce, which means that once they go off the sole parent benefit they cannot get back on to it; they will have to go on to Newstart and get a lower payment. Also, that is indexed to the CPI, not the MTAW as the pension is. As to how all that works out, if they can get a permanent job that allows them to remain in the workforce then they will be better off but if they are in casual employment and find themselves in and out of a job they are going to have a problem. They are the people that I am concerned about.

Ms GEORGE—A lot of them will be in that category, won't they?

CHAIR—Yes, indeed.

Ms Taylor—One of the concerns that we have with the Welfare to Work policy is the work-first approach. What you are saying is absolutely right. We understand that the thing that makes the difference in achieving secure work, the thing which means they never have to return to welfare, is education and training. One of the things that we are really concerned about is that it is actually going to be harder for sole parents to do education and training under the Welfare to Work reforms. Part-time education is not part of the activity test. That means that when their youngest reaches the age where the participation requirements come in they have to do the activities that their Job Network agency sets. They can study as well if they can fit that in, but if the activities and study collide the study comes second, so it would be very difficult for them to finish a course. Sole parents will have to go on to Austudy and study full time. Of course, the reality is that most sole parents study part time, yet part-time education under the Welfare to Work regime is actually going to be really difficult to achieve.

The other thing concerns the way that the Job Network is set up with its payments from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Network providers get 13- and 26-week outcomes for placing people in employment or education. But the education payments are a small percentage of the amount that they get for employment placements, and the education placements have to be for a much longer period of time. The Job Network model is a business model where providers are funded by getting outcomes. If you have got an opportunity of a \$5,000 outcome from putting someone in a job or an opportunity of a \$500 outcome from putting someone into education, where that person has actually got to last for a whole semester as compared to 13 weeks, which way are you going to jump? I think the strong business incentive is to put them in employment regardless of what the customer wants. As Elspeth said, sole parents want to work. They badly want to work. They are looking at the future of their children but they want to study, and that is something that the pension has allowed them to do: it has allowed them to study.

Ms GEORGE—And the pensioner education supplement on Newstart?

Ms Taylor—On Newstart you will not get the pensioner education supplement.

Ms GEORGE—So you do not get that.

Ms Taylor—You will get the lower rate of Austudy but you will not get the PES, you will not get your pensioner concession card and you have got to study full time and balance the arrangements as to your kids. It will be a very hard, if not impossible, thing to do, so there is a strong disincentive.

Dr McInnes—It actually risks disabling groups that are very able at the moment. For example, I did a lot of my postgraduate, graduate and honours studies whilst on the pension. I will never go back to income support dependency while I am healthy and able to work. If you go to any public or private organisation and ask the workers, ‘How many of you are sole parents?’ you will find that, as in the wider population, probably one in four people who are parents are sole parents and they will be indistinguishable from any other mum. They have done their degree, they have got into paid work and they have got off the pension and they will tell you the stories of how they did that.

Those groups who now unproblematically swim through the system to an outcome which enables them to leave might take six or seven years, depending on the number of children. I had three children; it took longer. But you have your children when you become a sole parent and you have to live with that reality. Those groups that can now be very enabled are likely to hit the wall and become stuck without access to education much more easily and you have still got that group, being the ones that stay on payment for a long time with very low skills, high health problems, high child health problems, whose members arguably need lots more support. So in a sense it is illogical to disable the able and put them in with the ones who are struggling a lot and then treat them all the same.

CHAIR—What is the breakdown of those two groups? I think there are more of the ones with problems than the ones who are able to study.

Dr McInnes—They are the ones who stay on income support. There was research by Butterworth which showed that the ones who remained on income support had a much higher rate of low education and health problems.

CHAIR—That is what I mean, but of the number of people who are currently on the sole parent benefit are there more of the people who stay on it or more of the people who seek education?

Dr McInnes—I would say they are about fifty-fifty, and of course people are not static. They might start from a position of great distress, upheaval and chaos, go through a process of getting community services and support, stabilise their family, start to think about study, go to study, become engaged and enthused about a possible career, graduate and go to work. It all takes time and people do not stay stuck in one place. We need public policy which enables people to develop, to grow, to heal, to recover and to get better outcomes over the longer term rather than a short-term approach which just says, ‘If we can get you into 13 weeks of work, that’ll be five grand in our pocket and everyone is sweet.’

In reality, that family is still going to face a lot of upheaval around their engagement in a casual workforce situation or if they have no access to skills. That flows on to things like secure housing and access to transport. You cannot take on debts to pay off a car or a mortgage unless you have some kind of secure income, so that is where the IR legislation making it easier to employ people and then drop them and pick them up again when you need them is going to really impact on how those families at the least able end can engage even in something like education, sustained housing or sustained transport.

Ms GEORGE—In the legislation there is no provision for enrolment in, say, a TAFE course to be the equivalent of the 15-hours work test?

Ms Taylor—No.

Dr McInnes—Work first explicitly.

Ms Taylor—It is particularly excluded as part of the activity test. It would only satisfy the mutual obligation side of it, which is an additional requirement. Your choice is full-time study and transferring to Austudy or risking part-time study knowing that you have to prioritise your job search activities.

Dr McInnes—And Austudy does not have rent assistance, so that is another loss.

Ms Taylor—And, of course, if you are going to do uni, you have a HECS debt. You might start a course and realise that you cannot complete it because you have the Job Network and Centrelink pressures, but you will still pay the HECS debt. So that is a big disincentive for parents.

Mr FAWCETT—You will not pay the HECS debt, though, until you are actually earning enough to be able to afford to pay the HECS debt.

Ms Taylor—But it is still a big factor in making the decision to study.

Dr McInnes—Yes, and it does get interest over that longer term, so for people who can leave and go to the workforce—

Mr FAWCETT—But you will never pay it back until you are earning enough money, earning well above the subsistence and pension level.

Dr McInnes—That is true. I agree, and the problem is that there is a big and growing debt that will never be paid back.

Ms GEORGE—I think the danger in this system is that it perpetuates certain categories of women's ongoing disadvantage. You can imagine the kind of work the women I represent who have come to speak to me and who have been out of work for, say, 10 or 14 years, often with a low level of education, are going to go into. It will be casual and precarious and they will be in and out of the workforce. I do not see that it has a long-term outcome that is positive either for the society and women's participation in work or for the woman and her child or children.

Ms Taylor—It is a juggle, because most will still be involved in the Centrelink system, getting a part payment, so they will have the work stresses and the Centrelink stresses with very little reward.

Ms GEORGE—And then, if they refuse the job on offer, they lose their payments for eight weeks, it is still?

Ms Taylor—Yes.

CHAIR—What is the fall-back position where a breach is found to have occurred and payments are suspended for eight weeks? What happens to the people? What happens to the children?

Ms Taylor—At the moment there is a limited financial management service, which is being called case management, but that is probably not an appropriate term. Centrelink are outsourcing that to some of the non-government organisations. Some of those who get an eight-week non-payment period, if they are eligible for this service—which will be for sole parents with dependent children or others who are considered exceptionally vulnerable—have to go to their non-government organisation and present their bills that need to be paid. The NGO will consider the bills, talk to the person and then make a recommendation to either pay or not pay, which Centrelink will then do. But Centrelink will pay directly to the provider. So they will pay, say, the real estate agent. If you need food, you will get a Coles voucher or a Woolworths voucher. It cannot exceed the amount of your income support. So there is a safety net there, but it is not a very dignified one. Every two weeks you have to front up and say whether or not, basically, you deserve to get this pay. What you will spend it on will be decided for you for the entire amount, and you will have no discretionary income whatsoever.

Ms GEORGE—And it will be paid in kind up to the level of the Newstart payment?

Dr McInnes—Yes, up to the level of the payment.

Ms Taylor—Yes. There may be cases where cash is given, but only in very rare circumstances and only in very small amounts. Wherever possible it will be paid in kind directly to the provider. Centrelink has had discussions with the big grocery chains to see that they will accept this.

CHAIR—You take a voucher?

Ms Taylor—Yes, and then you go to Coles with your voucher. So your real estate agent will know you cannot pay your rent and Centrelink are paying it. The child's school will know, so the child will suffer this indignity as well. You lose your right to determine how your income is spent.

Dr McInnes—We do know now that with poverty sole parents are not always buying the pharmaceuticals that their children need. They are not filling scripts, or they are not able to afford things like Panadol, head lice treatment, bandaids or antiseptic creams. Those kinds of basic things we might take for granted but, if you have one, two or three children and if there is any kind of illness running through the family—

Ms GEORGE—They all get it.

Dr McInnes—It becomes enormous. Whilst there is a pharmaceutical benefits scheme, it does not cover those incidentals. In a regime such as this, where you have had your money removed and you have to take in your big bills, where does that leave something like needing a nebuliser because your child is having asthma attacks but having no money? How do you negotiate that so your child can breathe that night?

CHAIR—They do not lose their right to use their concession card.

Dr McInnes—Their health care card, yes, but you still have a copayment with that. So if they have no actual cash flow, or if that cash flow is all allocated—

CHAIR—So there is no cash flow at all?

Dr McInnes—There will be family payments, and the family payments of course vary according to the amount of child support you are purported to receive. I say ‘purported’ because quite often they are reduced without the child support coming in.

CHAIR—Yes, but these people are not going to be getting child support—they will get \$6 a week.

Dr McInnes—That is right. These people will not get it.

CHAIR—But they will still get family tax benefit part A and part B.

Dr McInnes—They will. However, again, when we are looking at a survival level of—

CHAIR—How much is that likely to be, say, for a parent with two children aged eight and nine?

Dr McInnes—It would probably be about \$300 a fortnight, I would think.

Ms Taylor—Yes. What normally happens, as far as I understand it, is that one week you have your parenting payment coming in and the next week your family tax benefit. So they tend to budget weekly, because they have got income coming in each week.

CHAIR—But that is not going to happen. They are going to be reliant on, just from the way the system is going to work, taking the bill along to an NGO and saying: ‘This is the gas bill. Pay that.’ Then they will be given a voucher to go to Woolworths or Coles.

Dr McInnes—Yes. And they might still need pharmaceuticals and shoes for their children.

CHAIR—But they would have to take that out of family tax benefit A or B.

Dr McInnes—If that had not already been committed on the electricity bill or—

CHAIR—But they can take the electricity bill to the NGO.

Dr McInnes—They cannot take every bill in one fortnight, because it will only be paid up to the amount.

CHAIR—Up to the amount of what?

Dr McInnes—Of Newstart eligible payments.

Ms GEORGE—So if you have an electricity bill that is \$300 and a Telstra bill that is more than what you would have got, they cannot both be paid.

Dr McInnes—Yes. We are already seeing that sole parents are the most likely households to have involuntary utilities disconnections. That translates into living in the dark without heating, cooling, washing or cooking. That also escalates your costs. Another thing is that houses burn down with candles. We are already seeing that scenario. When we start taking more income away, it is not going to improve.

Ms GEORGE—What are your constituents saying? In the consultations you are having with the people you represent, what are they saying? Is there a heightened degree of anxiety and stress about these changes?

Dr McInnes—Yes. There is a lot of ignorance. People are not really aware. When we talk to workers about what is going to happen to people's incomes, let alone talk to the mums themselves, there is actually a high level of disbelief: 'This can't really be true. They wouldn't do that to us.' So when it hits it is going to be very frightening and alarming. Those who do understand it are terrified.

CHAIR—What percentage of people do you think are likely to fall into the breach category?

Dr McInnes—That will depend on public policy. I was on the ministerial breaches task force under the AWT legislation, and the data out of that showed really clearly that the rate of breaches varied according to the instructions of the administrator of the time. If there was a policy that breaches had to be high then breaches were high. If the minister changed or the direction changed then the breaches went down. They mapped who was in charge against how the breaches changed. We think that that outcome is going to be politically mediated. When we want to represent that we are tough on dole bludgers, the breaches are going to go up. When we want to represent that we are kind, caring, compassionate and supportive, the breach rates will come down. It will be about how we want to present what is happening to welfare.

Mr FAWCETT—You have made the point, though, that a lot of discretion is going to go down to the desk level officer within job networks and Centrelink. My discussions with Centrelink over a period now have highlighted that the people who are working at the desk level have a very good feel for those who are genuinely in need or who have been trying but have come unstuck with work et cetera and the very small percentage who are deliberately out there to work the system. Most of the ones that I have spoken to have said, 'Look, some more discretion to apply breaches for that small percentage would be a good thing,' but they have a very good working knowledge and understanding and compassion for people, I have to say. I have not found a Centrelink officer who has been hard or wilfully looking to disadvantage people. The thing you are portraying is a worst-case scenario where a whole sequence of things go wrong, but I believe that discretion at the working level for people at Centrelink is going to work in the favour of the group you are talking about, where they are generally disadvantaged through losing employment in a casual situation.

CHAIR—Can I say, David, that I agree that there are a lot of very good people in Centrelink. I deal with Centrelink a lot in dealing with constituents and I have to say that the error rate in

Centrelink—where they get it wrong—is quite prevalent, which is why my constituents end up in my office.

Ms Taylor—And in the appeals.

CHAIR—I am not saying that the errors that are created have been done malevolently—they have not; they happen for a whole series of reasons—but the long and the short of it is that it has been an absolute disaster for the person it has happened to. If someone is having a bad day—they might have had a fight over breakfast and are not in a very good mood—and someone comes in, they say, ‘I don’t think that’s genuine.’ Bang, you are gone. That is human nature. I do not know how you overcome that because there is total discretion. Is there any appeal?

Ms Taylor—Yes, there is an appeal.

CHAIR—And do they keep paying while the appeal is under way?

Ms Taylor—There are two points to that. It is possible to appeal. It is a four-stage process, and if you do lodge an appeal they should reinstate payments, depending on the nature of the decision that was made, I think.

CHAIR—Okay, so you are chopped for eight weeks and you appeal. Are you paid during the period that the appeal takes?

Ms Taylor—That is a question that I would have to take on notice.

CHAIR—I would like the answer to that.

Ms Taylor—Yes. But what I can say is that most people do not appeal because they do not know that they can and it is not something that they are told about. So the appeal data shows that when people do appeal they actually have a very high chance of success in having the decision overturned—which verifies your point—but most people do not appeal. You have to know what to do.

Dr McInnes—You have to understand the language and the process.

CHAIR—Do you have to pay to appeal?

Dr McInnes—No.

Ms Taylor—No, you do not, but you have to know it is a possibility and you have to know how to do it, and that is not something that they are generally given information about.

CHAIR—We have another group to deal with. Thank you very much for coming. If you would not mind checking that appeal point, that would be very good.

Ms Taylor—I will email it to the committee.

CHAIR—That would be fine. Thank you very much, Sharon.

[3.05 pm]

DANN, Ms Sandra, Director, Working Women's Centre South Australia Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome. We have your submission, for which we thank you. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Dann—Yes, I would, thank you. I will update some of the statistics because the statistics in the submission are a little bit old now. I have had another look at our statistics since then. I will give you a little bit of background. The Working Women's Centre provides information, support and advocacy to women workers on a broad range of workplace issues. We have been operating in South Australia for 27 years. We have five full-time staff; three of those are industrial officers who assist clients who have legitimate grievances against their employer or previous employer.

Some of the issues that we cover include dismissal or redundancy, employment conditions, workplace harassment, sex discrimination, remuneration, sexual harassment, maternity entitlements, family responsibilities, pregnancy discrimination, work and family queries, and sometimes workers compensation. Our clients' employment relationship may be covered by either federal or state acts, awards or agreements, while some of our clients work in award-free areas. We represent clients with their employers. Sometimes we are involved in direct negotiations where the client feels that will be successful for them. We also represent, in both state and federal industrial relations commissions, the Equal Opportunity Commission in this state and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, but only to conciliation stage.

You would have seen the statistics mentioned in our submission. We keep a comprehensive data base of all phone calls and case work that we are engaged in. Most typically our clients are employed full-time in the private sector and are in the 25- to 44-year-old age bracket. They work as clerks or in sales or personal services, predominantly in the wholesale, retail, health and community sectors. Many but not all of the women we represent are low-paid workers and most are not members of trade unions. The service we provide is free and confidential. I have also brought along today a few case studies that I hope demonstrate some of the difficulties that some women face when trying to return to the paid workforce or, indeed, to stay in the paid workforce.

It is mainly the second term of reference for the committee that I can speak to, based on our statistics and the experiences of the women who report those to us about their working lives. I have changed the names of the clients. I will not use clients' real names, nor can I reveal the names of workplaces or employers. That is confidential information. Some of the stories involve matters that are still before various jurisdictions and have not yet been resolved.

We are funded by both the federal and the state government, with the majority of our funding being provided by the state. We also receive some funding from SA unions and, from time to time, grant money for various special projects. In our original submission I referred to the 2004 statistics. I have had a look at our statistics again; the most recent ones go from 1 July 2005 to the end of March 2006. During that time we had a total of 2,266 calls, and approximately 11 per cent of those relate to the following issues: pregnancy and sex discrimination, maternity leave

entitlements, discrimination on the basis of family responsibilities, child care, marital status, and entry or re-entry to the labour market.

To summarise our submission, it is the view of the Working Women's Centre that the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families include such things as: HECS debt, the prospect of lost superannuation, loss of training and promotional opportunities, loss of income, loss of leisure time and opportunities for self, the burden of care, the costs of providing for babies, children and education, lack of paid parental leave, hostile work environments and pregnancy discrimination.

What would make it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce? Such things as flexible working arrangements that can be accessed: one of the complaints we hear from both men and women is that indeed they have flexible working arrangements in their workplace but that people either are discouraged from taking them or are too scared to do so or there is a culture that if you ask for those entitlements you are creating problems. Another issue is the ability to return to work part time, with similar comments there: it is more about the ability to negotiate, without grief, to return to work part time.

Other issues are: a higher level of awareness and support from employers for workers with children, and all that that involves; support from work colleagues; suitable and available child care; partners doing an equal share of the unpaid work of caring; adequate time off to recover from birth; access to skills refreshment courses; adequate public transport; and the level of guilt. Barbara Pocock, in her text *The Work/Life Collision*, refers to the groups of women who work who experience grief about going off to work every day and leaving their children, but, similarly, the levels of guilt that women who do not work have about not being able to afford to provide the things that their kids ask them for. Another issue is safety from violence and abuse. We have a number of women who come to this state who have fled domestic violence situations. They have come here because they believe that their work opportunities may be better, only to find that the difficulties in accessing appropriate work along with child care mean that either they cannot work or they are putting their children into areas where they feel very concerned about their safety perhaps from partners who may track them down.

The third term of reference for the committee is one that we do not have much to do with— income rates and so on for single income families are not our area of expertise. I think you have heard from a group who are across those issues.

I will give you a couple of fairly typical stories. I have gathered these since the implementation of Work Choices on 27 March. None of these scenarios, I have to say, are any different from the scenarios that we heard before the implementation of Work Choices; I think it is just a little too soon for us to really gauge what the impact of that legislation will be. Suffice to say that we feel there is an even greater need now for women to really know what their rights are in terms of signing agreements and their work conditions. If you do not have that knowledge it is very easy to be exploited or suffer discrimination.

The first case involves Brigitte. Brigitte took maternity leave to have her first baby. She decided that she needed to return to work part time and approached her workplace about this. They refused to negotiate any suitable arrangement. At the Working Women's Centre, one of the

industrial officers has advised Brigitte to put her request in writing to the employer and assisted her with the wording of her letter.

Scarlet contacted the centre for information and advice. She recently left a job and has been employed in a new position. She has just discovered that she is pregnant. She has not told her new employer yet. She is very worried about this situation, so our advice was around outlining what her rights and responsibilities are and suggesting ways that she can safely speak to her employer about her pregnancy.

Theresa worked as a casual supervisor at a recreation centre. She was returning to work after maternity leave. However, her employer informed her that her old job was no longer available. She was offered another position that was lower in status and had fewer hours. The Working Women's Centre industrial officer advised Theresa to write a letter to her employer, requesting suitable hours and remuneration.

Lesley worked as a casual for five months. When her employer realised that Lesley was pregnant, he dismissed her, saying that she would be leaving anyway. The Working Women's Centre has assisted Lesley to lodge a complaint of pregnancy discrimination with HREOC, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Laura worked in a hotel in a management position. Her manager told her that he was planning to restructure their five hotels and that her old position would no longer exist, as it would be collapsed into one position at her old level for the five hotels. Laura is three months pregnant and suffering from low blood pressure. She was offered a position as gaming manager, which she was unable to perform as she would have to be on her feet for most of the shift. Also, the duties were very different from what she had been doing before. She did not feel that she had the required skills or training to perform that role, even though the money was about the same. The Working Women's Centre has referred Laura to her doctor to get a detailed letter outlining what restrictions her health places her under and will then assist Laura to negotiate her position with her employer.

The last one is Helga. Helga is placed by a temp agency into suitable positions. She was offered a three-month temping job with a government agency. Helga has a son who plays soccer and attends training on Friday afternoons. Before Helga was due to commence her job with the government, she rang to introduce herself to her new supervisor and to clarify her starting times and dates, her duties and so on. In the course of this conversation, Helga asked about the possibility of starting an hour earlier on Fridays so that she could leave earlier to take her son to soccer training. Shortly after this conversation, Helga received a call from the temp agency, who told her that the offer of employment had been withdrawn. When Helga asked why, she was told it was because of her request for flexible start and finish times on a Friday. Helga asked the temp agency to phone their client back and say that she was happy to work until five on Fridays and that she had just inquired about flexible work times, as she knew government agencies had policies on this. Not long afterwards, the temp agency phoned back to say that the job offer was still off. When Helga pressed for a reason, she was told that the government agency had said they did not want someone who only thinks about child care.

Ms GEORGE—Welcome to the real world.

CHAIR—Although you are funded by government, you regard yourself as independent of government?

Ms Dann—We are separately incorporated, yes.

CHAIR—You said you had 2,266 calls, of which only 11 per cent really related to pregnancy, and what flows from that, and child care. What were the rest?

Ms Dann—The major percentage of calls have to do with dismissal—that is, women being given the sack—or—

CHAIR—Which is nothing to do with pregnancy?

Ms Dann—Not necessarily. It could be. We would normally stat those calls as ‘pregnancy discrimination’. The large number of calls we stat as ‘employment conditions’, and there may be multiple issues in there, but I tried to capture the issues that I thought had to do with the issues of balancing work and family.

Ms GEORGE—With the changes in the IR laws, a lot of women are not in unions. How do women in the community know that your service exists? Could you just tell us a little bit about your promotion?

Ms Dann—We have a little bit of a bind here. We do advertise from time to time. We are a small community agency. When we advertise, we create a demand that we cannot service, so that is tricky. We survey a percentage of our clients who ring in for phone support, and all of our casework clients, about how they found out about us, our level of professionalism and so on. The majority of women seem to find out about us from other women or from either community agencies or government agencies. So, if they have a problem with having been terminated, someone might say, ‘I think you ring some commission,’ and they will ring the industrial commission. Because they cannot give information and support and advice—they can only give information about the process of filling in a piece of paper—they will usually automatically refer those women to us. So we do receive a lot of referrals from our networks.

Ms GEORGE—Are you getting more inquiries with the changes in the IR laws?

Ms Dann—We are noticing that the inquiries we are getting are much more complex, because we now have to spend a lot of time figuring out whether people are on notional agreements, whether they are award free, whether they are a federal or a state employee and whether their entitlements under their agreements have been preserved by Work Choices or knocked out. That process is much more lengthy.

Ms GEORGE—It is a lot more technical.

Ms Dann—Yes. And it would be true to say that we are still learning ourselves what the complete ramifications of the new legislation are.

Ms GEORGE—Could a woman ring your service and say, ‘Look, my employer’s asked me to sign this contract. Does it conform to the law, or how do you think I should go about negotiating?’ Do you provide that kind of level of advice?

Ms Dann—We can work out what award that woman might have been on if she was an award worker under the old system, and compare the conditions in her agreement to that award, which is possibly similar to the no disadvantage test that the Office of the Employment Advocate used to perform. Under Work Choices, they no longer perform that test. That is an area of great worry to me. Ironically, under the new legislation, if an employer includes prohibited content in an agreement—

Ms GEORGE—They can be fined.

Ms Dann—they can be fined for that. But, when a woman or a man is handed a workplace agreement, there is no check for them to know whether or not that is a legal agreement. That is a huge worry. So unless people really know the technicalities of the Work Choices legislation, they have no idea whether what they are signing is a good, bad or illegal agreement.

Ms KATE ELLIS—Sandra, we had some evidence this morning stating that there was a need to monitor the impacts of Work Choices, particularly on women. I asked the question: ‘Who’s going to do that?’ From my understanding of what you have said, the Working Women’s Centre hears of a lot of the cases, particularly from non-union members. Do you think that, if you had adequate resourcing, that is the sort of job that your centre would be capable of carrying out?

Ms Dann—We will monitor the impact on women as we hear it and look at how the patterns are changing. We have always done that. That is how we pick up where there is a need to do more proactive project work on, for instance, workplace bullying. I always use this joke—it is an old joke of mine but I will use it again now—that no-one rings us up to say, ‘I’m having a great day at work.’ We do not really hear the stories where women are tremendously happy in their workplace. So I would have to say that we are always careful in our collection of stats as we know that we get the bad news stories and that there would be another picture for other people to gather. We will certainly go on assessing the impact on our clients.

Ms KATE ELLIS—Can I ask a question on a completely different matter. It is one that somebody else mentioned today and we did not have the chance to follow up. Every time I have read of women of the last decade or so talking about HECS and the cost of housing and how that has impacted on their decisions as to when to start families, I have found that hugely alarming because we are yet to hear the stories of the men and women that are now paying 25 per cent more. When you were talking about HECS, you said many women feel that they cannot afford to start having children until they have paid off their HECS debt. Was that under the old structure before there were further increases?

Ms Dann—Yes.

Ms KATE ELLIS—So can we expect that to become an even greater impediment in the future?

Ms Dann—Yes. These are women who are working and earning above the eligible rate to pay their HECS and they are finding that to be a slug on their family income. I work with a young woman who is the sole earner in her family as her partner cares for their two small children. It has taken her three years of working with us to complete the paying of her HECS debt. She worked in other areas before paying off her HECS debt. They did make a decision to have a third child but, having looked at the figures, they have reassessed it and decided that, even though they have paid off the HECS debt, they are not going to do that.

CHAIR—You said you represent people at the lower end of the income scale rather than people at the higher end of the income scale. Do you—this is a question that I asked before to which I could not get an answer—have any knowledge of what percentage of people with university qualifications return to the work force?

Ms Dann—Not from our statistics, no. I could not judge that at all. The reason we tend to represent lower income women is that higher income women do have the means to go to lawyers. That is usually where they would firstly go if they had a workplace issue that needed legal advice. We do not means test and we do not ask questions about income but, if it becomes apparent that a woman has the means to pay, we usually refer her to a lawyer, particularly where her matter looks like going beyond the conference stage. We have limited resources and we like to keep those for women who have no other access to assistance.

Ms GEORGE—What success do you have with the cases that you take before the HREOC?

Ms Dann—We have got a very good working relationship with the HREOC. I think it is fair to say that in all the years of the work that we have been doing we have not taken a dud case to the commission. It would be wrong of us to give women false hope about their cases. Sometimes clients insist on taking a matter to the commission and there are times when we would say, ‘We can’t in all faith go before the commission and argue what you want us to argue as that would be misrepresenting our knowledge of the law.’ At such times we would say to a woman, ‘You represent yourself. Here is what will happen,’ so we take her through the whole process and then say, ‘This is the type of statement that you would be required to give.’ We have got videos supplied by the HREOC about what a typical conference looks like. We would usually spend some time on preparing a woman like that to run her own case.

CHAIR—Have the majority of the cases that you have dealt with been under the old law of unfair dismissal or under illegal dismissal?

Ms Dann—I could not give you a figure on that—probably unfair because that bundles up a whole lot more.

CHAIR—So will that work for you lessen now?

Ms Dann—We are now in the position of saying to some women, ‘I’m sorry but there is no avenue of redress for you.’

CHAIR—Will you take unlawful dismissal cases?

Ms Dann—Yes.

CHAIR—So you could expect that to increase?

Ms Dann—It depends on the way the dismissal takes place. Dismissals are unlawful only if there are certain criteria such as sacking someone when they are sick, on a workers comp claim or pregnant. We have always taken those anyway.

CHAIR—Do you take those into the common law courts or do you still take them to the tribunals?

Ms Dann—Not at this stage. That is a possible avenue for the future. It is not a jurisdiction we have worked in and it would require us to upskill some of our workers. Most likely, we would take those to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

CHAIR—So that avenue is still open?

Ms Dann—Yes, Absolutely. There is a lot of confusion among women and I think employers too about that. Some people think it is a free-for-all and you can get rid of people just because you want to, but that simply is not the case. There is a lot of misinformation around, and that is one of the challenges not just for our agency but for agencies in general.

CHAIR—I think that is going to be a whole new area of law. With the legal profession having lost a lot of tort business because of the so-called reforms, I think this area is likely to open up considerably.

Ms Dann—We have had discussions with HREOC conciliators about the possibility of increased work there. Similarly, at the state level, we have some concerns that we might see a big increase in workers comp claims. We never advise people to go down that path lightly. It is not an easy process for people who have a work injury to have it addressed. We certainly advise people that that is an option, but we do not say, ‘Just bung in a workers comp claim and everything will be well.’ We have to be realistic about what we tell people. Sometimes the process of going through a workers comp process is more stressful than the original injury, and people have to be aware of that before they go down that path.

Ms GEORGE—Have the federal government said anything to the working women’s centres about that their expectation of your role in light of the changed circumstances and what resources would come to it?

Ms Dann—We are currently in negotiations for a new funding proposal for the next financial year. We had a phone link-up meeting yesterday. I think the government are very keen on using our expertise, but they have made it quite clear that they see a changed role from conducting casework—assisting women with individual workplace issues—to providing information about their rights and entitlements.

Ms GEORGE—Where would women who are not union members, whom you help now, go for assistance?

Ms Dann—I do not know. We have argued that it is really the casework that gives us the expertise to assist women to know their rights and entitlements, so we would argue strongly to

continue at least some level of service. I think the federal government are indicating that that will be tightened up after the next funding round.

CHAIR—Let me get the straight. Are you saying that the federal government are likely to say to you that you may not do casework with the funding you receive?

Ms Dann—They are not keen on it; they have made that clear. We do not have any funding proposal to look at yet; that is just in our discussions.

Ms GEORGE—You wonder how low-income women would be able to afford legal advice or any other professional advice. Maybe that is something we could take up in the report.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We are very grateful to you.

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

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 3.34 pm