

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

**PETITION 132 — OPPOSE FUNDING CUTS TO THE
DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2016**

SESSION ONE

Members

**Hon Simon O'Brien (Chairman)
Hon Stephen Dawson (Deputy Chair)
Hon Brian Ellis
Hon Paul Brown
Hon Samantha Rowe**

Hearing commenced at 10.04 am**Mr CRAIG PARR****Lead Organiser, Community and Public Sector Union–Civil Service Association of WA, examined:****Mr ANDREI BUTERS****Campaigns and Community Organiser, Community and Public Sector Union–Civil Service Association of WA, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Good morning. On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome our witnesses to our hearing today. I would like to introduce my colleagues. On my left is Hon Paul Brown. To the right of me—not normally described in that fashion, sorry about that!—is Hon Stephen Dawson and Hon Samantha Rowe. You will have signed a document titled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you both read and understood that document?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. A transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, could you please quote the full title of any document you might refer to during the course of this hearing for the record. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record, and if for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today’s proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise you that publication or disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute a contempt of Parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege.

Mr Parr, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Parr: Yes, I would. First of all, I would like to thank everybody for the opportunity to be here today to talk about the crisis facing the most vulnerable children and families across this state. We are here today as a result of a petition that was signed by 870 Western Australians from the far north of Western Australia to the great southern and all points in between. The petition calls for five actions that, if implemented properly, will go a long way to ensuring that when it comes to caring for our kids, every child counts. The five action items are: ensuring that every child at risk has a dedicated caseworker; a commitment from government to the programs that prevent children coming into care; a safe, fair and reasonable workload for all CPFS employees; ending recruitment freezes and stopping cuts to child protection; and that child protection is government business. Currently as it stands in Western Australia, 655 children are in a queue waiting for someone to care. They receive very little support. They are voiceless. They did not choose this life; it was chosen for them. What kind of society do we live in where it is acceptable for 655 of the most vulnerable children to be left waiting for the support that they need? I will read a quote from a young Aboriginal girl who is in foster care who told of her experience in the recent “Raising Concerns in Care Report”. She said —

My case worker doesn’t come to see me. Like I’ve not seen my case worker for more than a year now. She is my legal guardian and she makes the final decision for me but when I don’t see her for so long I can’t tell her anything. When I ring her most times she is not in the office.” ...

Can we as a society look at this young person, look her in the eye and tell her that there is not the time for her? That our promise of support for her and hundreds of other kids at risk can no longer be fulfilled because they are at the end of a very long list?

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support is struggling. The dedicated workers who provide support to our most in need are at breaking point. Their case loads continue to climb and they work under a regime where ticking boxes and filling in paperwork is prioritised over face-to-face contact with the kids that they care for. The upper limit of 15 cases is now used as an average—an indicator that things are fine—when the reality is that our members are drowning. The department is struggling, and under this pressure of budget cuts, under-resourcing and an ever-growing number of children at risk, it shuffles cases around and hides the true extent of workload. Team leaders are pressured by upper management to shuffle the numbers and hide the cases so that things look better than they really are. Let us be very clear: when we talk about shuffling cases and hiding cases, we are talking about kids; we are talking about hiding kids and shuffling kids. When people stand up and question why the department is not being transparent about the true extent of the crisis, they are moved on or they are told that they are not a team player. A senior child protection worker described the way workload is managed like this —

The numbers get shuffled around. Some other workers are struggling or off sick or for whatever reason they have too many numbers under the name so their cases get put under my name. I hate that because I know nothing about those cases. I feel like I'm carrying the burden. The other caseworkers have something like 18 cases while I've got my 15. I get rid of three more and then I immediately receive another three. It's just rubbish.

In the lead-up to this hearing we consulted with nearly 200 child protection workers from across the state. They have shared their stories and experiences with us, and today we welcome the opportunity to share them with you. Child protection is always going to be an emotive issue; after all, we are talking about the most vulnerable children in our society. These children deserve a happy life and a chance to reach their potential and a bright future—a future that can be made more certain by leaders who show that they have a heart by resourcing the department in a way that shows that every child counts. Thank you.

[10.10 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks very much, Mr Parr, for that opening statement. By way of correspondence, you have also provided us with a submission, “Petition 132 Hearing Summary Report — Every Child Counts”, dated 14 November 2016. We will consider that document tabled for the purpose of the hearing. We have taken that document on board. We have been referring to it and we will be publishing it on our website, so we will include that perhaps by way of introductory remarks.

Thank you for your opening statement. Can I just ask you at the outset: what channels are there for you as a representative of child protection workers to communicate these concerns with the department? In everything that we have seen so far there seems to be a disconnect in the sharing of communication. Have you got a good relationship with the department?

Mr Parr: Our main mechanism for talking to the department face to face around issues is through a joint consultative committee that meets about every six weeks. Sitting on that committee is two of the executive directors and some of the HR people from the department. If we have a specific issue that we want to discuss, they will call in whoever is the known expert on that subject. We attend that meeting with our union delegates, sometimes myself and sometimes my union organiser, and we have been raising issues around workload and the impacts on our members for a number of years through that forum. In 2014 we tried to work together with the department in a workload committee, which actually went for about six months. We sat down with the department and we raised these concerns with it and we tried to work on some clear strategies on how we could make things better for our members. Unfortunately, after six months we basically got to a position where

the department did not agree there was a workload problem. We got bogged down in semantics about what a case load actually looked like and we found that we were getting nowhere, so we had to look for other avenues to try to address the issue. This petition is one of the results of the other avenues that we are trying to explore.

The CHAIRMAN: There seems to have been an exponential increase in workload, and we express that perhaps by numbers of children in care or in protection. Is that your assessment as well?

Mr Parr: Absolutely. Since 2009 there has been a 40 per cent increase in kids in care. That is based on the department's own figures. Over that time the increase in caseworkers has not kept pace with the amount of kids coming into care. That results in a situation where the caseworkers who were doing the work are dealing with more and more cases coming through the door but they are not getting any additional resources to help them cope with that demand as it comes through. We know that in 2009 there were approximately 659 caseworkers available; that does not mean that they were actually on the ground because there is often a high level of vacancies that are not filled. In 2016 the latest figures that we get from *Hansard* are at 771. That is around about a 17 per cent increase, if we want to talk about numbers, but at the time over that period there has been a 40 per cent increase in kids in care, so the figures just do not add up.

The CHAIRMAN: You expressed concern about the case load of caseworkers and you also indicated, I think, that it comes down to a problem of definition too. In contemplating 15 cases, for example, as workload and the question of what is a case, have you got any observations or insights that you can provide to us about how 15 cases do not always equal 15 cases depending on circumstances?

Mr Parr: Absolutely. When the original workload order, which is supposed to govern how workload is managed, came into fruition through work between ourselves and the department, 15 cases was always supposed to be an indication of an upper limit—the absolute maximum. It was for people who were senior child protection workers. Not all those cases would have a high level of intensity or complexity. What we know is that over time the department started using the upper limit number of 15 as an average—as an indicator that things are okay—but a case is not just a case. There are multiple factors that can increase the complexity of a case. We can talk about a family group that has multiple children with some in care and some not in care, or they all might need care. There may be domestic violence in that family, drug and alcohol issues or mental health issues. The children might be hard to find because of the transient nature of how that family lives. One case could take up a whole week for a caseworker in some instances. To say that 15 is a sign of everything being fine is just simply not true.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it the case that with an evolution that you have described, that if 15 becomes the average rather than the upper limit with 40 per cent more cases, that it tends to become that all the cases that are included in a case load are actually the more difficult ones and that others just are not allocated a caseworker at all?

Mr Parr: What our members tell us is that in that 15 what has happened is that a caseworker could be carrying 15 enormously intense cases all at the same time, which means they are juggling family groups and the contact they have with kids. They are carrying this burden of a massive increase of risk on their shoulders. The more stable cases are supposed to be put on what is known as the “monitored list”. I refer to Margaret Quirk in the parliamentary hearing into the tragic incidents at Bunbury last year. She herself said that the words “monitored list” are weasel words. It does not take very much for a case that is on a monitored list to flare up, for there to be a breakdown of placement or for something really, really serious to happen, which means that that case all of a sudden needs immediate responses from caseworkers to try to deal with it.

The CHAIRMAN: What does “monitored” mean?

Hon PAUL BROWN: What level of engagement does someone who is on the monitored list expect?

Mr Parr: I think we have a quote, which is directly from the workload order, about a monitored case. No, I cannot find that and to save time I will not try. You could say that a case on the monitored list is dealt with at arm's length. There may be tasks assigned to that case that are being managed by a caseworker. I will give an example of a family group that is in a stable placement. In that instance the caseworker's job may be to touch base with the foster carer at intermittent periods to see that things are okay. There is no active, direct involvement with that family group. When the system is operating at such a high level of intensity, the distance between the caseworker and the monitored list tends to get further and further away. Imagine if you are operating in an environment where you are carrying all this burden and this risk on your shoulders, and if you think there is a case on the monitored list that is sitting there and stable it is human nature that you want to take your eye off it so that you can focus on the higher level of risk involved in some of your other cases.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: How long might it be before the caseworker is actually in touch with that family? Is it months or years?

Mr Parr: That can vary. I cannot put a definite figure on that. It can be months. But we could probably provide further testimony to that stuff in writing at a later date if the committee deemed that to be warranted.

Hon PAUL BROWN: In addition to that, what would be your view, if you have got the information, of the average time that someone might stay on that monitored list without a caseworker?

Mr Parr: I cannot give a definite time of an average amount of time on the monitored list. In the research that we did with our caseworkers over the past week leading up to this we did hear stories of cases being monitored for months, and we did also hear some stories from people about cases that were on the monitored list for up to two years.

[10.20 am]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask a question on the same topic. Mr Parr, page 5 of your document that you provided to the committee, the hearing summary report, refers to "Data Day", which is a day every month that a snapshot of workload is taken via the department's program ASSIST. What is data day and what happens on data day?

Mr Parr: Back in 2007 when we worked with the department to come up with the workload order, one of the stipulations is that the department reports to us about how many cases are on the monitored list and how many caseworkers have above 15 during that monthly period. Data day is the day on which they take a snapshot of all the districts to measure how many people are above 15 and how many cases in each district are on the monitored list. An email will go out to team leaders and district directors and it will say, "Today is data day. Please make sure that nobody is above 15", or sometimes they will identify, "Such a person has 20 cases. It's data day. Please ensure that they are below 15 cases before reporting occurs."

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: How do they ensure that they are below 15? What happens to those other five cases?

Mr Parr: As you would have seen from the evidence that we gave, they move cases around, they shuffle them or they may put them under another caseworker's name, but, really, they are still working on that case. So there may be somebody who has 12 cases and they will take cases off them and give them to that person so it looks like this person has less than the 15.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: So, just to be clear, that caseworker who has 20 will still remain with 20 cases but for reporting purposes they sit with somebody else.

Mr Parr: Absolutely.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: So it is kind of a cheating of the system.

Mr Parr: Absolutely. It means that there is no transparency and no integrity in the data that we receive. I have a quote here from a team leader, if I may read this to you. The team leader is the meat in the sandwich because they are the one who is told that someone in their team has this amount of cases and they need to fix it. The quote reads, “I’m a team leader and each month I’m directed to ensure that each team member has 15 or less cases and that there are no children under 5 years on the NLO list”—NLO list means nominated liaison officer, another word for the monitored list—“Those cases are then NLO’d to me, so essentially I’m carrying out my own work responsibilities as a team leader and case managing anywhere up to 40 children. There appears to be no mechanism to count how many children are allocated, albeit as NLO. Case management tasks still need to be undertaken to the team leaders. So basically they’re moved around, but only in name. That person who has that case assigned to them, they’re still doing all the work to do with that case. So it’s just about the numbers. It’s not about the real situation.”

The CHAIRMAN: We will be following that up with the department a little bit later on today.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Just one more question on that, Mr Parr. So data day finishes: what happens on the next day? Do those cases go back to the caseworker? Do they move on the list or do they still stay with their NLO or on the monitored list but the caseworker actually looks after them?

Mr Parr: We receive a report from the Department for Child Protection, usually via email. It has a list of how many people are above 15 and how many people are on the monitored list. Once we receive that list and they have provided their reporting obligations to us, the cases go back to that person. We have seen evidence of snapshots from the ASSIST program, which is the database that records how many cases people have, and we have seen examples where every single person in a district has 16 or 18 cases, and I have even seen one example of somebody having 22 cases. It is an indication that the whole system is under pressure. The figures we get are largely unreliable.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Just to be clear, and I just want to put this on the record, 20 cases may not equate to 20 kids. Once case could have four, five or six kids depending on the family.

Mr Parr: Yes, absolutely. Can I just say as well that the worrying thing that we see is that the same data that we are given from the workload snapshot, that is the same information that is given to Parliament to be put into *Hansard*. Not only are we receiving figures that you could say have been cleansed or that are unreliable, the same information goes to Parliament when parliamentary questions are asked about the data.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Thank you. We will raise that with the department. Mr Parr, can I ask about departmental reform. I understand that the department is going through a reform process at the moment that includes possible changes to district structures and job roles. Does the union support the need for structural change and are you being consulted and involved in that process?

Mr Parr: The union and our members would support any initiatives that can make things better for the Department for Child Protection. Anything that will give our members the tools to do their jobs better is something that should be supported. The issue we have is that there is no new funding for these initiatives. Whenever a new initiative is announced, basically the money has to be found somewhere, so it is taken from one part of the system and put in another part of the system. It does not have an impact on our members and the work that they do. The only thing that is going to have an impact on the work that our members do is a significant and targeted injection of funding to give them the tools necessary to do the best they can. In terms of consultation, we receive letters from the department saying, “We are intending to make this change”. Sometimes it consults with us and asks us to come to a meeting to discuss the changes. Other times we have to get on the front foot and we have to write a letter back to them saying “Hold on, you are making changes that have

a significant impact on our membership. You need to meet with us.” Most of those cases result in a meeting between ourselves and the department.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Can you structurally change the system so you are actually ensuring that more child protection worker positions are created or is it simply a case of more resources being needed?

Mr Parr: Any moving of money around and structural reforms is just creative accounting. It is the same pot of money. It is the same amount of people doing the work, but at the same time the amount of kids coming into care increases. Our members are being asked to do more with less every day and that means that they are carrying more and more risk. You cannot have new initiatives and new reforms if there is no new money because another part of the system will fall down.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: From information provided to questions in Parliament and at budget estimates last week, the issue of safety and wellbeing assessments was raised. Can you explain to the committee what a safety and wellbeing assessment is? I think there is a statutory or mandated time line in which those things are supposed to happen.

Mr Parr: A safety and wellbeing assessment is the point where a caseworker is required to undertake the investigation and to make an assessment of a child’s safety and wellbeing, as the name indicates. That is where they would sight the child, they would do some research and they would actually analyse and assess the level of risk that that child is suffering under at that current moment in time. The response times for the commencement of a safety and wellbeing assessment are: priority 1, which is supposed to be undertaken within 24 hours; and priority 2, which is supposed to be undertaken within two to five working days. We know that responses to questions asked in the Legislative Council this year revealed that on 30 November 2015 there were 692 SWAs open for more than 90 days. We also saw a report recently in August where out of the 16 districts, nine of them were at red status, which meant that the average days a SWA was open for was 90-plus. Six districts were at yellow status, which meant the average days open were 51 to 90 days and only two districts out of the 16 were coping with the SWAs initiated but had not been commenced at an acceptable level. That is another indicator of a system under pressure. You have all of this work, but at the same time our members have to try to meet the compliance requirements of trying to undertake the SWAs within the time frames and under the current resourcing. It is just unrealistic.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: So in practical terms for a child in care what does an SWA being open for 60 or 90 days mean to that child?

Mr Parr: That would mean that that child is not sighted. It could mean that no-one has actually gone and spoken to that child or that family and done the analysis as to whether there is a high enough level of risk to warrant support from the department or some family support with the department. Through this process we spoke to caseworkers all around Western Australia. I will give an example of a caseworker—I will not say where she is from. She was made aware of two young children. Somebody had rung up the department and said that a two-year-old was crossing a main busy street. That caseworker, because of the pressure that she was under, had to make an assessment as to whether we have the resources to send somebody out there to do that assessment to see if that child was at risk. Given the level of intensity and complexity of the work that that caseworker was undertaking, she basically had to queue that case because she was dealing with such horrible situations with her other cases. She had to make that call. Is it right that every day our members, because of a lack of resources, have to make calls like that?

[10.30 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Could you comment on the part of your submission that questions the government’s commitment to its early intervention and preventative programs? Could you elucidate

some of your specific concerns? Possibly you might also make reference to Responsible Parenting Services.

Mr Parr: Absolutely. Our members tell us that the most important work in child protection is getting in early before it becomes a crisis, working with families to give them the skills and abilities to be able to keep their kids so that we do not have an influx of kids coming into care. The specific example I will give is the Responsible Parenting program. The Responsible Parenting program is the umbrella term for Best Beginnings, which works with young mothers before they give birth to their child and works with them as a child with an infant to develop mothering skills and to be able to cope with having the child. Parent Support works with kids who usually have been referred to us from another agency, sometimes juvenile justice, whose parents are struggling to cope with the behaviours that they are exhibiting. Both of those programs were independently assessed by PricewaterhouseCoopers and an assessment was made about the success of those programs. The response to that from this government was to pull \$10 million from funding this year, and next year funding will disappear altogether. PricewaterhouseCoopers assessed the dollar-by-dollar success and return of those programs as this: for every dollar spent on Best Beginnings, the evaluated saving was \$3.85. For every dollar spent on parent support, the evaluated saving was \$7.22. But it is not just about the dollars; it is about the impact on communities. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report highlighted the impacts of Responsible Parenting and the success of it in regional areas. I will read a bit from that report so that you can see that even an external, independent body conducted to do this research said this —

Cessation of RPS services in the expansion districts would be anticipated to lead to a deterioration of client outcomes in areas including family function, child development, child and adult health and child education, with attendant increases in costs to both the public and the families involved.

Workloads for child protection and juvenile justice teams would be expected to increase as family outcomes would deteriorate without the support RPS can provide.

We can see that even when we have a report that says how fantastic a program is and how effective it is, the money is pulled away. As a result, over the next period there will be at least 63 job losses within the department as the FTE for that program is wound back and eventually abolished.

The CHAIRMAN: I was just looking at an extract from the budget and where we have some expenditure items. I am not necessarily seeing where there is a reduction in the budget. Obviously we need to look a bit deeper. Can you identify any specific areas of concern?

Mr Parr: For the department's general budget or for early interventions?

The CHAIRMAN: Areas that relate specifically to program delivery of the type that you were just talking about. This is not an estimates hearing, but you may be aware that in this current financial year apparently \$6 million has been allocated for Responsible Parenting Services that was not available last year, for example. That sounds to me like a supplement or an addition, rather than a cut. I am also aware of some of the dark arts of Treasury and how things are portrayed. I am just wondering whether you can identify for us where the cuts are that you are referring to in your submission.

Mr Parr: I might defer to Andrei for that one because he has the figures in his hand.

Mr Buters: Thank you very much. My understanding of the \$6 million is that it was packaged to keep the program going because it was identified as a success, but in the budget documents this year for the Department for Child Protection and Family Support a table lists changes to frontline services and in that table is listed a figure of \$27.6 million going down to about \$15.8 million, so a cut of basically \$11.837 million. As Craig mentioned, next year is when the program will close completely.

Mr Parr: What I will also add, if I may, about the budget of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support is that we need to be aware of the impacts of the workforce renewal policy. The workforce renewal policy means that if a frontline child protection worker leaves the department at the end of the year, the department receives only 90 per cent of the aggregate salary over the year back. That is an ongoing cut to the salary of child protection, which means that it has a shrinking pool of money for salaries. When we throw into the mix the one per cent efficiency dividends over the last few years, there is a little sustained chipping away of the department's budget that over time leads to the impacts of the things we mentioned in our report and the evidence that we are giving today.

The CHAIRMAN: Again, there are some things there that we will perhaps have to follow up more with the department, and we will do so. I want to canvass a couple of other points that you have raised as matters of concern from your members. One theme that comes through is the role played by the community sector as opposed to the purely government sector in relation to child protection. What role do you think there is for the community sector to play in child protection services?

Mr Parr: I think there are some fantastic community organisations out there doing some wonderful work in this space. What our members would say is that the role of the community sector is to support the department. It is to provide services around the edges of the core function of what is child protection work. We think that child protection work should be the core function of government and that it should be resourced appropriately and that the community sector is there to provide those programs around the edges, not to replace services that are already delivered by government.

The CHAIRMAN: What sorts of services are you alluding to?

Mr Parr: Some of the services that we have in Western Australia are things like drug and alcohol counselling. There are people doing great work in the community sector around domestic violence, but we believe that the core function of child protection is government business.

The CHAIRMAN: By that you mean the case load management, the monitoring. I am having difficulty with this term "monitoring" as it seems to be marked by a lack of monitoring, so that is where I am confused about it. But you see those sorts of functions as being done by government offices?

Mr Parr: And providing support to children and families before things become a crisis, so that the whole function of the department is not just dealing with crisis when things get so horrible that people's children need to be taken away. That is some of the work of the Best Beginnings and the Responsible Parenting program. It was funds allocated to this end. So you do that work with the families, you do that work with young mothers, you provide the family the opportunity to demonstrate that they have the skills to keep hold of that child before it becomes a crisis.

The CHAIRMAN: I admit I am being the devil's advocate, and my question will not be music to the ears of the public sector staff association or union. One would think that surely aspects that you have just spoken of, such as providing skills for new parents and so on, and that sort of life coaching, could be provided by the non-government sector?

[10.40 am]

Mr Parr: What I can say about that is that, in terms of the conversation we have been having with our members, in the metro area people have access to those kinds of services through the community sector. However, if you are working in a remote community, where a lot of our members work, those services simply do not exist, and the cost to the community sector to be flying somebody up to Halls Creek or Wyndham is just not realistic for them to be able to have the budget to be able to deliver those services. I will quote another caseworker on the NGO services, if I may —

Really a lot of the NGO services are not there, we don't have any family reunification services, we don't have any men's domestic violence services. Generally we are lucky that our clients prioritise the services that we do have but it is so limited and the standard is very poor in terms of the complexity and the trauma that our clients and children have been through. The level of expertise is just not there to do the work that we need. They don't get funded enough to pay enough to attract those skilled qualified people that have the skills to do the work and deal with the trauma and historical and intergenerational complexities with the clients that I have. They just don't have the skills. We can't attract that level of skill.

That is from a person from the south west district saying that they do not have the support from the NGO sector there. We have been consulting with the community sector over the past few months because we know that there are a lot of similarities in the stuff that we are saying and that they are saying. What we are hearing from the community sector is that the pace of change that this government wants to hand over tasks of government to them is going at such a rapid speed that they actually cannot keep pace with the demands that the government wants to put on them. It happens both ways. The government wants to give more to those community sector organisations but they are not ready to take on a lot of the functions that the government wants them to take on.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Chair, can I return briefly to caseworkers? What happens to the cases of a caseworker who goes on leave, whether it is sick leave or extended leave?

Mr Parr: There are a couple of options. One of the things that would happen is that the case would be allocated to another caseworker, or it would become monitored. It would be put on a monitored list and some of the tasks associated with that case might be monitored. We have spoken to people who have said that they went away and the case was put on a monitored list and when they came back, no work had actually been done on that case.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: The other question I had related to foster carers. From answers to parliamentary questions we know that many foster carers have multiple children in their care. Does the union have a view on that and the number of foster carers and the role of foster carers?

Mr Parr: The department obviously struggles to attract enough foster carers, and you can understand why: it is an extremely difficult job. We are dealing with children who have suffered extreme harm and trauma, so we can understand that it is very difficult for the department to attract foster carers. Largely, a lot of the foster care work is done by family. What we do know is that the reports we are getting from our members is that in a lot of cases they are not able to provide the level of support for the foster carers that is needed to keep those kids in that placement. If you are a foster carer, you take on a child, and all of a sudden that child starts exhibiting certain behaviours that make it really difficult to fit in to a home environment, particularly if you have other children in that family. The foster carer tries to ring the department to ask for support and what we are hearing is that a lot of times their calls are going unanswered because the caseworker is so under pressure that they do not have the resources or the time to be able to provide that support to the family. I have a quote here from a 12-year-old female child who was in foster care —

I've had so many different case workers, like anything they were about to do, ends up not being done. Like me and my carer and carer's family were going to go to Bali for a holiday in a couple of months but I haven't even had my passport done and I told them last year and they haven't even done that. So now we are going to —

They ended up having a holiday in a Western Australian town and they were not very happy about that —

... instead.

You have these kids who are in care and the families who are doing a great job trying to look after them and they need a level of support from the department. But when a caseworker is having to

prioritise risk and harm, those other things that can help those placements stay stable so that they do not need the intensive work start to fall by the wayside.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Just to be clear then, another consequence of the massive workload of child protection workers is the potential for a foster care placement to fail purely because there is no support, so the cycle continues.

The other issue I want to ask about relates to staffing vacancies. We ask questions in Parliament regularly about the number of positions that are vacant in the department, particular child protection workers. It always seems to be the case that only a third to a half of the number of vacancies are being advertised. Do you have a view on that and why that happens? Is this a case of the department trying to save money, or is it simply that it is too hard to attract and retain child protection workers?

Mr Parr: We know that at any given time there are normally between 20 and 30 caseworker vacancies across WA. If we put that into some perspective, that is about the size of a Bunbury office, so that is basically a whole district office of vacancies. We do know that recruitment freezes have had a massive impact on this because the department could not advertise for permanent vacancies so a lot of those positions were filled with short-term contracts. And we know the impact having people who are in precarious work on short-term contracts has on their ability to build relationships with the children in their care. Like this child said, you have somebody on a fixed-term contract, the contract is not renewed and they leave, then another person comes in on a fixed-term contract and they have to try to start from scratch to rebuild that relationship with the child. We do know that in some district offices across WA—there are a lot of them—10 per cent of all the staff are employed on a fixed-term contract, which means that there is no certainty for the employee and no certainty for the child. Some of the reasons there are vacancies are, the department would say, because of some of the reforms they are doing. They are looking at where positions are not needed anymore. If a position is not needed, they have looked for where they can put a caseworker who is about to have their position abolished into that position.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Is that simply a case of moving a caseworker from one office to another, because I dare say that given the high numbers of children in care, we need caseworkers.

Mr Parr: Absolutely. Can you imagine if there are one or two vacancies in a place like Fitzroy Crossing or Halls Creek—a small office that may have only a handful of caseworkers? If you have two vacancies in an office like that, imagine trying to cope with the volume and intensity of the work for the other caseworkers who are left behind. It is unsustainable. Our members tell us every day that that is the kind of situation they are put in.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: So you see the case that the department would advertise for pools of staff—you go into the child protection pool. Everybody applies and if they get a tick off they just sit in the pool and they get a job as a job arises, and it might be going to Fitzroy Crossing or Halls Creek or anywhere. Does that still happen?

Mr Parr: I cannot really comment on the intricacies of the employment practices of the department. I do know that people do apply for jobs and they do go into a pool. Other than that, I do not have the details about the ins and outs of that process, I am sorry.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: From your perspective, are they advertising enough jobs? Are they actually getting out there and advertising the jobs, or are they simply trying to save money by saying that they will not advertise these now, and tough to the other staff?

Mr Parr: I think the point is that even if they fill those positions, we are still in a situation in which the number of kids in care has increased at such a level that even if we filled those 30 positions, there is still an enormous amount of workload; there is still an enormous amount of risk. The only way we will resolve that is, absolutely, we need to fill the vacancies, but we actually need more caseworkers and more resources to be able to cope with the problems we already have.

The CHAIRMAN: We have had a good hearing so far and we have gained a lot out of it; however, I think we probably must start moving towards a conclusion at this stage. I must ask before we do whether you want to raise or perhaps re-emphasise any other issues.

Mr Parr: What I would like to do, if I may, is read from another quote that I have in my notes, which paints the picture of what it is like for the reality of a child protection worker in Western Australia. The caseworker says that it is a pressure cooker for burnout. They are understaffed and under the pump, and understaffing has implications when caseworkers have to visit a home alone. They have to walk into very dangerous homes. Often they find out after the fact that weaponry has been found in the home and it is all drugs related. But they know that the department cannot afford to have two staff walk into such an environment. A home visit can take up to two hours. Their processes and policies tell them that they can have two people visit a home, but the reality is that it is just not the case. The workload is getting to a point where it compromises safe home visits.

We are not just talking about the safety of the child—absolutely, that is crucial to being able to do that kind of work. However, when a department is under-resourced the way it is at the moment, our members are walking into life and death situations every day, as highlighted in the statement that I just read to the committee.

[10.50 am]

Hon PAUL BROWN: That raises a question in my mind. You talked about the pool of staff previously with Hon Stephen Dawson. What experience, if any—what qualifications or background—do those new employees who are coming into the department bring with them to enter some of those very remote communities or some of the very complex family structures with very high-risk or at-risk children? What experience do they bring with them as new employees?

Mr Parr: That varies. We have new graduates who come in straight from university who bring with them the knowledge they have learnt on their course, but we also have people who have done social work in the UK or in other countries who bring with them their set of skills, so it varies across the department. I cannot give a direct answer about what experience each individual person brings to the role.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Given that there is a broad range of experience coming into that pool and that has been allocated out to caseworkers, in your experience is there any direction about those new graduates who probably have a lot of theoretical experience from university as opposed to field experience. Do you have any opinion about how that experience is being allocated into the case load management structure?

Mr Parr: I cannot answer that question directly but what I can say is that the feedback that we get from talking to our members is that there are people who come to the department with all the best intentions. When they see the reality of undertaking child protection work in Western Australia and working for the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, they are quite shocked. The feedback we get is that a lot of people are saying that they did not expect that it was going to be anything like this; that is, the level of intensity, the level of risk that people are carrying and the workload. What we see is that there is a high level of burnout among child protection members. People come to the department with all their ideals and their best intentions, and when they see what the reality is and that they cannot sleep at night because of the amount of risk that they are carrying on their shoulders, eventually they leave.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Is there any evidence about where that burnout is occurring? Is it occurring more in regional WA because of the travel and isolation and potentially the lack of support that they might find as opposed to being in the metropolitan area?

Mr Parr: Those figures are not reported in the annual report, so we do not have the direct information about where the burnout is occurring. What we do know is that our members tell us that

burnout is a definite issue for people in the department, but in terms of which districts, which areas, I cannot actually itemise that because we get most of our information from the department's annual reports, from *Hansard* and from direct conversations with our members.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: Is it your view that the child protection system is in crisis?

Mr Parr: Absolutely. Every day this is what I hear from members: the system is broken; families are broken; there are lots of broken children in Western Australia. We are not asking for a massive pay rise for child protection workers; all we are asking for is a significant targeting increase and injection of funding so that our members can do the job they were trained for and that they chose to do. I have heard stories over the past two years of working in child protection that you cannot help but be affected by. They are horrible stories of kids suffering neglect and of child protection workers doing their best, day in, day out, to try to fix those problems—problems that society has thrown at them. They just do not have the tools or the resources to be able to do that properly. They feel like they are scratching the surface. The compliance and reporting mechanisms have gone through the roof. One caseworker told us that 20 to 30 years ago 80 per cent of their work was working with a family, and 20 per cent of their work was paperwork and compliance. In 2016 we find ourselves in a situation where the department is so preoccupied with ticking boxes and getting KPIs that that has done an about-face. We have been told by plenty of members over the past couple of weeks through our survey process that they are seeing families and children 20 per cent of the time and on a lot of occasions they are spending 80 per cent of their time on compliance paperwork and reports, taking them away from that face-to-face frontline service. They chose to work in that environment because they want to work with kids, not sit behind a desk filling in reports and ticking boxes.

The CHAIRMAN: They are good points. I would like to thank you again for coming in today as we draw our hearing to a close. On behalf of my colleagues on the committee, please convey our best wishes and personal regards to your members involved in child protection for the work they are doing. If you could reassure them that we certainly appreciate and understand the at times very difficult nature of the work that has to be undertaken while acknowledging that so many of them are motivated by the satisfaction they derive from the work. It is not without some extraordinary challenges and they certainly enjoy the support of parliamentary members in doing that. Indeed, one reason we are having this hearing today is to try to give some practical demonstration of that. If you could convey to your members our best wishes and respect for what they are doing, that would be appreciated. With that, I declare this hearing now closed.

Mr Parr: Absolutely, I will do that.

Hearing concluded at 10.56 am
