

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES IN GOVERNMENT**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH  
Wednesday, 12 March 2008**

**SESSION ONE**

**Members**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)  
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas (Deputy Chairman)  
Mr S.R. Hill  
Mrs J. Hughes  
Dr G.G. Jacobs**

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**Hearing commenced at 10.00 am**

**SINGE, MR DAVID**

**Chief Executive Officer, Wheatbelt Development Commission,  
examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

**Mr Singe:** I have.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee today?

**Mr Singe:** No, I have not.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Before we start, do you have anything you would like to say to the committee?

**Mr Singe:** No, other than the fact that I am delighted to have the opportunity to be here and if I die of nervousness in the first few minutes, I will get better later.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Our job is to make you nervous, but do not die on us. We have a doctor here just in case.

We have a few questions to ask you. We have looked at the objectives of the Wheatbelt Development Commission. A part of the Wheatbelt Development Commission’s role, as it applies to other government agencies, is to facilitate coordination between relevant statutory bodies and state government agencies and to cooperate with representatives of industry and commerce, employee-employer organisations, education and training institutions and other sectors of the community within the region. Can you give an example of how you engender collaborative approach with these stakeholders and how successful that might or might not be?

**Mr Singe:** The answer is, after so many years, yes. To be honest, the trick is working out where to start to try to make sense of it. What I did in the notes I drafted for my previous discussions I had with Brian was to pick five topics—in fact, I should have picked six—that reflect, and the notes will come through, what this topic is about and what it means to the wheatbelt. At various times I will refer to health, education and training, the Avon Community Development Foundation, marketing the commission, Indigenous economic development and our partnership with the Department for Planning and Infrastructure. With those six areas in my mind, I might cross over them in the way that I give examples. They represent different aspects of the issue.

To be honest, the act is a bit of a treasure, remembering that Western Australia is the only state that has statutory authorities based outside the capital city in regions, responsible for the functions that are outlined in those objects and functions of the Regional Development Commissions Act. For someone like me, who has been here a long time and actually came to Western Australia because in 1987 it was seen to be the eminent state in which to practice regional development, the act is somewhat precious. I am always happy to argue that with anybody, including members of Parliament, and ask them to please understand that the other states have not reached this point. People do not always value what we have in Western Australia, because they do not understand it unless they live with it. Although the act asks a lot, and, in fact, it almost demands a huge amount, the fact that the state has separate statutory authorities means that there is an enormous amount of flexibility. We have this wonderful umbrella act that allows known statutory authorities to respond in a way they see fit and in accordance with the needs of their communities. Quite often we find ourselves doing the same topic in quite different ways because our communities have different expectations and different demands.

To answer the question, I will start with health. We are, I believe, the only commission to have a formal written arrangement with Western Australian Country Health Service. This was borne, I must admit like many things in regional development and partnership in government, out of frustration. I have been involved in health issues since about 1991. The reason for being involved is the underlying principle that you accept regional development is based on four pillars. First is a job—except for the unemployed who go to Byron Bay and enjoy a good lifestyle—and most people want a good job and, indeed, most Western Australians have one. Second is somewhere to live, third is

education and fourth is health services. If we take those as the four pillars, the rest of the topics we deal with seem to, in some way, have some impact on them and a bearing on them singly and collectively.

Health is a difficult issue in the wheatbelt. The wheatbelt is arguably the most fragmented region in Australia. We have 72 000 people governed now by a mere 43 councils, since the Shire of Northam and Town of Northam merged, and some 160 separately named communities. That means that it is a region of repetition. The region has more little sporting complexes than can be found in a sideshow alley to throw a tennis ball at. The whole history and structure of the wheatbelt is probably one of grand visions of history and not quite realisation. We have enormous infrastructure; for instance, 23 hospitals, but they are all based on the 1960s model.

We have this amazing region. We are the only broadacre farming region that substantially abuts a major Australian capital city. The only similarity is the farming region to the mid-north of Adelaide. It still has the Barossa as a shield and Murray Bridge as a shield to the east. Perth, as a metropolitan area, is the only major Australian city that, in effect, substantially abuts broadacre farming. The wheatbelt region comprises a massive number of small communities and the service delivery issues are quite difficult. The reason for that in health is that lots of people go to Perth. It is not surprising that ever since the mid 1990s, which was when I saw the first documentation on this subject, the amount of patient leakage from the wheatbelt to Perth has simply grown to the point where certainly more than half the people—and country health has more accurate figures, but I believe that it is fewer than half the people who seek services in the wheatbelt—simply bypass anything in the wheatbelt, even if it does exist, and disappear into Perth. Obviously that has big implications for service delivery—budgets and all sorts of things.

Given that the structure of the region means that Northam is the largest community, it has less than one-eleventh of the entire regional population. We have no regional centre like Albany, Bunbury, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Port Hedland. Therefore, the service delivery issues have driven us insane. We talked to country health, which was integral in those days—no it was not, it was separate. A review by the country health service was undertaken and released in 2003. We invited Christine O'Farrell, the then chief executive officer, to attend a commission board meeting at which our minister, Kim Chance, was also in attendance. Kim is very supportive of health issues. Christine basically admitted that health had failed in the wheatbelt. We had prepared ourselves so that it was not a cold turkey start to this discussion. We prepared ourselves for that board meeting and the board debated and made an offer to seek formal partnership—it was something that was inevitable—and we were to do it on the basis that the government pays us to have good regional development knowledge of the region and pay country health to provide health care. We said that if we put the two together we might get a far better result. The memorandum of understanding is working quite well. It has been subject to some serious stress at times because it is very hard to get a common objective with different players, as the committee would know.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** On the MOU, obviously it is minuted and it meets regularly.

**Mr Singe:** Yes and I can provide a copy of that in the draft notes that I will send through later than I intended to Brian. I have highlighted a few of them, with a copy attached, and I will polish it up and send it through by the end of the month. You will be able to see a copy of that.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Who do the minutes report to? Do they go directly to Minister Chance?

**Mr Singe:** Do you mean the MOU?

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Yes.

**Mr Singe:** They do not. They stay with us.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Do they sit within the development commission?

**Mr Singe:** No, within country health. We work to support country health. It is the owner of the information as the lead agency and we, the commission, provide regional development support through knowledge and process. I have copies of minutes of what we call a health working party at which we meet with country health, but it is really their carriage; we do some work. The MOU is between the two of us and that is linked to a second stage. I have to correct that: it is actually a memorandum of intent. We always called it an MOU, but health called it an MOI, rather than an MOU. We have what is an MOU, which involves the same two organisations, plus two of the three zones of local government in the wheatbelt and the Wheatbelt Division of General Practice. That group, again, to answer your question Shane, is also aimed at focusing on country health. We arranged for an independent chair for that, who happens to be Peter Sullivan, CEO of the Avon Catchment Council. We have someone who is not in our group to keep us in order.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You mentioned 43 councils and a numbers of hospitals as well.

**Mr Singe:** Twenty-three hospitals.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are they of the 1960s vintage?

**Mr Singe:** Pretty much. Northam and Narrogin are largish, although they are classified as “district” rather than “regional”, it depends on who you talk to. It has been left a bit vague for a range of reasons. Merredin and Moora are a little more modest and the rest of the hospitals are relatively small, which means 16 beds or less.

They are seriously geographically skewed inland. The coastal area from the metropolitan boundary through to Lancelin, Cervantes and Jurien Bay does not have a hospital.

[10.15 am]

**The CHAIRMAN:** When working on health care for the development commission, do you have input into the updating of those hospitals? The Moora District Hospital will be updated. Have you had any input into that and into dragging a hospital from an inland area to a coastal area?

**Mr Singe:** I have just been to Dandaragan. The second one would cause the elected members of local government there serious heart troubles if we went through that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does having 43 councils cause more division than collaboration?

**Mr Singe:** It is surpassed only by the football final, which got me into trouble once when I mentioned to *The West Australian* that when they get over the 1956 grand final . . . ! It is up there with schools. We will not do school buses. It is up there with a whole lot of things. I will go back to the four pillars again: jobs, housing, education and health care. Education and health care are potentially incredibly divisive issues in our region. There is a difference between two. Health care affects the entire population and they do not have a choice, whereas post-compulsory education is a choice. There is a very big difference between the two topics and the bureaucracies that deal with them. We have a very bad historical geographic skewing because the coast was opened up after the Second World War, I understand, and so there is a mismatch of the facilities from the 1960s versus the growth areas of 2008. Also, there are pressures on budgets and how to deal with all of those things. Although the Shire of Dandaragan would dearly love to see the cake redistributed, the shire understands that the cake probably will not be redistributed under the current structure. A new paradigm is required to work out what to do. The MOU and the MOI are intended to be the basis of that new paradigm. It is also about trying to achieve some engagement. I am sure that as MPs you run into plenty of examples of trying to engage people in collective behaviour. It is difficult. Someone invented the phrase “herding cats” for a damned good reason. It is not terribly easy to work out how to do regional development with 43 possessive local governments. The commission was bold enough to put a submission to the local government review and we argued for the adoption of some principles to work out how to deal with future local government structures. We still are not seeing much of a response to any of that. The most recent effort is WALGA’s 223-page tome that contains a lot of good material but I still do not see the signs of any principles about how to underpin an argument for service delivery and structure in the field of local government.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is leadership from government required?

**Mr Singe:** Absolutely. However, that is very hard when there is the same problem within the government. We are as guilty in the state because it is very rare that we manage to get these partnerships to actually work for a substantial time and to deliver a medium or long-term result that people can actually pin something on, be it MPs, public servants or communities. If I go back to health, the real achievement to date—I have made a rough note about measures of achievement to date—is basically engagement. We have weathered a few storms during that time and we have reached a collective agreement that the forum is worthwhile and we are getting that agreement from the WA Country Health Service—we believe—because it is our job. Two of the three zones are local government and the third wants to join but is suffering from terrible schisms within its own branches about what the impact of that might be because, unsurprisingly, it is a mixture of inland and coastal regions, and so it has a real problem. I am very chuffed that we have a Central Wheatbelt Division of General Practice, because the doctors are not a loved profession. They are just not. Sorry Graham!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you explain that?

**Mr Singe:** It has reached point at which local governments fork out a lot of money to try to keep a doctor. Objectively, when one takes a step back, one really should be asking why small communities with limited resources and money must fund a doctor to the extent that they must underwrite the doctor’s practice, and provide a house, a car and perhaps pay for school fees. That arrangement imposes six figure sums on small communities. Although it was probably a strategy undertaken with the best of intentions to defend a service at some point in history, it has actually evolved into something entirely different, whereby a doctor will not turn up unless all of those things are available. There are a lot of questions about whether that is a good way of doing business and there is a question of whether the state needs to look at that arrangement and at what the state’s role should be. Those types of issues are being discussed in our MOU forum. We are pleased that we are using that forum to raise the big picture issues and to get away from what we all understood and laughed about a few minutes ago, which is the terrible parochialism at a lower level. It is very hard to raise the bar and have a decent debate. That is what we are doing on health care.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The services that doctors provide is—I will get jumped on if I say this wrongly, because Graham is a doctor —

**Mr Singe:** As a visitor, I encourage you to be brave like me!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is more than 50 per cent of the wheatbelt population going to the city for medical services because of the level of medical services they receive? Is the acuity much higher?

**Mr Singe:** It is a mixture. When we talk about Merredin, we have to talk about the long-term near unmitigated disaster in the provision of GP services. When we talk about some of the other communities such as Wyalkatchem, where Frank Kubicek is retiring after 25 year of service, we can say that they have had a fantastic service. The medical industry is like any other industry; there are good and not so good service providers. Sometimes a factor is the way the community regards the doctor. There is always a range of issues. The current situation has not necessarily been caused by the doctors. I can understand why they are where they are. In a way, the professional body—the AMA—has isolated the doctors in some ways from being loved in the community. They are decent people.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** Look at Graham.

**Mr Singe:** Absolutely—exhibit A! They are decent people, but it is the way the world is at the moment that small communities think they must have a doctor because in a small town accident/emergency is regarded as the biggest mental horror. We must try to take people one step back and to objectively ask: what is the current structure delivering on A and E? People's perception and the reality do not always match. What they would love to have is similar to the mentality that I would still love to have a passenger train that goes to Albany. That is not the reality. On some weekends—it is not good—there is no doctor in the entire wheatbelt region, and that is unacceptable.

**The CHAIRMAN:** There are 43 councils in the wheatbelt. Is each of those councils supporting a doctor or is there a shared arrangement across the councils?

**Mr Singe:** They are generally done on an individual council-by-council basis. There is not a great collective decision in that arrangement. I will use this opportunity to highlight a positive. In the past few months, the division of general practice has clearly made a move and realised that if it does not take the initiative on some of these issues, no-one else will. I am pretty pleased with that because, again, the framework of having a forum, which we use all the time, is having a positive impact on that division as well. For instance, it is actively involved in trying to determine the future form of the Wyalkatchem medical practice. That is very good, as far as I can see, because that division is a body of industry people—doctors—who work in the region and who, as medical practitioners, understand it more intimately than anyone else could. If they can form a collective within their own division and then transfer the positive results and thinking of that to our MOU group, we will have had a win.

I will stray across to education and training because that is one of the other pillars. I wish I could say positive things about it. However, our experience has been totally the reverse. The commission is trying to engage with education and training in a region that is down to its last 88 government schools. Annual school closures are basically done with no warning. I mention both Pingelly and Wubin as very sad examples of shires that have suddenly discovered that their school services would be either altered or shut. We have found it impossible to engage in education and training in the same way as we have been able to engage with the health industry. Education and training appears to be an insular portfolio.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that at the departmental level or at the school level?

**Mr Singe:** It is at the departmental level. We have had a number of discussions over time with senior departmental people. Our method of doing that is to use subcommittees of the development commission's board. Therefore it is not me as the CEO but board members who, on behalf of the board, discuss and negotiate what the opportunities might be for the regional development commission to contribute to the betterment of the provision of education services. Sadly, it has been unsuccessful.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is it a similar situation for the provision of new facilities, courses and schools? A few years ago, Jurien got either a refurbishment or a brand new school.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** It was a brand new school.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did that involve cooperation?

**Mr Singe:** Things do happen in regard to the provision and delivery of services. The decisions that are made are centralised. If you examine the white paper on strategic infrastructure planning, you will find that between now to 2027 there is no mention of either one additional school being provided or redeveloped in the wheatbelt. Between 2006 and 2027, not one place is listed in the wheatbelt. I go back to where I started. This is a peri-urban region. The fourth biggest city in Australia has one of the highest growth rates of any urban community. Sometimes the development commission is unsuccessful in its efforts to try to get engagement and traction with some agencies and to get them to understand that that engagement is for both their betterment and our betterment. It is a bit sad that education and training falls into that category. Last week I had discussions with three of my board members who are involved in this and they have basically lost patience with the polite conversations and the subsequent disinterest. The people involved are polite and pleasant. We can meet with them and do things, but to expect anything to happen is a very, very poor hope.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have strategies and plans to develop that type of interaction and engagement?

**Mr Singe:** In terms of what we have done and the way we have gone about it?

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Do you use the heartlands country that you have grouped yourselves under to try to form some of those relationships?

**Mr Singe:** Professional charlatans will try anything, to be honest! In the case of education and training, because the health model is working, we sought to replicate its features when dealing with education but clearly it has not worked. We must all think about why it has not worked. That is why the board members and I have come to the conclusion that we have two different issues and philosophies in these two very large bureaucracies. We always try to engage the regional managers or directors or whoever when we are doing these processes. If someone goes around me without trying to talk to me, I get very cross. I am happy if someone talks to me but is dissatisfied. It is then the person's entitlement to go somewhere else. To be ignored is pretty ordinary. Inevitably we always make a conscious effort to engage locally. It is very sad—looking at it as an outsider—that the regional directors of education seem to be absolutely powerless and incapable of even writing a letter. I will give an example of why that is happening. Many people quite rightly talk about the difficulties of recruiting staff. We have trouble recruiting people, but we do recruit them. For many years I have recruited university graduates to work for us because they are far more energetic than me and they are far more mentally skilful and they actually want a job. We assume that we will have them for two or three years and we willingly send them to work at Camp America or somewhere.

[10.30 am]

It has been a great model. We employed a young student from UWA who was setting out to do her honours degree. She is in fact a mid-west girl from north of Geraldton and very clever. We came to an agreement, in the spirit of partnership with the Institute for Regional Development of WA—and there is another one; we have a fabulous partnership with them—and said, “Look, Janine could do her honours out here, on a topic to do with education services in wheatbelt south. so that the area that is focused on is Narrogin out to Lake Grace.” The only initiatives that we have been able to achieve in education have been in that area, and they have not come from the department; they have come from the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council, which is the only shining light, I must record. It is the only shining light and the only channel that we can find at the moment that offers us hope and some creativity.

So we said, “Okay, we will do this.” So we came to an agreement with the university, and young Janine set off to do her honours degree. That involved interviewing school principals. In short, she ended up having to be chastised by the two regional directors of education in the region for having dared to talk to people initially and, in order to get the approval, finally had to get a letter from the Director General of Education and Training. It also came with an instruction that she was to shred all of the material that she had acquired before receiving the letter. Now, that is to do an honours research degree on the role of community and educational engagement. I reckon that is pretty rough.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** It sure is.

**Mr Singe:** I am only using it as an example of the bigger picture. I am not setting out to crucify individuals. I am setting out to crucify a culture that says we are in silos. By the way, she got first class honours.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** Very good.

**Mr Singe:** So we are very proud of her.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** So then getting back to the heartlands country —

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** What is involved with that?

**Mr Singe:** This is the marketing.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Yes

**Mr Singe:** Heartlands has been interesting. You know as well as I do, as a regional MP, that regional women are to be feared

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Yes, certainly!

**Mr Singe:** Especially when you get them into produce marketing and small business, because they are fabulous. They are so talented and committed and hardworking that it is quite frightening. Heartlands is the aggregation of a group of really interesting producers of niche market produce.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** So it is not local government coming together and saying, “blah, blah”?

**Mr Singe:** No, but I do want to do a few sentences to steer it that way because I think that is a potential. The origins of it are to do with the small niche market producers. The development commission has supported the heartlands marketing group over a period of time. It is now evolving—I will use the expression slightly loosely—into the potential for being a trading arm of the commission, so that we form ourselves a partner with whom we could do business, not just on the original food topic, but potentially art, music, all sorts of things. At the same time—I grant it is a bit

visionary—one might hope that local government in there somewhere would be influenced. I am not sure in any other way, but I use the word “influence” in the sense of what it is and how it is going.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Yes.

**Mr Singe:** That is a fantastic potential group that we have worked very, very hard to build up. I am very proud that we managed to send three of their members to the international Slow Food conference in Italy. That got international recognition for them and for our region. But, yes, the origins of it are humble and modest, like so many things, but the potential for it directly and indirectly to do things could embrace the sense of local government partnership and cooperation. I think it is a long way out on the local government topic, but —

**Mr S.R. HILL:** I am just thinking that in the mid-west we have the *Batavia* and we have the wildflower and the mid-west councils. I thought it was something branded, where local government came together and identified as a collective.

**Mr Singe:** Yes, we have a couple of those within the region with local government, and that is fine because one must recognise that the wheatbelt is not a unitary region; it is actually a federation of four warring tribes, each of them with their own subregional centre, plus a somewhat disenchanting coast. So there are really five elements, and to expect unity in our region is pretty much an unreal expectation, but as long as one understands in regional development that getting aggregation and collective behaviour on a subregional basis is acceptable, then you can go somewhere. Just bite off as much as you can chew. Do not expect the whole thing to work; it is just too complicated. So that is education and training.

If I briefly mention the Avon Community Development Foundation, Mr Chair; I might do that from a different perspective, and try mentally to summarise this one, because this is a success story. It is quite long and reasonably complex, but it warrants a few words at least. In March 1989, I was asked by the then business manager of the Muresk Institute to host a forum focusing on, basically, the regional development future of the wheatbelt. Given that I arrived in 1987 to the office at Northam and there was no previous state history of regional development in the wheatbelt, the region was automatically something like nine or 10 years behind the previous last region, which had a state government presence in regional development. So the wheatbelt, given the warring-tribe nature of the place, had been regarded as hostile territory pretty much by all government; and indeed, the natives were not particularly keen to talk each other. So this forum was pretty significant, and Ian Fairnie, who was then the head of Muresk, often went to America.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I know Ian pretty really well

**Mr Singe:** Ian did me a great service and found a guy called Harry Martin, who was the president of the Tupelo Community Development Foundation in Mississippi. I then discovered—because I am not an Elvis fan—that there was a correlation with Elvis and a few other things; but here was a town just before World War II with a population of around 8 000 people—only a little bigger than Northam—which by 1989 had a population of 60 000. One has to allow for the American economy and all the rest of it, but they were pretty dead on the back of cotton and all sorts of things. The story was really one of American philanthropy: put money into a community foundation, do not ask what you get for it directly—which I might add is a terrible thing in our communities of “What is in it for me?” The answer in Tupelo was, “What is in it for you is the life of your grandchildren”, and Americans accepted that. In Australia we are not quite that good, but we are getting better.

So out of the conference and Harry’s presentation came two community development foundations in the wheatbelt; one in the central midlands and one in the Avon. The central midlands moved out very quickly and they went into a model of investment, which ground to a halt on the back of the change to national laws about how you effectually dealt with investment issues. So it was not that they there doing anything improper; it was just that the scale of accountability killed them.

The Avon, on the other hand, went into a more philanthropic model like Tupelo and so many others in America, and I actively supported it because it provided a partner for me to work to because I am a public servant. Because I am a public servant, I have a set of rules and when you are dealing with a partner who is not a public servant they have a set of rules, and then you can start to build a partnership with positive benefit. So it struggled for quite a period of time, but we took on three projects: one, education and training—there was no TAFE college in the wheatbelt in the early 1990s; two, aged care. There was no proper aged care facility in the wheatbelt in the early 1990s; and the third one was somewhat old-fashioned. There was no industrial park and no opportunity for medium-scale manufacturing to be located anywhere in the wheatbelt. In short, we chose who would lead and follow. I led on the TAFE college and the foundation led on the aged care and the industrial park.

By 1995 we had a 40-bed residential aged care facility in Northam, and we had changed commonwealth rules to achieve it. The intention of having it as a hub and spokes of aged care under a single administration at places like Goomalling and Cunderdin, sadly, fell over but nonetheless we did change the commonwealth’s thinking on aged care; and if I remember correctly, we were the first example of the state putting money into aged care in order to solve a problem, which is traditionally not their area, with jolly good reason. So we got our 40-bed old persons’ residence in Northam.

In 1995, we also opened a new hospital in Northam and the industrial park. I assured everyone, as an economic geographer and regional planner, that the textbooks tell you it takes 10 years and our minister, Kim Chance, opened the first manufacturing premises there 10 years and two months after we actually started the process. So I am not going to try any more forecasting, because at the moment I have got 100 per cent accuracy, so that is quite good.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that industrial park is in Northam as well?

**Mr Singe:** It is 18 kilometres east. It is very much an American model because it is actually located between wheatbelt towns, so that people could live in different towns and drive to the site. It is owned by LandCorp. The community had to put in \$450 000 initially to leverage the state government, particularly the state bureaucracy, into recognising that the topic was serious. So there is a huge sense of community ownership with this thing that LandCorp understands but generational changes of staff have to be advised sometimes. So the issue of corporate culture and partnership is a topic unto itself. Stage 1 has sold out. Stage 2 is being built at the moment, with 17 allotments, eight of which are either legally spoken for or very likely to be spoken for. Everything, and I say this quite immodestly, that we out in the region—and it was we; the community leaders, me, a couple of very good regional managers and government agencies like Water and Main Roads—agreed in the early 1990s could happen out there is now happening. The industries that are going there in particular are the mining support industries who find the price of land in Perth prohibitive. They need an area and they need a flexible subdivision arrangement. We are the only LandCorp industrial park that can do quite a lot of flexibility in how to do subdivisions. The other ones are companies that are building basically transportable or prefabricated buildings for all sorts of purposes. There are four of them and none of them are competitors. We have actually created ourselves an industry cluster for two industries, and there is a lot of academic work done on clustering. We have actually done it with hard work and letting the market decide what they actually need to do in order to make a dollar; and I have to say in this forum that it is a great success and we are all incredibly proud of it. So that was led by the Avon Community Development Foundation.

A small detail perhaps to note for the committee, because there is quite a lot of detail behind it, but it requires a judicious balance of organisations. It took me two and a half years to finally seek the cabinet approval for the structure of the advisory board that would be put in place for this park, mainly because it has a minority of public servants on it. It was not the elected members of Parliament who had a problem with it; it was the bureaucracy itself. So, after two and a half years' struggle, George Cash signed off to that. There is an additional clause that says the Avon Community Development Foundation will nominate the chair in recognition of their historical role and their continuing partnership and presence in order to be an advocate for the park. In fact the CEO of the Avon Community Development Foundation is also the chair of the Industrial Park Advisory Board. In terms of your committee's reference of conjoined anything, one of the points I noticed was to do with, I have not got the phrase quite right, but to do with the intersection of ministers cross —

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Collaborative?

**Mr Singe:** Cross-something. No, it was not collaborative. It had the word “cross”, which, if I took it wrongly, could mean the wrong thing, but this is a working point that I would like to make very clearly: LandCorp owns the park and LandCorp is part of Alannah MacTiernan's portfolio, and Kim Chance is Minister for the wheatbelt, and he appoints the members to the Avon Industrial Park Advisory Board, which reports to him. I can see potential threats to the continuation of that in the future, and it is rather sad because I would not want the model lost because advice in Perth says that you cannot actually do these things. I mentioned a moment ago that the departure of people causes cultural shift, and of course Kim has announced again that he intends to stand down. For us, his understanding, as a wheatbelt member of Parliament and minister, goes right back to the origin, so he has lived it through in that role, understanding it. I am prepared, on behalf of the commission and in this forum, to say that is the sort of thing that represents an operational threat to you in the country when you are trying to do things, because there will come a point when someone has to deal with the issue.

I am convinced from where I sit that the information in the briefing to work out the future arrangements would necessarily include those who really want to be included; but I think I have made my point.

[10.45 am]

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** You have.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, very well David. Can you tell us what you think are the factors for the success of the Avon Community Development organisation? What can actually drive it? What keeps it running?

**Mr Singe:** Passion and hard work; quite simply. The big hurdle for the foundation was to be able to be well enough resourced to employ a CEO. I think all of you—in fact, I know all of you—have experiences where you see an organisation and it changes its whole status and capacity as soon as it is able to be an employer. So it goes from being a volunteer body of people with good intention to being something that has got some guts. The trick was to work out how to have enough money for them to employ the CEO. Now, they got over that hurdle. That hurdle, from memory, took roughly five years to work out how to do it; and, like every organisation, I can remember it going through peaks and troughs at meetings out at the Meckering sports club, because that was neutral territory and away from Northam for

about eight years to actually work out how to keep this thing going. But the appointment of the CEO and the financial capacity—it has membership from state government, local government and the private sector, which means it works on a membership base. It has now been reinforced substantially through the aged care facility referred to earlier because they have sold it. They actually managed it, so they actually, as a community group, became the owner of a 40 bed aged care facility, and they have sold it so they have got money. They have enough money not to worry about employing a CEO any longer. They also have sufficient funds to have to spend quite a bit of time, which they are doing currently, to discharge their philanthropic obligations and work out what their next task should be. They have so far spent a good 12 months on it and I encourage them to do it slowly and work out what they might do. Indeed—and I will jump on it very quickly—it could be in the area of housing, which of the four pillars in regional development is the one that the development commission has very little to do with. But there is a wonderful model in Wongan Hills that a group of Wongan Hills businessman put together of investment in house construction. The CEO of the Avon Community Development Foundation is now also a member of the development commission board, so there is a touch of professional incest in how the system all works. However, he has been up to Wongan Hills because he discovered as a board member not long ago that this was happening, and is working with his foundation board to see whether that could actually be a replicated model through the foundation. Housing, of course, would be great because Northam at the moment has 1 100 blocks of land that have been subdivided and no-one in living memory in Northam can recall a time when there were 1 100 blocks of land on the market. Trying to get a house on them is a bit difficult; so this could be the foundation's very practical contribution to one of those four pillars of regional development.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does that fit in with your pre-fabrication industry that you have got running?

**Mr Singe:** Yes, you are going exactly down the lines; and one of those, by the way, is a very entrepreneurial Western Australian businessman. He actually has a whole partnership in China. He is involved in a partnership where these things are actually built in China and it is actually Chinese stuff coming here, because they do it better.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** So, David, just getting back, you obviously mentioned that it is key personalities who drive this.

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** So, you have Minister Chance and Minister MacTiernan who are working together.

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** If personalities change, if there is no documentation or an MOU or anything of understanding for future generations to come in over the top of you guys, what happens with it?

**Mr Singe:** This is not my favourite topic, risk management, but I am sure if I sat there with someone in risk management they would say, "Oh God!" because one is left entirely vulnerable to these things. So from a development commission perspective, I always encourage succession planning within an organisation as much as I can, and I do it in the commission. I try very hard to make sure that the way we operate means that we are all incredibly dispensable, and I regard my own dispensability as being my greatest achievement, quite frankly; so when I go on long service leave I come back and find the thing has not died. If I can instil that into these other organisations, and if the commission can assist them with that, we regard that as being a valuable function. The commission has two programs. We have talked about the objects and functions of the act. We have always been measured on only two programs. Back in the colourful mid-90s, when we had the big fights with Treasury and everybody about accountability, performance measurement, KPIs and every other thing that we can think of, the regional development portfolio sat there and said, "We are too hard to measure; our job is too complicated." I must say the response from the other side said, "No you are not", which was probably the best response to actually tell us we had to do it. So we have two programs at the commission, and we are measured on the provision of information and on facilitation services. So under both of those programs I can do all of the things that I have talked about this morning with you in the committee, and that includes the succession planning. So you can pick so many topics and say that it a valid piece of work for the commission to undertake, and quite clearly if you are in a partnership, the spirit of the partnership is to make sure that everyone does survive and prosper; but it is a threat and it is very hard. I am a city person, I grew up in the city, I love cities and all the rest of it; but I did a degree in regional planning, a masters degree, and I am an odd creature because there are very few regional planners in Australia and I happen to be one of them. One of the things that attracted me to do that and—I never thought I would be working in country Australia for most of my career—one of the attractions was that in the country the need for partnership and the way in which people have to behave is so different from being in the city. I recognised that as a student as a principle and then suddenly discovered that if I really wanted to do it passionately I would have to go and do it in the country. I think the difficulty there is that it is easy to be seen that one whinges from the country when things are different. If you put it on a positive foot, the opportunities in regional Australia to do things differently are fantastic because of the intimacy and the ability to be able to talk between the leaders; whereas in the city much more of the life might be incredibly good, but it is incredibly professionally isolated in one way. So one is in one's own little network in a corner. Out in the country you have no choice but to be multiskilled and you have no choice but to know lots of people; it is like that for all our regions and all our communities. I think that comes with an obligation to ensure that the succession planning and the partnerships last; and, look, I am very selfish about this. I want them to work; it makes my life easier. I am quite selfish about it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** David, can I ask you: is there something that government can do legislatively or otherwise to mitigate that risk or to remove those threats? I mean, you mentioned LandCorp.

**Mr Singe:** I have an answer that is slightly to the edge of your question, if you would let me have a little bit of indulgence, because I do want to get it in.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think I would be very hard to stop you!

**Mr Singe:** You are welcome! You asked me into the room and Brian is a decent man!

I am a CEO in government so I do a performance system, right, and it strikes me that there is so much talk over a long period of time about partnerships. At risk of seeming slightly cynical over nearly 21 years in Western Australia doing this job, there is a lot of conversational goodwill that is had in a meeting, and by the time you are more than 50 metres from your front door, you are back to the reality of paperwork. I rather suspect that some attention could be paid to the CEO's performance documents; to actually put in there that there is some value to the CEO in achieving some of these joined-up things, because I do not see where the pillar is that holds this together. I cannot find a foundation in government that actually meets the objectives that you are talking about in this committee. I could be really wrong, but from where I sit I am right in my opinion because I have not seen it in nearly 21 years from country Western Australia. So, I can go down and try my engagement with education and training with my board members and not do well; or I can do it with health and have continuing success; or I can go to planning and have a roller coaster ride, which is going now quite well. I can do it with these things but it just struck me that the key to it really is back to the leadership, and the leadership in the public service is the CEO; and unless the CEO feels obligated in some way, then it may not happen.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** David, how do you engage with the education department to improve to at least get where you are at with country health?

**Mr Singe:** We have stopped.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Is that a "metrocentricity" philosophy? Have you been able to sort of put your finger on it and try to get around that or get over that?

**Mr Singe:** How do I answer this? I think it is a cultural circumstance that has been born of a lot of issues over a long period of time in the agency. I will be brave enough to say that I think it is almost a defensive mechanism.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Yes, so the fear or like a —

**Mr Singe:** Terrified of actually engaging with anyone because there is no control; whereas in health they got over that and they were not actually terribly controlling, because if I go back to the nature of the client base, education other than compulsory is by choice; health is not. So health has to front up to whatever marches in its door whereas education and training is a different world, and I just suspect that it is fear of not being able to control. I do not think it is a personal thing; I think it is a deep-seated culture that from my perspective has got considerably worse over my time in the public service here.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** David, I find that extraordinary, because as a metropolitan member that sort of thing would not happen without some engagement with school communities. I mean, it has happened at a local planning level when you have a school closure, then there has to be stakeholder engagement. So to me, listening to what you have had to say, there are some serious inequities, and how we deal with it here at a metropolitan level and how —

**Mr Singe:** Sadly, I will add on very quickly, Pingelly and Wubin were in consecutive years. We had already made our position clear about Pingelly, and Wubin happened the following year.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Despite what you had said; despite your input?

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Despite all that?

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** David, thanks very much, I am just conscious of the time.

**Mr Singe:** Yes, so am I.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think we asked you one question right at the start!

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** And he covered everything!

**Mr Singe:** Pardon me, Mr Chair, but everyone out in the wheatbelt would laugh in empathy!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much for coming in and imparting that knowledge to us. You have made me want to go and tour the wheatbelt and have a look at lots of these projects that are happening.

**Mr Singe:** I shall get my executive assistant to send you an email tomorrow afternoon when she is back.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes. I would love to travel out there as city member, and never having lived in country Western Australia I think it would be a —

**Mr Singe:** Someone asked me the other day who was chairing the committee and I said, “Well, not a regional MP. I don’t think there are regional MPs on it.”

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** There are two of us!

**Mr Singe:** So we would love to know we were close to you and give you a quick opportunity to see a few of these things, if you would like to.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I would absolutely love to.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** Yes, me too.

**Mr Singe:** And the same for both metropolitan members.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** Absolutely!

**Mr Singe:** Just to have the opportunity to talk to people, other than me, to get a perspective about the topic because it is such an important topic. I am so pleased that the committee—

**The CHAIRMAN:** I also want to see if there is the same exuberance and enthusiasm with the rest of your board and your people out there that you are carrying.

**Mr Singe:** I have to say it, but they are all enthusiastic; quite exhausting is the term.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They are all like you! That is great. David, can I thank you very much? I just have one little piece to read to you so you know what happens after today.

**Mr Singe:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Again, thanks for your evidence before the committee. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Could you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 days of receipt? If we do not receive the transcript back within that time, we will deem it to have been correct.

**Mr Singe:** Okay; that is fine.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So again, David, thank you very much.

**Mr Singe:** That is understood; thank you very much; and Brian, you have my contact.

**Principal Research Officer:** I have, yes.

**Mr Singe:** So I do not need to actually do anything about that. Thank you, Mr Chair; thank you, members.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you, David.

**Hearing concluded at 10.58 am**