

Chapter 3

Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Portfolio

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

3.1 This chapter outlines key issues discussed during the 2012-2013 additional estimates hearings for the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Portfolio.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 14 February 2013. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters
- Families and Children
- Housing
- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Community Capability and the Vulnerable
- Seniors
- Disability and Carers
- Women
- Workplace Gender Equality Agency

*Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters*¹

3.3 Proceedings commenced with the Chair noting that questions on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) would be open for discussion during the hearing despite the current inquiry by the committee into the NDIS legislation. Mr Finn Pratt, Secretary of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, tabled an updated organisational chart for the department.

3.4 Senator Fifield inquired into communications methods used to raise awareness of the Schoolkids Bonus payments and the Household Assistance Package, focusing on contracts between the department and companies contracted to develop and test advertisements and to conduct market research.

3.5 There was then a discussion of the department's audit findings. The secretary noted that he was 'moderately pleased' with the zero audit findings by the Australian

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 4–16.

National Audit Office (ANAO), the best in the department's history. The committee also discussed the ANAO legislative finding relating to potential breaches of section 83 of the Constitution arising from adjusted mining royalty payments to the Aboriginals Benefit Account. Departmental officers noted that the department is pursuing legislative amendments with regards to this issue. The zero audit findings and the potential breaches of section 83 of the Constitution have been covered in this committee's Report on Annual Reports (2013 No. 1).² Departmental officers also clarified their approach to potential breaches of section 83 in relation to the payment of the Family Tax Benefit.

3.6 Senators Fifield and Siewert asked questions about the government response to the social and community services (SACS) award case. Departmental officers confirmed that the government has committed \$2.8 billion in assistance to organisations over forward estimates and that \$8 million has been paid out to date. Questions on Notice were accepted relating to the organisations who have received offers for funding, and specifically relating to Western Australian organisations who have taken up those offers.

3.7 The Committee also discussed the following items:

- Variations in the department's forward estimates;
- Funding directed through the department in relation to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; and
- The Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission.

Families and Children³

3.8 The committee directed the majority of questions under this outcome to the efficiency and effectiveness of the various communications methods in relation to the Schoolkids bonus. Members of the committee queried the use a mass media campaign to advertise an automatic payment. Departmental officers outlined the strategic purpose of the advertising campaign and clarified that the advertising is targeted to informing people about why they are receiving a payment. The information campaign sought to avert the possibility of the Department of Human Services, who would be administering the payments, being inundated with a large volume of calls from recipients. The department took to provide research on notice to the committee regarding the relative merits of an advertising campaign and a mail-out.

3.9 Ms Bell, Branch Manager, Communications and Media, provided the committee with figures on expenditure to date and anticipated expenditure in relation to advertising the schoolkids bonus, and undertook to provide details of the tender process for advertising, and a breakdown of monies spent. The department also

2 Community Affairs Legislation Committee, *Report on Annual Reports (No. 1 of 2013)*, March 2013, p. 14.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 16–26, 34–36.

undertook on notice to determine whether they are able to provide the research and media strategies provided by the media contractors, the detail of cohorts in focus groups and a breakdown by jurisdiction of the amount of payments. In response to questions from Senator Furner, Mr Whitecross, Branch Manager, Family Payments and Child Support, clarified that more families are receiving larger payments under the schoolkids bonus than were under the Education Tax Refund, and noted that over the life of a child, a family would receive around \$8 000 in schoolkids bonus payments.

3.10 Senator Cash inquired into promotional materials around family payments. Ms Bell clarified that the kits in question related to a range of family measures, not solely the schoolkids bonus. Ms Bell took a number of questions on notice relating to the specific products included in the kits and the research behind the kits.

3.11 The committee had questions relating to the numbers of families receiving Family Tax Benefit Parts A and B, and the eligibility requirements including immunisation requirements, for the Family Tax Benefit. The committee also discussed the number of people accessing Dad and Partner payments and Paid parental leave, and the funding arrangements for Family and Relationship Services Australia (FRSA), including the funding for the FRSA national conference and senior executives forum.

*Housing*⁴

3.12 The committee began under this outcome by seeking clarification of the responsibilities of the Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary. Mr Pratt noted that the breakdown of responsibilities between the Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary are still being finalised but confirmed that Minister Butler is responsible for housing and homelessness and Parliamentary Secretary Parke is responsible for social housing and homelessness. Mr Pratt took to provide a more detailed breakdown of responsibilities to the committee on notice.

3.13 Ms Carroll, Deputy Secretary, responded to the committee's questions on the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on housing and homelessness and the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) with updates on these agreements, noting that the NPA is still being negotiated, while the NAHA is an ongoing agreement subject to a funding review. Senator Payne asked the department to provide on notice advice from the minister of what they intend to do with the NAHA advisory committee.

3.14 Senator Payne also asked for an update on social housing initiative dwellings. Mr Palmer, Manager, Housing and Homelessness, provided this, noting that 99.4 per cent of approved dwellings have been completed. Ms Pickering, Branch Manager, Commonwealth State Relations, provided the committee with information on the review conducted by KPMG into the initiative.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 26–34.

- 3.15 The committee also discussed the following items:
- consultation processes around community housing;
 - the bulk verification process for community housing rents;
 - engagement of indigenous community housing organisations;
 - the Public Housing Rent Deduction Scheme;
 - the Building Better Regional Cities program; and
 - the National Rental Affordability Scheme

*Australian Institute of Family Studies*⁵

3.16 The Institute outlined their process of setting strategic directions and directed the committee to their annual report which details the membership of the Institute's advisory council.

3.17 The Institute then discussed the work that is being undertaken in the area of grandparents providing care for children, noting that they are collecting information from various research and studies including the longitudinal study of Australian children.

3.18 Senator Siewert inquired into the input from stakeholders into the Institute's past adoption experience study. The Institute noted that it had received input from a range of different affected stakeholders in the study but that these were kept as separate sources of information and that therefore groups did not comment on statements from other groups. The Institute assured the committee that there should be no concern that service providers were given extra opportunity to comment.

*Community Capability and the Vulnerable*⁶

3.19 The committee began with questions concerning gambling reform including the pokies trial in ACT, and consultations with the states about what federal regulation may entail. In relation to the ACT trial, Ms Croke, Acting Group Manager, Problem Gambling and SACS, gave details on the establishment, membership and meetings of the oversight committee for the trial, and undertook to provide the minutes and meeting papers for the meetings. Departmental officers took questions concerning control mechanisms for funds received as compensation by clubs, and money to date spent by the Commonwealth on the trial.

3.20 Regarding wider consultation with states around federal regulation of problem gambling, Senator Cash asked the department to provide on notice the dates of those meetings. The committee also discussed the consultation around and status of the drafting of pre-commitment regulations. Ms Croke noted that the department is

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 36–39.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 39–58.

working on a consultation strategy, the form of which may include a discussion paper, to be released at the end of March or April this year, followed by consultation.

3.21 The committee also discussed the expert advice provided to the department on pre-commitment and the response of manufacturers to this advice, the post-implementation review of the trial, the level of expertise in the Problem Gambling Taskforce, research into problem gambling, and the powers and staff of the National Gambling Regulator.

3.22 An extended discussion of income management followed, with a range of views being expressed by the committee and the department over the effectiveness or otherwise of the measure. Senator Siewert asked questions about the report of the Social Policy Research Centre, which held that there was "no measurable evidence of any positive impact of income management".⁷ The department noted that this report had mixed findings.⁸ There was also discussion concerning difficulty in effectively measuring outcomes for income support programs and the issue of data scarcity precluding a thorough evaluation of the program over the period of its operation.

*Seniors*⁹

3.23 Senator Fierravanti-Wells asked the department to provide a breakdown of recipients of the age pension for a number of variables including receipt of part and full pensions, male and female, and singles and couples. The department also provided further data on staffing levels in the seniors area, the seniors supplement, department of veterans affairs and seniors healthcare cardholders, and recipients of couple payments.

3.24 Ms Foster, Branch Manager, Seniors and Means Test provided an update on the seniors work bonus and pension reforms, noting that aged-care pensions increased by around \$172 a fortnight for single people and \$182 a fortnight for couples combined. The committee also discussed the effect of the Household Assistance Package.

*Disability and Carers*¹⁰

3.25 The committee began questions in outcome five with a comprehensive discussion of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the NDIS Launch Transition Agency. Senator Fifield commenced with questions on the budget for the scheme and for the agency, and inquired into the difference between the phases for the scheme outlined by the Productivity Commission and the Government. The committee

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, p. 51.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, p. 52.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 58–60.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 60–84.

followed this with questions concerning access to mainstream services by persons within the NDIS, and the timeframe for release of draft rules for the scheme.

3.26 The committee queried the rationale for the apparent extensive use of delegated legislative instruments. Ms Wilson, Branch Manager, Disability and Carers Policy, noted that the practice of containing detail in disallowable instruments or statutory instruments under framework or enabling legislation allows for greater flexibility in the implementation and allows rules to be changed quickly if this becomes appropriate.

3.27 The committee also discussed appeal mechanisms, governance arrangements, the age cut-off, carers, the National Injury Insurance Scheme, the NDIS Launch Transition Agency and the contingency planning and preparations underway in the launch regions.

3.28 In relation to mental health, Senator Fierravanti-Wells confirmed with the department that it is still responsible for selected components of the National Mental Health Reform Package — Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMs) service, Family Mental Health Support Services, Mental Health Respite, and Carer Support — and sought details around expenditure, projections over the forward estimates, and client profiles for these programs. Senator Fierravanti-Wells also sought details on the number of people on the disability support pension that have a mental illness, and the number of those clients who are working up to 30 hours per week.

3.29 The committee inquired into the new assessment processes for the disability support pension (DSP) and Newstart, and asked for the percentage of DSP claimants with a severe impairment. The committee also sought an update on the Federal Court case concerning the business services wage assessment tool. Departmental officers outlined what they regarded as the implications and consequences of the finding and the process for appeal. The committee also discussed the issue of people entering into and retiring from Australian Disability Enterprises.

Women and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency¹¹

3.30 The Office for Women and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) were called together for the final outcome discussed in the hearing. The WGEA provided information on the update of their website to reflect changes to the legislation underpinning the agency and confirmed that the majority of calls the agency is receiving concern the requirements on employers for the current reporting year. Ms Conway, Director of the WGEA, outlined the Agency's involvement in developing gender equality indicators, which has included consultation with stakeholders and meeting with Ms Carol Schwartz, appointed by the minister to conduct the consultation.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 84–90.

3.31 Senator Cash questioned the Office for Women about the department's role in the BoardLinks initiative, noting her concern to ensure that the initiatives outcomes were monitored effectively.¹²

3.32 The committee also discussed progress on the national data collection and reporting framework, partnerships with music festivals in The Line program, the domestic implementation of the national action plan on UN Security Council resolution 1325, the Board Diversity Scholarship program, the UN forum in March,¹³ and women's alliances.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, p. 85.

13 The fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 4–15 March 2013.

