

DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT — BUDGET

Motion

Resumed from 26 February on the following motion moved by Hon Sally Talbot —

That this house condemns the Barnett government for failing to quarantine essential front-line services from budget cuts, in particular the Department for Child Protection and Family Support.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [2.08 pm]: Mr President, as you would know very well, it is not ideal to extend these debates over a number of weeks, but that is how things have panned out with my initial remarks about this motion that has been moved in my name. My recollection is that when we adjourned debate on this motion a couple of weeks ago, I was in the process of explaining to the house that although I was not going to enumerate line by line the cuts to front-line services that have taken place during recent years, particularly under this minister, I could not but refer to a couple of them specifically. The rest of them will be left to my colleagues over the next hours of this debate. I think when we adjourned the debate last time I was speaking specifically about the government's decision to cut \$615 000 from the provision of emergency relief—that is, the particular form of emergency relief that was provided through the offices of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support specifically to people who literally found themselves without money in their purses and wallets to feed their children, to pay for their immediate transport and the like. In other words, they were people genuinely facing hardship in the very short term.

So the government took the extraordinary move to cut some \$600 000 out of the budget. It was not a vast amount of money, but it is the sort of cut that hits people very hard when they are facing very difficult times. People who are extremely vulnerable face these cuts. I gave the example of the Collie Emergency Relief Centre run by Ray Hebbard and Grace Pears, who were horrified to find out that that money had been cut from the child protection budget. They are quoted in the *Collie Mail* dated 5 September 2013 as saying that —

“It certainly will affect us. They used to be able to go to the Department of Child Protection if they lost their wallets or were in need of money,” ...

“It doesn't say money is getting handed on to services like that. It's going to have to come out of what we get here.”

That cut took people very much by surprise. I would go so far to say that that it took the minister by surprise because her comment at the time was that she was apparently unaware of the effect that that cut would have and was not prepared to make comments to the media that morning when it expressed the community's concern.

The other aspect to the cuts made in the budget context over recent years has to do with staffing levels in the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. I know that there might be an argument to say that keeping staffing levels at a constant level—keeping the same number of staff—is not actually a cut to front-line services, but clearly all the literature put out by the department indicates very clearly that demands on services are increasing. Demands on the people who provided those front-line services is increasing, including most vitally the implementation of the basic mechanisms of child protection itself—the Signs of Safety procedures that the department quite rightly lauds as making a substantial difference to the quality of protection that children are provided with when they first come into care, in that initial assessment process. The very people who administer this service are not being assisted to do their job because of this government's cost cutting.

When I was the shadow minister for the portfolio of child protection, I asked many questions in question time in the house and in the context of budget estimates about why the number of child protection officers remained constant and did not keep pace with the extra demands for services. We were never able to get an adequate explanation of why that was the case. The number of child protection officers has pretty much remained static over the past six years or so. Along with that failure to increase the number of child protection officers doing that front-line work for the department are the anecdotal reports that child protection officers are overloaded with case work. Once again, I asked any number of questions asking for details about that overloading. We all know that a procedure is in place that basically limits the load to about 12 cases per officer, which can occasionally be extended to 15 in some circumstances, particularly when all the children from the same family are in care and it makes sense for the siblings to report to the same child protection officer. The answers to all those questions, some without notice and some on notice, were always that no case officers were overloaded. But that does not accord with the anecdotal evidence that comes back to us from the officers at the front-line. I draw the attention of honourable members to one report in particular—I have a whole file here of reports—in the *Canning Times* on 3 September 2013. The headline on page 6 is “Union concerned over ‘heavy load’” and the article reads as follows —

CHILD protection workers in the Cannington district are exceeding the number of cases they are recommended to handle as they battle to keep up with demand according to the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association.

That is the employee representative union —

At the start of August ...

That is August 2013 —

there were 564 child protection cases in the Cannington area, an increase of 38 from June.

While the Department for Child Protection and Family (DCPF) figures have shown an upward trend, with an increasing number of cases reported each month, the number of staff has remained the same.

The union reported 20 staff members in Cannington were dealing with more than the maximum number of 15 cases at once and 12 staff in Armadale were also exceeding the limit.

Just think of what that does. Of course, our immediate concern is with the quality, the standard or the level of protection given to the children who have been subject to, or at least an allegation of, some kind of abuse or neglect. Of course, that is our prime concern, but just wind back one step from that and look at the stress that child protection workers are placed under. Of all the workers in the public sector, we would expect that child protection officers working for the department would be amongst those who are the most precious and for whom the government would fight the hardest to maintain proper working conditions, but sadly that is not the case. Under this government we have seen the stress and the workload increasing exponentially as more and more work is piled onto them.

Hon Helen Morton: That is according to the union.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: That is according to the representatives of the minister's employees. The minister ought to give due weight to those reports coming directly to her. I know that she has an immediate line of contact with the union, or at least I know that the union tries to have an immediate line of contact with the minister and her officers. The minister should take these reports very seriously because they are about employees of the department who have been placed under these kinds of stresses. We know from the data coming from the minister and her department that child protection officers are required to deal with an increase in not only the volume of work, but also the severity of cases. If members read the latest budget statements, and there is even a reference to it in the midyear review, they will see that the number of cases in which children are subject to more extreme circumstances is increasing, as is the number of children with special needs. The minister knows all this and has spoken about this aspect of the delivery of child protection services in this place many times and yet she does not seem able to give effect to improving the conditions of the staff who are handling this increased workload and stress. That is a very important sense in which the delivery of front-line services is failing under this government.

I want to bring a particular case to the attention of the house in general and the minister in particular. I will not name any names, and I hope I can do this without divulging even the region in which this person was working. It has come to my attention that there is a very senior, very experienced and well regarded child protection officer working in the department in one of the offices outside the metropolitan area. She went to a place in which it is not easy to get people with that kind of experience to work because the circumstances are difficult, the demands are great, and the distances that must be travelled are enormous. Frankly, from just looking at the data that is associated with this case I will say in the most general terms that every country member in this place knows that our child protection officers in the regional child protection offices are amongst the most severely put upon of any people working in the public sector. When this person agreed to transfer to the regional office, they were welcomed with open arms by the local officers and the community. That person spent only a couple of years in that regional office, despite the fact that they offered to stay, they had a full case load and they were clearly working on innovative programs with other public sector service providers in the community. When that person had to return to the metropolitan area, they were told that if they wanted to continue working in that regional office, they would have to reapply for their job. This is a child protection officer with decades of experience and an absolutely unimpeached record of service to the department. I am happy to go behind the Chair and give the minister more details about this case because I think it is an absolute disgrace that we are losing people like this from some of the most difficult areas of child protection in this state due to some kind of bureaucratic enforcement of a process that totally escapes me. Why tell someone who is transferred to a regional office that if they want to stay in that regional office they must reapply for their job? It is a complete failure of the system and a complete failure of the government's will to try to deliver, particularly to regional areas because that is my special interest, the quality of service —

Hon Helen Morton: Did the person stay?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I told the minister that I am happy to speak to her off the record when I can give her more information about this specific case. I beg the minister to look more closely at this. It seems to me that we are losing some of the most capable and experienced people who are delivering these front-line services. We are losing them because of some kind of —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Let us conduct the debate according to the rules that are laid out in our standing orders. That means one member on their feet at each time.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Let us move on to a broader question. As I said, I know my colleagues are anxious to participate in this debate, so I will leave it to them to catalogue some of the cuts to front-line services that people are experiencing in their electorates. I ask the government a broader question about the whole issue of service delivery. Watching the way the government has been proceeding now for five years, and into the sixth year, since 2008 when it took office, will the government still be a major service provider in another few years? The minister knows exactly what I mean by this. We have all participated in debates about this brave new world of person-centred approaches, client-centred approaches, consumer-directed care—whatever we want to call it; this brave new world of service provision and where we are going to be. Quite properly, I think this is a very interesting way of delivering services. We are not going to be providing funding to agencies that provide a kind of smorgasbord service so that a customer, client or patient might walk along the metaphorical self-service counter and pick which services or resources appeal to them or which services or resources fit their particular circumstances. The money will be going to the individual and the individual will then be in a position to demand from service providers the particular services that they require.

I have had conversations with many people who have had a great deal of experience all around the world of implementing this new model of service delivery, particularly in Canada and the United Kingdom where things are a good few years ahead of anything in Australia. The interesting thing that they are all reporting is that when one initially walks into an agency and starts talking about consumer-directed care or person-centred approaches, every agency in the world proclaims that it already does that: “We already listen to our customers and our clients. We already have a focus on delivering the services that people are coming to us and asking for.” I was told over and over again in this initial round of meetings that after three or four hours of talking about how these models work in practice, almost every agency then turns around and has a real “aha” moment, admitting that while they thought they were delivering services in that way, in fact, they are not. Their eyes are opened, the blinkers fall from their eyes and they can see that there is a better way of doing things.

But I think the problem comes when we add a good dose of this new person-centred approach and then mix it around in the melting pot with the Barnett Liberal–National government’s approach to privatisation, de-funding government provision of services and looking to the private sector to provide those services. We have had numerous debates in this place, some as recently as two weeks ago, about what happens to service provision when we start looking to groups such as Serco to provide those basic services. What happens to accountability and the standard of the service that is provided? We have to start asking very serious questions and demanding answers from this conservative government about whether it still intends to be a service provider while it is in power. We all know that at the moment a trial is being undertaken of the provision of basic child protection services by the private sector. The minister knows that pilot programs on the delivery of those basic child protection services are running at the moment.

When I refer to this change, this brave new world that is coming, I do not mean to cast aspersions on some of the NGOs who are providing these services. We have to be very careful about the way we have these discussions. It certainly seems to me from talking to some of the private sector agencies, particularly the NGOs, that over the past five years, because of the resources that they are able to draw upon, and because of the far superior level of support they are able to provide their staff in many cases, they are rapidly getting to a position in which they can genuinely provide a better service than the government is able to provide. There are numerous examples of this but one that I think should be of particular concern to the government relates to IT and the collection of data. We hear the government talking frequently about the way that it wants to gather data. I was shocked a couple of months ago when, in answer to a question asked in this place, I think by Hon Stephen Dawson, the minister informed the house that some of the data collection on quality of life and reports on the department’s experience of dealing with children in care was done on a computerised questionnaire where a departmental officer was available to assist children to fill in this questionnaire should they need assistance. From what we could see about the information provided by the minister, children as young as four and five were being asked to fill in computerised questionnaires about the quality of care they were receiving. If we compare that with some of the record collection and data processing that is done by some of the private sector agencies, the NGOs, theirs is far superior to that. By way of example, I draw honourable members’ attention to the CREATE Foundation’s survey, which is clearly collecting a different sort of data from the data currently being collected by the department. If we get to the stage in a few years’ time when it is perfectly obvious that we get a better service by

going outside the government sector, we have perpetrated a huge trick on the electorate of Western Australia because that is not what the electorate wants. The community of Western Australia—the electors of Western Australia—want the government to be accountable for every dollar that is spent, particularly in areas such as child protection, mental health and disability services—all those front-line services that are so key in helping people who are particularly vulnerable. The community expects a high degree of accountability. The community expects the very best services to be delivered to those people, and it expects those services to be delivered by the government. If the government runs down its service provision to such an extent that better service can be provided by the private sector, it will have played a gigantic trick on us and I do not think the electorate of Western Australia will stand for it.

The government must understand the difference between what happens to an individual, an organisation or a corporation in terms of broad data about social disadvantage. The epidemiological data relating to the provision of health services is of the same qualitative type. There is a difference between the kind of data that is collected about the community and the evidence that comes from the consumers of these services—from vulnerable people who have gone in search of help and not been able to find it. These are the sorts of examples that I am sure honourable members on the other side of the house must hear on a weekly basis. I know everybody on this side of the house hears these stories, and I cannot believe that community members come only to members of the Labor Party to tell their stories. The stories are about the inflexibility of the services provided by government, and I will talk particularly about the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. I refer to the case of a woman who lost custody of her child because of what is perceived to be a failure to comply with the orders that are supposed to be enforced by her caseworker. I will share with honourable members one of the examples that were given to me. The woman had undertaken to be home at a certain time, when the caseworker would call to do the regular assessment. The caseworker called at the house and found that the woman was not there. After initial inquiries were made and the woman could not be located, moves were made to revisit the nature of the agreement. What frightened the woman who talked to the agency, which then furnished me with this example, was that she had taken out a violence restraining order on her partner. She had been advised by the service that was helping her on a day-to-day basis that if the partner ever appeared, she should do her very best to remove herself from that situation. She had removed herself and had taken herself off to a relative's place, where she felt safe, so she was of course not at home at the time she was supposed to be there to meet the caseworker. The minister may well stand in this place and say that that would have been resolved within the hour as there was a perfectly adequate explanation and no damage would have been done to the existing arrangement, but that was not the case. It is one of those examples that members on this side hear on a regular basis of an inflexibility in the system and a failure to take into account the individual who is going through these dramatic experiences. This is not a criticism of individual caseworkers, because I understand how, in an overstretched, stressed department, the level of aversion to risk is obviously higher than it might be if people were properly resourced to do their job. But in a case in which somebody has made genuine attempts to change their life around—they have stopped using illegal substances, have found a partner who is employed, and are doing everything one could ask of an individual human being to make their life go down a better track—they still get caught up in those bureaucratic processes whereby children are taken away.

There seems to be a complete lack of understanding on the part of this minister and this government that every case has to be treated on its individual merits. I must say that one of the great sadnesses for me during the period when I was shadow Minister for Child Protection was seeing that often it is agencies working in the private sector, agencies that are not funded by government, that are able to respond in that way. When we put that together with the story I shared with the house just now about experienced child protection officers being subject to that kind of bureaucratic nonsense, it is a sure sign that government service delivery in this area is not up to the standard that the community expects.

I know that I will have some time at the end of this debate to do some summarising, but I want to finish up by saying that if ever there was an area in which front-line services ought to be knitted together by that kind of joined-up government that we all talk about yet nobody seems to deliver, it is this area of child protection. Often we see ministers in this place and the other place standing up and talking about their view from inside their carefully barricaded position. We have a unique advantage in this house in that we have a minister who looks after child protection, mental health and disability services. The Euler's circles quite dramatically intercept in those three portfolio areas. Yet we see that the area of child protection is effectively siloed from issues, for instance, the funding of education. If members do not read any other material or listen to anything else and listen only to debates in this place, they will have heard about the effects of cuts to education in areas that intersect with child protection, mental health and the provision of disability services. The first line of cuts we have seen came in schools. Workers who were directly involved with enabling children who are vulnerable or suffering particular kinds of disadvantage to cope with our education system were the first people to go out of schools. Have we seen this Minister for Child Protection giving any sign that she talks to the honourable member next to whom she sits in this place about the need to stop cutting those services from education, because they affect the

very people for whom she is trying to deliver services? Have we seen any sign from this minister that she has talked to the minister in the other place with responsibility for housing about the need to provide affordable social housing for people who are at risk of homelessness? We have seen this minister and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs duck and weave about this new subcommittee that has been set up to deal with Indigenous issues in this state, without delivering a single thing for those most vulnerable people in our community. Sadly, what we see being played out on a daily basis is that all these government ministers are quite happy to sit within their own tightly barricaded little silos. I know what the Minister for Child Protection will say when she stands to respond to this debate. She will talk about the money that she has been spending on services. It is not about that; it is about improving the quality of life of people who are amongst the most vulnerable in our community. The reports about those front-line services are that they are not being delivered.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [2.38 pm]: I did contemplate when I was thinking about making a contribution to this motion whether it is broad enough for me to talk about cuts to schools, because it states —

That this house condemns the Barnett government for failing to quarantine essential front-line services from budget cuts, in particular the Department for Child Protection and Family Support.

However, I thought there was a stronger argument for me to make some contributions on child protection, because although the services provided by schools are front-line, it is a universal service and not a service that is responding to an emergency, if you like, such as a child being at risk, although things happen at schools as well. Nevertheless, what really motivated me was the debate last week when the Commissioner of Police wrote an opinion piece about which I was involved in an exchange of tweets. My colleague, Ben Wyatt, the member for Victoria Park, responded, in a tweet, to the commissioner's opinion piece on the need for more children to be taken into care because they are living in families that are so dysfunctional, asking whether it is really the way things ought to be going. I responded to that tweet with "history says no". A whole lot of commentary and questions were unleashed on me and a request to do some media, which I could not do on the day I was asked because I was visiting a school. But I wanted the opportunity to respond to what the commissioner had said, and I think this motion has given me the opportunity to do that.

I want to begin by saying that the last budget the Barnett government produced was the third in a row with no additional child protection caseworkers. The budget papers demonstrate that. It is remarkable given that the eight or nine budgets prior to the last three budgets had increased the number of child protection caseworkers. There are three service areas within the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. The first service is "Supporting Children and Young People in the Chief Executive Officer's Care", which budget paper No 2, page 565, describes as —

Services for the safety, support and wellbeing of children and young people in care of the CEO.

The second service in "Protecting Children and Young People from Abuse and Harm", which budget paper No 2, page 565, describes as —

Services to assess concerns about the wellbeing of children and young people and respond appropriately, including child protection investigations, the provision of intensive support services and applications for court orders.

The third service area is those services relating more broadly to family support. It is the early intervention programs, not the pointy end of child protection. The pointy end of child protection is service 2, in which investigations responding to allegations of abuse are done and intensive support services are provided, and service 1, in which children have been taken into care and it is made sure that they are looked after properly.

In the budget papers 2011–12, 2012–13 and 2013–14 the full-time equivalent employees, child protection caseworkers, sit in services 1 and 2. In the 2011–12 budget papers, the estimated actual number of FTEs in service 1 in 2010–11 is 1 086. The 2011–12 budget target for service 1 FTEs is 1 086—the same number. That is the first year when there was no increase in child protection caseworkers in service 1. In service 2, "Protecting Children and Young People from Abuse and Harm", in which the investigations are done and if necessary intensive support services are provided, the estimated actual FTEs for 2010–11 is 701 and the 2011–12 budget target is 701—it is the same. In the 2012–13 budget papers for service 1 the estimated actual for the year 2011–12 is 1 087—that is one more than the year before—and the budget target for 2012–13 is 1 087. In service 2, in the 2012–13 budget papers, the estimated actual for 2011–12 is 744, and the budget target for 2012–13 is 744—the same number. The 2013–14 budget papers list service 1 full-time equivalent employees as 1 085—a drop of two. Let us say, adding one and dropping two equals about the same in the grand scheme of over 1 000 FTEs. In the 2013–14 budget papers for service 2, "Protecting Children and Young People from Abuse and Harm", the FTE number is 743, which is the same as the year before.

Personally, I find it remarkable that there has been no increase in the number of caseworkers over that time because, unfortunately, the cases presenting are getting more, not less complex. I know the director general's response to this—I heard him say it—is that the department is getting smarter about how it does its business and the reflection of no change in the FTE numbers does not tell one anything because the department is smarter with how it uses its FTE numbers. However, when people like the Chief Justice and the Commissioner for Police give real-life examples of the enormous and unacceptable number of children residing in dysfunctional families, I think we have to move beyond accepting that we are doing things as well as they can possibly be done. Nevertheless, I take issue with some of what the commissioner said and I will talk about why I do so.

There are really sound reasons why the Department for Child Protection and Family Support should be exempted from the kind of across-the-board cuts that can be applied to agencies that deal less with emergencies and cases of risk and harm to children. Child protection requires vigilance, and constant and consistent application of resources and effort. Child protection is tough work. Every single day child protection caseworkers make decisions about things the rest of us do not want to think about, never mind actually make decisions about. We have to recognise that they are dealing with the very basest of human frailty, and incredibly difficult and confronting situations. There is very strong and solid evidence behind modern child protection casework practice, but there is also human frailty. There is human frailty in the people that child protection practice is applied to, because despite all the support services and things that can be done around them, there are still people who will do things that continue to appal us. There is a bit of luck as well. That means the very best evidence-based decision-making can still get it wrong. There is strong case practice and science, but there is also a bit of art to it—a subjective decision is made calculating the risk. Child protection workers balance the devastating impacts of removing children, no matter how difficult the family circumstances seem, and the lifelong effects that removing a child from what they know their family to be can be, taking into account the risk of lifelong disadvantage, versus immediately keeping them safe and hoping that everything that is put around the child can make up for the fact they have been ripped from their family. Despite the terrible things that have gone on, they still actually love their mum and dad. They want the problem to be fixed; they do not want to be removed from the situation.

When governments mess around with the resourcing of child protection, really serious things can happen. It is one of, or a combination of things. Caseloads can get too high and when child protection workers are juggling too many cases, things can slip between the cracks and wrong decisions can be made. There are not enough foster carers because they think it is too hard, there is not enough support in place and they do not want any part of it. That is putting aside that these days people's attitudes about taking into their home a strange child who may come with all sorts of baggage as a result of what they have been through—people are highly risk adverse and do not want to bring children like that into their homes. There is not enough back-of-house support for the child protection workers, so they get overloaded because they are trying to manage all their paperwork and do not provide enough intervention for families at risk. All those things can happen, or one of those things can happen, when we start to mess with the resources in Child Protection and Family Support. At any one of those pressure points things can go terribly, terribly wrong. That is why we have to be consistent and vigilant with the resources we provide to child protection.

I want to canvass a little of the debate that happened last week. Commissioner O'Callaghan wrote an opinion piece that appeared in *The West Australian* on 1 March. He stated —

Parents simply do not deserve to have charge of their children and it is time to ask ourselves whether, in fact, they should.

He then detailed some cases of young children who had allegedly committed crimes and who the police had taken back to their parents, who had committed 1 000 more crimes than the children had. He raises the question: what are we putting that child back into and what hope does a child have if we are putting them back into that situation? The bottom line of his article was —

It would be fair to ask why these children are allowed to remain in the custody of their parents whose track records indicates they are simply not capable of looking after their children, nor are ever likely to be.

He ended his opinion piece by stating —

Maybe what I am advocating will be seen by some as heresy but I cannot help thinking that if our only response to children committing crimes is to put them into the justice system we are unlikely to have much impact on the spiralling (very) young offender crime rate.

I would go as far as to say that the children referred to have absolutely no chance of living a normal existence if we leave them where they are.

He is not the first person to say that. Amanda Banks wrote an article today canvassing some of the same issues. She referred to the 2012 comments of WA Chief Justice, Wayne Martin, when he questioned “whether current child protection policies were an overreaction to the Stolen Generation.” He was referring to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, particularly among youth offenders. The article states —

“There is no doubt that some Aboriginal children are living in appalling conditions in different parts of Australia with the knowledge and acquiescence of child protection authorities,”

That is pretty damning, but it is true. We know children are living in some areas of Australia who, by any measure, are not living in acceptable circumstances. There is a call for greater intervention and for what I think Karl O’Callaghan said most starkly—to intervene with the purpose of taking more children into care. I respect the Commissioner of Police as a Commissioner of Police, and I understand that from his point of view statistics come across his desk every day that show him the drivers of his workload. The drivers of his workload are these families in which there is a long history of recidivist low-level antisocial but unacceptable crime where children are living. He is seeing his officers chewing up his resources taking children back to families where he knows nobody will be providing adequate supervision. I can sense in him frustration in that. I respect the way he does his job but he is not an expert in child protection. Although he, like everyone else, is entitled to his point of view, and I can understand how he got to his point of view, there are very sound reasons for being cautious about taking children into care. If members ever needed to be reminded of it, they should have listened to *AM* this morning and read the articles in *The Melbourne Age* about what is happening in Victoria’s child protection system. I will talk a little bit about that in a minute. The balance we have to get right is to learn the lessons from the stolen generation; we have to learn the lessons from sexual abuse in institutional care as we are hearing day by day from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse that is on right now; we have to learn the lessons here in Western Australia from the St Andrews Hostel situation in Katanning; and we most definitely have to learn the lessons from what is going on in Victoria today. Each of those circumstances says that when we provide group care for children in a residential setting, we have to be extremely cautious about how we do that. When adults are in charge 24/7, with no individual advocate for the child in the way a good parent would be, those children are at risk. They are already at risk because they have been taken into care, as was the case with the stolen generation and those children in institutions the subject of the royal commission. It is not the case with the St Andrews Hostel in Katanning where they were still in the care of their parents; they were at a boarding facility while they attended school. We have to learn the lessons because all the evidence—all of it—says there is the capacity for serious flaws in institutional settings and serious lifelong damage crosses generations as a result of disrupted and broken family ties. Although it is easy to say, “You know what, you need a licence to have a dog but you don’t need a licence to have a child and we should just rip them out of that house and put them into this facility”, we have to think very carefully about doing that because all the evidence says that we do not do institutionalised care all that well. We do not have a good history of it. That is being played out now in the royal commission and in Victoria.

Michelle Scott, the former Commissioner for Children and Young People here in Western Australia, made the point once when there was a to do in the child protection area. She expressed it far more eloquently than I remember it, but she made the point that because of what they have already been through we owe children who are in care a higher standard of care than we would perhaps provide for children not in care. They have already seen things and had things done to them that no child should ever go through. We rip them out of that in the name of protecting them, so we have to make sure not that the care they receive is adequate, or of the same standard as any other child receives, but that it is of a higher standard because of what they have already been through. That is why we cannot muck around with the funding for Child Protection and Family Services and that is why, with the greatest respect for the Commissioner of Police, Karl O’Callaghan, I think he is wrong. We should not take more children out of homes for the sake of it as a quick response to a set of statistics that tell us too many children are going back into homes where they are not getting safe parenting. We need to do more to make sure they are getting safe parenting and to improve institutionalised care and about getting foster carers. There is no silver bullet. As a former Minister for Child Protection, I agree that there is a bit of a culture of overcompensating for what happened in the stolen generation. I think that still exists in the department. I think people with the greatest of intention are terrified they will be accused of repeating the stolen generation situation, and sometimes they do not act as quickly as they should. I understand the Chief Justice’s motivation for saying that, but with the greatest respect for him, it is not a silver bullet by any stretch of the imagination.

I want to touch on what is going on in Victoria because if we think that taking kids into care is a solution, we need to look at what is happening in Victoria right now. This morning a report states that police in Victoria have identified 30 to 40 children in state care, some as young as 12 years old, who have been sexually abused and are subject to paedophile gangs who are offering them sometimes something as small as cigarettes, mobile phones or shopping trips in return for sexual favours. These children are in residential care. The reports tell us that the particular group of children we are talking about includes children whose behavioural challenges are such that

they cannot be placed in foster care; they need to be in a facility with a high level of supervision. They are therefore in residential facilities—small group homes run by non-government organisations. Those homes are not run by the government; they are run by NGOs. To people who think that the solution to everything about dysfunctional families is to take children into state care and put them into group homes run by well-meaning NGOs, here is the evidence: it can happen anywhere. It is about vigilance and it is about appropriate supervision. There is no silver bullet. If people think that kids are safe when they come into care, they need to think again, because government after government after government has examples of substantiated cases of abuse happening in care. The situation in Victoria, honestly, made me almost speechless when I heard the first version on the earlier broadcast of *AM*. I then listened to the later broadcast of *AM* on my way into Parliament and was horrified. Between 30 and 40 children as young as 12 years have now been identified, and Victoria expects there to be more. This has been going on for the past 18 months. Some children have been transported between towns and even interstate, and some abuse has been filmed by the paedophiles. These incidents have occurred over the past 18 months, in particular in suburbs around Dandenong and Shepparton, which are in rural Victoria. But rural Victoria ain't like rural Western Australia; it is about an hour and a half or two hours from the CBD of Melbourne.

Hon Peter Katsambanis: Not far from Mildura?

Hon SUE ELLERY: Yes.

Hon Peter Katsambanis: Mildura is seven hours away.

Hon SUE ELLERY: But this is Dandenong.

Hon Peter Katsambanis: Dandenong is in the suburbs.

Hon SUE ELLERY: Exactly.

Hon Peter Katsambanis: It's not rural, it's not a region, it's a suburb.

Hon SUE ELLERY: I understand that, but the other place the program talked about was Shepparton.

Hon Peter Katsambanis: That's three hours away.

Hon SUE ELLERY: It is three hours away if someone drives very slowly.

The point I am making is that this matter is not so far from sight that it can be dismissed by saying, "Oh well, you know, it's a long way away. It's hard to deliver services in Shepparton." No, it is not. And it is not hard to deliver services on the outer suburbs of Melbourne such as Dandenong.

One case was of a 13-year-old girl being given a pack of cigarettes in exchange for sex. We have heard stories like that before in Western Australia. I can remember the stories from Halls Creek. One particular man was known to everyone. He was known to say, "Come and watch a DVD in exchange for sex. Have a pack of cigarettes in exchange for sex. Have some alcohol in exchange for sex." That was appalling and completely unacceptable. Those children were not in the care of the state; they were in the care of the families. The 13-year-old girl and these children that *AM* referred to are in the care of the state, yet this is happening in a residential care facility for kids. I guess it would be a level 2-type facility if we compare it with the Western Australian system. These kids therefore will not fit right into a foster care family with a bit of support. These are kids whose behaviour is pretty challenging, so they need 24/7 rostered shift supervision. That is the supervision that they have, yet this is happening. Some of the things that have been going on absolutely beggar belief.

My point is that it is not right for people such as Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan and others to think that this is just about the Department for Child Protection and Family Support taking more children into care. That is not the solution. With the greatest of respect to him—he is a good police commissioner—he is not an expert and he is not the director general in charge of child protection. However, I agree with the other points that he made in his opinion piece. There does need to be intensive family support significantly more than there is now to those families where this stuff is happening. Frankly, there is a group of families in need of support. I used to call them the frequent flyers because every agency knows them. They are the ones who get themselves into all sorts of pickles with every agency they come across. It is about how we deal with them in particular, but then outside the frequent flyers group—if you like—is a broader group of children for whom we are still not doing enough to improve and fix the situation.

It is the case that we need to do better about recruiting foster carers. Every government has tried to do it. If this government thinks it has exactly the right number and exactly the right care plan to attract them, I say that it has not, because we still do not have the right number of them.

Hon Helen Morton: Who said we've got the right number of them?

Hon SUE ELLERY: No, I said "if this government thinks".

The government has not got the right number and there is still no brilliant recruitment and retention strategy to get the right people in. Frankly, with the way in which our society operates these days, we will never have enough because of that whole risk-averse thing with people these days not wanting kids with baggage coming into their home and maybe putting their own children at risk. I think that is how people think about it.

I am sure that the minister will confirm this: a good number of foster carers are willing to take newborn babies and under-2s. That is important and they do a fabulous job and we appreciate them. The older the child gets, the more challenging their behaviour and the more we need to make sure that they have the best kind of family support around them. That is the category of child for whom we cannot attract enough foster carers to look after. It is still the case, though, that decisions are made in budgets about where most of the resources go and it is still the case that reports of abuse, for example, will be treated with a higher priority for children aged zero to two years and two to five years. If a parent rings the district office and says, “My 13-year-old is really at risk, this is the behaviour she is exhibiting, this is what she is doing and I’m really worried about this,” the response from the person who takes the call is, “We can’t do anything to help you.” Because of the allocation of resources, the office is not in a position to assist teenagers and adolescents. I guess it prioritises the level of intervention. It is because of all those aspects that it is really important that agencies such as the Department for Child Protection and Family Support be protected from the cuts that make it harder for them to do the job that they need to do—but they have not been.

Even in the midyear review, which is the most recent economic document we have other than the budget to which I have referred, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support has had a cut of \$1.3 million for procurement expenditure. That expenditure goes on all sorts of things. I know how the department works, so I know that it will try to cut that expenditure by buying fewer photocopiers rather than fewer things to support the children. When governments keep making those cuts, ultimately over time they have a flow-on effect on the things that the department needs to spend its money on to support families that need intensive family support and to support children in care. This is not the kind of area in which we can take our foot off the pedal. We absolutely must be vigilant—that is, from the bottom of the organisation to the top of the governance of the organisation. Caseworkers out on the ground doing the front-line work need to be absolutely vigilant.

It becomes harder for them when we do not give them enough resources to do the things that they need to do, but, equally, the government of the day needs to be absolutely vigilant in how it does the work it does. It is not a good signal when there has been no increase in the number of child protection caseworkers over the past three budgets—that is, not sending the right signal. It is the case that there have been some awful times in child protection in Western Australia and some of those awful times were when we were in government; there were truly awful cases. However, I am proud of the fact that the Labor government in its last two and a half years in office—it started when David Templeman was the minister—put in place an extra 500 caseworkers and allocated an extra \$500 million. Some of that \$500 million continued to be spent in the first two years of the Barnett government’s reign. It counted in its budget some of that \$500 million because it was not all spent when we left government. The minister is looking quizzically at me. What happened was the allocations were made, Treasury held the money and it was released in chunks. If members look at the estimates hearings for 2009–10, they will see that questions were asked about that issue. Some of that money continued to be spent by this government. That is okay because that is as it should be. However, the point I am trying to make is that this could be turned into a “you did not do enough of this; you did not do enough of that” argument.

I think there needs to be recognition that no-one can take their foot off the pedal in being vigilant about child protection. That is why, when decisions are made about whether agencies can be exempted from these kinds of cuts, there is a very strong argument to do that with the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. It is not the only one; I know that every agency will argue that it needs to protect this more than that. I know of a handful of agencies for which the consequences can be so dire if the people on the ground are not provided with the support they need that the community says that it is not acceptable and we need to do better. That is why I was really pleased that Hon Sally Talbot moved this motion and that is why I am happy to support it. It is important that we take the opportunity to focus on those areas in which we need to maintain resource levels, plus it gave me the opportunity to say what I wanted to say to the Commissioner of Police.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [3.12 pm]: I, too, will make some comments on Hon Sally Talbot’s motion that this house condemns the Barnett government for failing to quarantine essential front-line services from budget cuts, in particular the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. I will start by addressing the Commissioner of Police’s recent comments in the media. The commissioner was dead right to raise these issues in the media. I read the article in the newspaper and noted some of the stories. One particular story that stuck in my mind was about a three-year-old child with bruises wearing a nappy who showed up at a bottle shop at half past eleven on a Friday night. I think, in that sense, the commissioner is probably right. The parents of that child were nowhere to be seen. That child may well have been better cared for in the child protection system; I certainly do not think he was being cared for in that sense. However, I do not

think the commissioner is right in saying that every one of these children needs to be taken into care. I do not think he thought about those comments before he made them. I welcome the fact that he made those comments because it gave the issue some prominence. He caused a debate to happen, so I commend him for that, although I do not think he was correct in what he said.

There is no doubt in my mind that the removal of children has to be a last resort, but there definitely always is a question about when to remove children. That is a vexed issue. I say at the outset that I know that child protection is tough work. Every day, child protection workers make decisions that the rest of us do not want to talk about and would never have to make in our lifetime. I commend them for the hard work they do and for their dedication to the job. When child protection workers are under stress because their case load is too big, there is no doubt that that creates an environment in which poor judgement calls can, and are more likely to, be made. I commend the workers for the work they do, and I acknowledge that today.

I do not think the government is doing enough at the moment to equip parents with the skills necessary to be good parents. It is definitely a role that the Department for Child Protection and Family Support could play. How do most people learn parenting skills? They learn it from their parents; they learn it from their family situations as they are growing up. They model themselves on their parents. Some people might not have had good parents and might not have liked the way they were punished. That is fine, but they have still learnt from it. However, people who grow up in dysfunctional families do not have that luxury. If a person's parents had terrible parenting skills and the person had a torrid childhood or there was domestic abuse in the household, that would have been all they were used to. Some people cannot break out of that cycle and they take on the skills of their parents. I think the government could play a stronger role in providing parenting skills. We all know from early childhood experts that the early years are vitally important. If we can get in early, we can shape a child's future. If we can teach parents the necessary skills and give them the necessary support, it can have a lasting effect on those children. We are very happy to spend money at the other end. Governments of all persuasions are happy to constantly spend money on places such as Banksia Hill Detention Centre and facilities to lock up children. If we spent that money on giving a child a chance in the early years, we would certainly put that child on a better course, and I think we would spend less money in the long run.

Returning to the commissioner's comments, the child protection system is bursting at the seams. If more children are to be taken into care, there will need to be a substantial funding increase. In fact, over the past few years, the system has gone backwards and the number of kids in care has increased. I want to touch briefly on a response I got from the minister during question time yesterday when she spoke about the Signs of Safety program. The Signs of Safety program is a good policy, and I commend the department for the work it has done on the program. What the evidence will show, and certainly what the evidence has shown in other countries that have taken on the Signs of Safety program, is that with early intervention, fewer children end up in the child protection system. Under the Signs of Safety program, fewer children who are worked with are coming into the child protection system, yet there has been an increase in the number of kids in care. I think there has been an increase in the number of children with complex behaviours or troubled backgrounds coming into care even though we have the Signs of Safety program. That has had an impact on the workload of the staff in the department.

Some years ago I was in David Templeman's office, and it is fair to say that we lived through the aftermath of some of those issues that Hon Sue Ellery mentioned—terrible, terrible things that happened to children. There was an injection of money and an injection of staff into the system, and there is no doubt that they were needed. At that time, one of the things that came out of the discussions in the Ford report was an Industrial Relations Commission agreement on the workload of child protection workers. In that decision, it was mandated that child protection workers should not have more than 15 open cases at a time. In fact, I think Hon Sally Talbot said that 12 is the goal, but more than 15 should definitely not happen. So, 15 kids were being looked after by a caseworker. Any child who was not looked after by a caseworker would appear on the monitored list. We know from information released recently that about 620 children are on the monitored list in this state—that means children who on a day-to-day basis do not have an interaction with a caseworker. I am not saying that children in care need to have an interaction with a caseworker every day, but these are children on the monitored list whom a team leader might look after and the cases might or might not be looked at periodically. Roughly 620 children are on that list. We also know from information released recently that about 104 child protection workers have more than 15 cases—that is the upper load that is mandated. Of those 104 workers, we know that seven are on 18 cases, and 11 are on more than 18 cases. I think this is as a result of the failure to quarantine front-line services from cuts; there is no doubt about it. That number of caseworkers have more cases than they should have, and, as I said previously, I think they are dealing with more complex cases. So, instead of going upwards and dealing with more than 15 cases, I think they should be going backwards and dealing with fewer cases because of the complexity of the issues that they are forced to deal with.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; President; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Stephen Dawson; Deputy President; Hon Helen Morton

We need more money and more caseworkers for the existing number of kids in care. I think the commissioner was wrong to say that every child should be reaped up and brought into care. I do not think that is the solution. There is no doubt that more needs to be done. In certain circumstances, perhaps children need to go into care quicker if the signs are there. But, as we know and as Hon Sue Ellery said, there is no guarantee that, just because we bring a child into care, they will have a better life.

I want to talk about some of the history of funding and the concerns around cuts to child protection in this state. I will wind back a couple of years. Before the last state election, there were a number of articles in *The Sunday Times* and, indeed, the *Herald Sun* relating to cuts to child protection and putting children—or, in their words, putting kids—in danger. The article that I refer to from *The Sunday Times* of 10 November 2012 relates to an email from an executive director in the then Department for Child Protection—obviously, the name has changed slightly since then. It revealed that the department was over budget and taking children into care despite not having the money or resources to look after them. I quote from this article —

An email dated October 2 from a DCP executive director says the department is \$400,000 over budget in “client costs” —

I presume “client costs” is money spent to look after children in care —

and that “drastic measures will need to be taken if this is not reined in”.

“You absolutely need to get your spending in your district under control,” the executive director says.

“I don’t ever want to have to start laying staff off again as the cost is too great.”

I am pleased that the executive director said she did not want to lay off staff, but this points to the fact that there is not enough money in the system at the moment. Agencies such as the Department for Child Protection and Family Support are forced to make savings, and some of those things that they are forced to do if they are going to make savings are sacking staff, banning overtime, cutting benefits for children or reducing payments to families for things such as groceries. I believe this agency should be quarantined. Treasuries will always ask for efficiency dividends or whatever, but an agency such as this that plays such a crucial role should not have to face these funding issues on a daily basis.

Hon Helen Morton: Can I just ask a question?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, I will not take any interjections.

Hon Helen Morton: I just want to know where that is.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Madam Deputy President, I will not take any interjections.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson): Members! Hon Stephen Dawson has indicated he is not taking interjections. He has the floor.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will not take any interjections. If the minister wants copies of articles that I am quoting from later, I am happy to give her those.

Hon Helen Morton: I don’t think they are Western Australian; that is all.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am quoting from articles about the Western Australian child protection system. The motion we are addressing today is about condemning this government for failing to quarantine essential front-line services from budget cuts. I do not think any member of this place would say—if they do, I look forward to hearing them say it because I think they will be ridiculed—that this agency, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, has not faced cuts to front-line services. If they do say that, they are plainly wrong—absolutely wrong. These articles that I am quoting from relate to the state system in Western Australia.

This leads me onto another issue, and that is a number of questions I have asked recently in this place. Some of them have been questions on notice, and I have asked them a number of times since I have been the shadow minister. Previously, other members, including Hon Sally Talbot, have asked similar questions, and before her, Hon Sue Ellery asked some of these questions. I have asked questions about the number of vacancies in the department, particularly in the service delivery areas, and, indeed, the number of caseworker positions that are vacant. On 5 December last year, I lodged question on notice 674, in which I asked a range of questions, including what the total Department for Child Protection and Family Support funded full-time equivalent allocation was as at 30 November; how many vacancies there were; how many vacancies there were in a range of areas; and how many people were on fixed-term and permanent contracts et cetera. The question is on the record so I do not have to go into that too much more. The answer to that question was provided recently, in February. I will quote from that answer because it tells me that across the agency, the number of funded FTEs in the Department for Child Protection and Family Support at 30 November 2013 was 2 270. Of those, on that date there were 133.15 vacancies. If we look at service delivery across the state, we see that 1 551.89 FTEs were

allocated to service delivery. Of those, 95.15 were vacancies in the service delivery area. In the caseworker area, the allocation was 775.45 FTE caseworkers, and there were 29.3 caseworker vacancies. If we delve deeper, we see that in places such as East Kimberley, there were three vacancies for caseworkers; in the goldfields there were three vacancies; in Murchison there were 4.55 vacancies; in the great southern there were two vacancies; in Pilbara there were four vacancies; in the south west there were two vacancies; in West Kimberley there were two vacancies; and in the wheatbelt there was one vacancy. Out of the country services, 21.55 were caseworker vacancies. Members might say that at all times there are vacancies in the department because people leave and it takes some time to replace them, but if we look at answers to questions asked three months before, we find similar figures. When we ask how many jobs are being advertised, we find that about 30 or 40 of those vacancies are being advertised. I think the government and the department are actually managing their funds by not filling vacancies. There are about 130 vacancies in the department each month, with about a third of those in the caseworker area. The government is managing its budget by not filling vacancies, which puts more children in jeopardy and at risk. This is a real concern for me as a regional member of Parliament. I know that the regional areas are often the hardest to staff, but it really annoys me to see so many vacancies for caseworkers in those areas, particularly in my electorate where I know there is an absolute need for them. Not enough is being done, and it is because of cutbacks in this agency that those positions are not being filled, which will have a disastrous effect on children in care in the regions.

I will talk about the figures of children in care. There is no doubt that under this government, as indeed under the last government, we have seen a great increase in the number of children who have gone into care. Since 2006, we have seen a doubling of the number of children in care. In 2006 there were approximately 2 000 children in care. Now, there are about 4 000. When I last asked a question about this in this place, about 3 950 children were in care. That question has not been asked again since last year, so I dare say that number is now over 4 000, which means 4 000 children are in the care of the chief executive officer. This is a concern, and it is also a real concern that at least half of those children in the care of the CEO are Aboriginal. It is another great shame for not only this government but also past governments and parliamentarians that the number of children in care is so high in this state.

Another issue I will raise about the department and staffing is my concern with the number of front-line staff at the Department for Child Protection and Family Support who have applied, have been approved or are in the process of being approved for a redundancy. Last month on 27 February, I asked the Minister for Child Protection a question about the number by district of staff who had been approved or who had applied for a redundancy and the positions of those staff who had been accepted for a redundancy. I appreciate the minister's response to the question about how many redundancies had been approved or were in the process of being approved, and the answer reads as follows in *Hansard* —

Crisis care, one; East Kimberley, two; fostering and adoption services, five; Fremantle, two; goldfields, one; great southern, one; head office, 21; Mirrabooka, three; Murchison, two; Peel, one; residential care, one; secure care, one; and wheatbelt, one.

A total of 42 redundancies had been approved in the department. It is of great concern to me to see us lose child protection workers in particular, and obviously we will have a debate in this place at a later stage, perhaps over the next two days, about forced redundancies—I will leave that issue aside for now. It is also of great concern to me to see that in places such as East Kimberley, a senior child protection worker and a senior child protection worker–community have been made redundant. These are two positions that are needed. On the ground in those communities there are lots of issues, and I am really concerned by this loss and the impact it will have on the services provided in those regions.

Earlier, Hon Sue Ellery touched on the matter about the fostering and adoption services. Five staff have been accepted for redundancies in this area. We know from debate in this place and in the media over the past few months that we need more, not fewer, foster carers in this state. If we go along with that argument, surely we need more staff to recruit the foster carers and not fewer. More children are coming into care, which means we need more people to foster children, and the staff in these areas are being let go or made redundant, which is a real concern. This agency should not be under pressure to get people to put up their hand to become redundant. We need more staff in this agency, not fewer. To have 42 staff made redundant adds to the pressure on the department, which certainly does not help.

I will quote from a few articles that have appeared over the past few months. There has been a lot of concern about this issue, and rightly so. In February last year, just before the election, there were a number of stories in the paper. The *Fremantle Herald*, which is a Western Australian paper in case anybody is interested, as indeed is the *Avon Valley Advocate* —

Hon Simon O'Brien: They are all a bit right wing.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Not in my electorate, Hon Simon O'Brien. It does not mean that they are lesser papers because they are not in the regions, but it certainly means that they are Western Australian newspapers—absolutely!

In February last year there were some articles about protection workers who were at breaking point. I will quote from an article on page 13 of the *Fremantle Herald* of 23 February 2013. It was written by Carmelo Amalfi and titled “Protection workers at breaking point”, and reads —

UNDER-resourced and overworked—Fremantle’s child protection workers are burnt out say union organisers.

At the start of February, the WA child protection department had 6202 cases on its books with 459 handled by Fremantle staff.

Unions say every staff member is working on 15 cases at once—the maximum number allowed.

In WA 111 caseworkers deal with more than the preferred number of cases. At least 11 staff in the Fremantle office exceed that limit.

This was obviously written last year because I have given the house some updated figures. It continues —

Branch assistant secretary Rikki Hendon says child protection workers are struggling following a Barnett government decision to cap the number of new staff, despite the number of children needing support rising.

Several workers approached to comment declined to be quoted, in fear for their jobs.

Recently I asked the minister a question about this and we know that staff members are not allowed to speak out. It continues —

“Our members are constantly telling us they are not able to do the job to the best of their ability because of the high number of cases they have,” Ms Hendon says.

Workers were asked this week to document their workload in a survey as part of Workload Action Week.

DCP director general Terry Murphy says the union is “advocating for a redundant, heavily bureaucratic and unreliable measurement of the workload”.

I disagree with the director general in that area because it is important for the workers at the coalface to document their workloads, and I think it is mandated in the decision of the WA Industrial Relations Commission of December 2007. It is good for the workers to manage their numbers and to tell the department what their caseload is because we need to know, and certainly Parliament and the public needs to know because we need to know that children who are in the care of the CEO are actually being looked after, which is the point.

The other article relates to the wheatbelt. Again, it includes figures on the number of children on the books and the number of cases being managed in the wheatbelt. I will not read it out but it relates to the same issues—staff in these areas complaining about their workload, raising their concerns about the number of children coming into care, raising their concerns about the pressures they face and in some cases raising their concerns about the service or care provided to these children in care. At the end of the day, we cannot forget. The state is the guardian of these children in care. We need to ensure that the state is looking after those children.

Around election time we read more stories in the paper—some people might say that it is political posturing or whatever—about at-risk children and the crisis around the number of carers. There was a story in *The Sunday Times* on 3 March last year. I should point out that the Minister for Child Protection at the time was not Hon Helen Morton; it was Hon Robyn McSweeney, so the words in this article are not this minister’s but certainly a former minister of this government has confirmed that there is an issue. This article by Katie Robertson states —

CHILD welfare workers are having to take vulnerable children home with them because of a severe shortage of foster families.

The Department for Child Protection confirmed this week that staff had had to care for kids in their own homes because appropriate accommodation couldn’t be found.

The latest department figures reveal 3910 children were in state care at the end of January, up from 3276 three years ago.

There are 2533 approved foster carers in WA, half of whom are relatives of the children concerned.

Child Protection Minister Robyn McSweeney said finding foster carers was their “greatest challenge” and a four-month recruitment campaign that started last September had resulted in 67 applications.

I commend Hon Robyn McSweeney on the campaign. I have no doubt that the current minister would agree that there is a real need for more foster carers for the number of children in care in Western Australia. One issue that the minister and I probably would not agree on is that not enough money is being spent by this government to actively recruit foster carers and to provide more support and assistance for foster carers in this state. There is definitely a need for them and definitely more has to be done. It is definitely a result of the fact that this government has not quarantined this agency from budget cuts, particularly in front-line services.

Before I move on from the article about foster carers having to take children to their own homes because accommodation could not be found, I wish to relay a concern that was raised with me on Monday this week, I think, from Kalgoorlie. I am in the process of writing a letter to the minister. The minister knows that I often write to her on a range of issues. I am not always happy with the response she gives me but she certainly always gives me a response. I have an issue with the fact that she will not look into individual cases. That is her choice but I keep raising issues with her when I am concerned and when I think they warrant further investigation. I am writing a letter to the minister at the moment relating to an issue raised with me in Kalgoorlie on the weekend about carers who are provided with respite, so a departmental staff member or somebody from an NGO takes the child who is in care and looks after them for the weekend. An allegation has been raised with me about some of these children, particularly in the Kalgoorlie area, being housed in inappropriate situations or circumstances over the weekend. The case that was raised with me related to two children being looked after in a caravan park, I think, with a range of dongas around the place that I believe housed workers for mining companies in the region. I am not being disrespectful to miners or anybody else but these children were being looked after for the weekend in caravan parks that housed over a couple of hundred single men staying in dongas. I do not think it is an appropriate place for these children to be housed. It would not take much for these children to walk away from the eyes of the carer, and I think it just puts them in a terrible situation. I will write to the minister on this issue and I hope to get a satisfactory response.

I move on and, in doing so, remind myself of Hon Sally Talbot's motion—that is, the failure of this government to quarantine front-line services from budget cuts. I wish to quote from a report that was prepared by the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association of WA, which I know the minister has no regard for; indeed, she made disparaging comments about it in this place this afternoon. That is probably because she does not like unions or does not see the role or benefit of unions, which is obviously a fundamental difference from my view. Nonetheless, I will quote from this report entitled "Swept under the carpet. The truth behind the 2013–14 state budget report". In this document the CPSU/CSA has outlined a number of its concerns with the recent state budget. It has raised some valid concerns. It has done its homework. The report says that this government has abolished the family crisis program. For those members who do not know, the family crisis program provided cash or vouchers to people who presented at DCP seeking help for one-off household disasters, such as the burnout of all whitegoods, a lost wallet or lack of baby formula food. This program is gone from the budget papers this year. We have also seen the abolition of the community-based kindergarten subsidy, which was a grant application program for kindergartens with a high proportion of Aboriginal children. We have also seen approximately \$4.5 million less in funding for the hardship utilities grant scheme, a state government scheme that provides financial assistance to help people in financial difficulties who are having problems paying their water, gas or electricity bills. HUGS provides assistance and helps ensure that supply of these vital services is not cut off. We have seen the abolition of the family crisis program, the abolition of the community-based kindergarten subsidy and significantly less funding provided to HUGS. The other thing the government abolished in this budget—Hon Adele Farina would have heard me talk about this issue previously—is the child-centred family support team in Bunbury. I know that Hon Adele Farina is concerned about this issue, as she has told the community. She has been vocal on this issue, as have I.

We know that there is a demand for child protection services in this state. That demand is ever increasing. Hon Sue Ellery quoted from the budget papers. We see the number of children in care constantly rising.

We have seen, from a range of reports, an increase in the last couple of years of between six and seven per cent in the notifications of suspected child abuse, so caseloads have increased yet we have seen no increase in the number of full-time equivalent workers at the coalface—the workers who are providing vital services to these children. We should not take this issue lightly. We should all be rightly concerned. As I said previously, I do not think this agency should constantly face budget cuts from government. Given the work that this agency in particular does in looking after children in care, I think it should be quarantined from budget cuts; in fact, we should be putting more money into these vital services.

As I said previously, I want to pay tribute to child protection workers around the state who, for the most part, do a tremendous job. There is no doubt that issues fall through the cracks at various times, and that because of workload pressures the wrong decisions are made from time to time, but, for the most part, the people who work in the system deserve a pat on the back because they deal with difficult issues and a great many children with many and complex behaviours. I respect those workers.

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Hon Sally Talbot's motion reminds me that this government should be condemned because it has not put resources into this area; it is continually underfunding this area. It seems that the government is immune to not only criticism, but also the issues, and it has forgotten how important this agency is. With those comments, I thank the house for the opportunity to deal with the motion this afternoon.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Minister for Child Protection) [3.51 pm]: Part of me is really pleased that this motion has come on, because it is a great opportunity to talk about the government's record in this area, particularly around resourcing, so I thank Hon Sally Talbot for moving the motion. At the end of what I have to say, the majority of members in this house will applaud the Barnett government for quarantining the Department for Child Protection and Family Support from cuts and for growing the essential front-line services of the department.

Several members interjected.

Hon HELEN MORTON: If I thought there was any benefit in moving to amend this motion, I would, but there is no worthwhile point in doing that, given that most people, both in this place and in the community, are fully aware of the substantial growth and development that has taken place in front-line services and the growth in the budget since the Barnett government has been in power.

It is a pity about the word “condemns”, because the contributions of some members have been helpful. I specifically appreciate the comments of Hon Sue Ellery, who pretty much mirrored my views about the points that were made in an article by the Commissioner of Police not that long ago. I concur with most of the Leader of the Opposition's comments; in particular, she gave an exceptionally good overview of the difficulties associated with the services being provided in the child protection area. Her comments clearly reflect somebody who has a close understanding of this work from her role as an ex-Minister for Child Protection.

Hon Nick Goiran: Unlike the mover of the motion.

Hon HELEN MORTON: I agree with Hon Nick Goiran. Without being too specific about the mover of the motion, her contribution contained the usual sermonising we get from that member and barely anything of relevance. The words “ill-informed”, “inadequate” and “disingenuous” came to my mind, and the only sensible thing that the member said in the debate related to the correlation between the issues around drug and alcohol services, mental health services and family and domestic violence being the three main reasons that children come into the care of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and the fact that all of those services work within the portfolio that I have. I do not think Hon Sally Talbot has made any effort whatsoever to gain an appreciation or understanding of the work that has been done in that area.

Several members interjected.

Hon HELEN MORTON: The only thing I can say, to be honest, in appreciation of Hon Sally Talbot's raising this issue is about its timing. I do not know how, so far back, the member chose the timing of this motion to coincide with the week preceding my major bilateral discussion to negotiate a budget. The one thing I can thank her for is that she made this debate happen this week, and it has given me this great opportunity.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson): Order, members! The Minister for Child Protection has the floor.

Hon HELEN MORTON: I say to Hon Sally Talbot that her timing is impeccable, but that is the only thing in her speech that is of relevance and has made any great sense.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon HELEN MORTON: Thank you again, Madam Deputy President.

Further on in my comments I will refer to the various contributions that members have made. I want to add my own comments about the mechanism by which child protection and family support is undertaken and how the people who work in this area are working in a really tough environment. They undertake work on a daily basis that is risky, complex and highly emotive and they have to balance the issues in taking this action versus that action, and the implications of it all. It is really difficult work. I have heard people say that in public administration, child protection work is probably the most difficult in not only this state, but any state. I absolutely agree with that and I support the work that these people do.

It is very hard in that environment for people not to become risk averse. But if they were to become risk averse, they would do the very things that Hon Sally Talbot was concerned about: They would start to work in an ever-narrowing environment in which they were more concerned about covering their backs than they were about assessing and determining the ability of these children to live as good a life as possible. It is very hard for people

in this area not to become control focused and internalise their efforts when they have absolute responsibility, which everybody has talked about, and have to work in partnership with many different agencies—police, corrective services and education. The Department for Child Protection and Family Support works to provide a range of services and it is doing it incredibly successfully. It is very difficult for these people when the criticism comes, as sometimes it does, because no matter how professional and how much evidence-based risk assessment is undertaken, as was indicated previously, sometimes they cannot manage all risk out of a situation and something really dreadful and untoward occurs. We see examples of that from time to time, but the department, the caseworkers, and child protection workers in particular, are well supported by their agency in that sort of situation. Notwithstanding that a situation has turned out not to be a good situation and they have to go through and do their own internal inquiry and have an open and accountable approach to that and learn from that experience, they are well supported so they do not become defensive in their mode of operation.

As I have indicated, the strength in the Department for Child Protection and Family Support lies in its very mature culture of leadership throughout the whole organisation, not just with the director general or the tier 2 level of directors working in the department; the leadership works throughout this organisation. Anyone who goes to any section of this organisation will see that leadership culture being applied at every level. It is a learning organisation, and if I have time towards the end of this speech, I will indicate the extent to which learning is supported, increased and developed throughout the organisation. The Department for Child Protection and Family Support is seriously committed to learning in both professional and support services. This work is enabled by government and government budgets. Of course, the agency works through evidence-based practice frameworks. I appreciate hearing people talk positively about the signs of safety practice framework. There is also the sanctuary framework, which applies to children in group homes, and is another practice framework that is being developed in Western Australia. There are also the partnership arrangements for foster caring. A significant commitment to self-evaluation, review, development and best practice is built into the practice framework that this organisation is seriously involved in day in and day out.

It is an exceptionally different organisation from that of five and a half years ago. It was described at that time by Prudence Ford in the Ford report as an organisation that was overwhelmed, confused and defensive. They are the words she used. The Department for Child Protection and Family Support is now considered to be a leader in the service. Twelve other countries are adopting the practice that has been developed in Western Australia in those five and a half years. It has been taken up by Tasmania and is about to be rolled out in Queensland. This organisation is seen as a leader by world standards and the national standard of Australia. Equally, other government agencies in Western Australia seek leadership from this organisation. For example, the Department of Health sought a leadership role from the child protection department in providing support for people who had been affected by a person who was possibly damaging people he came into contact with. It was initially thought that the health department would take on that leadership role but it, quite rightly, asked the Department for Child Protection and Family Support to take on that leadership role because it was better equipped to do so. The breadth of its work was probably a bit of an eye-opener for me, not having had a great deal of involvement with the department when I took over the portfolio about 12 months ago.

I am pleased to have become aware of the emergency services. The first opportunity I had to visit the emergency services centre was just before the fires at Mundaring and Forrestdale, when I met the staff at both locations. I was able to see how, at a moment's notice, those staff undertook their duties on the ground in the way they provided welfare services for people in those emergencies. Sometimes we forget when we talk about the Department for Child Protection and Family Support that it has a much broader role.

I recently spent half a day visiting the working with children unit and was quite surprised at the thoroughness of the checking process compared with the police check process. There is no comparison between the checking undertaken for a police clearance versus the checking undertaken for a working with children check. The unit receives more than 100 000 requests for working with children checks every year.

Further indication of the breadth of the organisation is the crisis care unit that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for family and domestic violence. It also receives calls concerning mental health issues, and all the child protection after-hours calls are diverted to that unit. After spending half a day with the crisis care unit, I got a feel for the breadth of work it undertakes, which is separate entirely from the work done in the districts for the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. People have quite rightly indicated that the demands on this department will increase; its needs will not slacken, unfortunately, nor will the government's commitment to the agency; it will continue to grow.

I want to talk a little about some specific areas around resourcing because I think that is the essence of this motion, but I will talk shortly about some of the points other people have raised. Since 2008–09 the budget for the Department for Child Protection and Family Support has increased by 73 per cent, to \$588.4 million. This agency is not going backwards; its front-line services are not being cut. The 2013–14 budget allocated an additional \$98.1 million over five years. It is important that people realise that when funds have been diverted to

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higher priority services, that does not necessarily mean services have been cut. As I said, the 2013–14 budget allocated an additional \$98.1 million over the five years, with \$21.8 million in this current financial year to address the increase in demand for Child Protection and Family Support services. To allay concerns that might have been in people's minds about full-time equivalents, the department's FTE rate has increased overall by 7.6 per cent since the Barnett government came to power, including an increase of 117 new caseworker positions, or 18.6 per cent.

The heavy lifting was done by Hon Robyn McSweeney. I am not claiming credit for this work. I acknowledge the work Hon Robyn McSweeney did building this agency's resources and front-line services and FTEs.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.