

**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 TWO

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 11.02 am

Ms EMMA WHITE

Director General, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, examined:

Mrs PHILIPPA BEAMISH BURTON

Chief Finance Officer, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, examined:

Ms CHERYL BARNETT

Executive Director, Metropolitan Services, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, examined:

Ms JULIEANNE DAVIS

Executive Director, Country Services, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome our witnesses and observers to our hearing this morning. Witnesses will have signed a document entitled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you all read and understood that document?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and they are also being broadcast on the internet. A transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, if you quote any document could you also give us the full title for the record. Please be aware of the microphones and try not to cover them or rustle papers near them. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. 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 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.

The committee received petition 132, promoted by the union representing many of your employees, the Community and Public Sector Union—Civil Service Association of WA. Are you familiar with that petition?

Ms White: Yes, I am.

The CHAIRMAN: We are going to ask you to respond to a number of questions for our benefit as to the claims that are made in that petition. Firstly, in a general nature, it appears to us that the number of child protection notifications of abuse and neglect and, subsequently, the numbers of children referred to your agency have grown dramatically in the past five to 10 years. Why has that happened?

Ms White: That is correct. We have had a growth in demand that ranges between five and 10 per cent per year over the past 10 years. The big drivers for referral—the main reasons we get referrals from professionals and other members of the WA community—are with regard to family and domestic violence. I think there has been a welcomed increase in community understanding of family and domestic violence. We have had a national campaign. Some of the increase in awareness is reflected in the increase in notifications. Drug and alcohol misuse by parents and other adults in children’s lives is the other primary reason people make contact with us. The impact of that drug

and alcohol abuse is having a negative impact in some way on the child and the mental health issues of parents. It is these things in combination. We also have a growing number of families that we work with in the department who have been involved with the department over a number of years and often over many generations; again, it is the combination. We have also strengthened legislation over that 10-year period. In 2004, proclaimed in 2006, there was a fundamental shift in the legislation in the Children and Community Services Act, from the previous Child Welfare Act 1947. That has strengthened the legislative and statutory obligations right across the system for people to report. It reflects, I think, in WA and broader nationally people's understanding of the harm on children and understanding of the cumulative nature about the trauma, our understanding of neglect and certainly our understanding of the impact on children, both witnessing and being involved in instances of family and domestic violence. We have much more sophisticated MOUs and interagency protocols and coordination mechanisms with other government departments—importantly, Police, Health, Corrective Services and Education—where we now are much more prescribed and they are prescribed about when they need to report and how. These are the things that have seen our child protection system mature over those years. Of course, we saw the implementation of mandatory reporting in 2009—new statutory obligations on certain professionals to report. It is a strengthening of the system in part, but also reflects some of the really complex entrenched situations and challenges that families are grappling with and, most importantly, how children are experiencing them.

The CHAIRMAN: Clearly this has led to a growth in the workload of your officers. We are seeing, for example, that the number of children in out-of-home care has increased by about 40 per cent since 2009. How has your resourcing in terms of manpower and funding kept up with that requirement?

[11.10 am]

Ms White: With regard to the growth of children and young people in out-of-home care, as you have suggested, and quite rightly, we have had an enormous increase in those numbers. The rate at which children come into care has actually come down, particularly for non-Aboriginal families. We have not had the same trend and success with the rates of Aboriginals coming into care. Part of the Prudence Ford review—the independent review in 2007—put the department on that initial reform agenda; it was about establishing a resource demand model with Treasury and for government to design a way that helps the department through the resourcing keeping separate demands. We have had a demand model in place since 2008–09. The demand model has been reviewed by Treasury annually since that time. In fact, in recent months we have just agreed to another process to fundamentally review and rebuild that demand model. Things change all the time. We had the proclamation of changes to the Children and Community Services Act as recently as January this year. I think a very important development occurred where we strengthened the provision: for children who are witnessing family and domestic violence, it requires a child protection response and often a family support response to that child. We can see that even in a short period of time that is resulting in an increase in reports. So reviewing and rebuilding that demand model on an annual basis is really critical and that is something that we have been doing.

The CHAIRMAN: Obviously it has been an environment of change and evolution in recent years. Of course, organisations are often resistant to change in their culture. Has this been a real issue for your department to implement new models and so on to deal with the increased workload?

Ms White: I think change and demand is always a challenge. It is a combination. Child protection work is incredibly complex work. Frontline workers are often working with highly traumatised families and children with a range of issues going on. It is not just the presenting issue that is of concern for the child, but they might have some instability in their housing situation. There are other things happening in families' lives that are deeply troubling and also require very thoughtful work by professional child protection staff. The work is always stressful, almost by definition.

We are working with situations that are often really volatile, particularly when we see the impact of emergent challenges like methamphetamines and so on and so forth. They change the nature of the interaction with families at times. We are a learning organisation. Every year—every week to week, month to month, year to year—we learn more about the impact of certain things on children. We learn more about what works with families to make a sustainable difference. Being able to be responsive to that and always implementing change and improvement has to be part of how we manage our organisation. It has been for a long time and it certainly will be for the future, but it all has an impact on how you think through how to change something, how staff experience and contribute to the work. In response to your question, how we manage change and continually improve is very much part of our everyday work, and needs to be.

The CHAIRMAN: I would like to ask a couple of questions exploring the life of a caseworker to try to get a good handle around some of those definitions. I know that members also want to look at the impact on regional operatives as well. We will come to that in a moment. Firstly, what are the main duties of a caseworker? Is there a typical caseworker load?

Ms White: I might try to deal with duties and load separately. A lot of the duties for a child protection caseworker are prescribed under the act. Of course, we operationalise the act through policy positions, procedural and practice advice and direction to staff. Child protection caseworkers can have a real combination of matters that they are working with with the families. That can range from initial inquiries: we have had a report and we need to do some further talking with other professionals, look at our own information about the family and our previous involvement to work out what role should we or could we play. They could be undergoing safety and wellbeing assessments, which is how we do the assessment, planning and investigation work when harm or concern for a child has been put to the department. That can involve direct interviews and conversations with children. It can be big extended family meetings to put the concerns on the table and then really map out through our signs of safety approach with families—what is working well and what is not, and what are some of the concerns and how can we work from the strengths within a family to turn those strengths into safety and enduring safety for children. Caseworkers can be on any one day spending time with a child in out-of-home care, to appear in court for a trial. They might be preparing written reports on affidavits and so forth for a matter before the court. They could be working closely with another not-for-profit community sector organisation about how we can through coordinated and intensive case management help to facilitate support and services to families. Case management is a very diverse role. We have different ways of defining what category the case is, as it were, and that is aligned to the act, so it is children in care, families in that child safety space investigation, and of course intensive family support through the child-centred family support aspect of our act. That is just a flavour. It can be a day of packing your bag, getting in a car, driving to an unknown address, knocking on a door for a first time and introducing yourself to a family who may or may not be happy to see the department, as you would understand. It is a very grim day for families when child protection becomes involved in their life. They can be working with other professionals, advocating for children in care so they can support the individual needs of that child to access education and health. They can be facilitating contact and time spent between a child in care and their family in a setting from an office right through to a more informal setting at a barbecue or similar. It is a very diverse role.

The CHAIRMAN: This is quite a challenging question as we soon discovered as we have been talking about figures like 15 case loads or 18 in exceptional circumstances. The CPSU contended that there are many instances of caseworkers with 20 or more cases. Although recognising that there are cases and cases that give you a greater degree of workload from time to time, are there any hard and fast rules about the number of cases that is a reasonable load or does it vary widely?

Ms White: No, it is hard and fast. There is an industrial order that the department has obligations about, and there are accounting rules in that order. It is a maximum of 15 cases, and in exceptional circumstances that 15 can be extended to 18. We have very prescribed guidance in our case practice

manual that is available to staff and the public via our website with regard to how we manage the oversight and monitoring of those prescribed case loads. We also have guidance through the order about how other activities—for example, if a caseworker in a regional area has a case load but one day a fortnight is required to do duty, there is a prescribed measure about how that additional activity should reduce their capability or capacity to cover cases so the case load is brought down or brought up depending on what the circumstances are in accordance with their other duties as well. It is very prescribed, as is how we review, monitor and report our performance against those conditions in the order.

[11.20 am]

The CHAIRMAN: We received a submission via the union that I will quote to you. It said —

'I am a team leader and each month I am 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. Those cases are then NLO'ed to me. So essentially I am 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 (all be it as NLO—case management tasks still need to be undertaken) to team leaders.

We also heard that there is number shuffling that occurs on data day, where the figures are, in effect, fudged by direction so that it all looks well and that forms the basis of responses to parliamentary questions and so on. That is the allegation that has been put to us via those sponsoring the petition. Can you please respond to that?

Ms White: Yes, I will respond as best I can to each of the elements of your question. First and foremost, there is no advantage to fudge any books. The work is the work. The numbers of cases are the numbers of cases. We do not prescribe to that practice of changing the numbers for any reason, but I would say that from the director general's point of view it is in everyone's best interest from the front line working right through to the DG to be very clear and accurate about the number of cases and where they are so that we can manage not only the risk to children, but also the workload for staff. We have a monthly data day where we pull the data off the system so we can really check and double-check where the cases are, and make sure that the case loads of all caseworkers are in tolerance of the industrial order, as per our case practice manual. We send an email out to all staff, team leaders in particular, prior to data day with some direction about can you update the system. There is often a bit of a lag. As you would appreciate, child protection work does not stand still. It can be a day-to-day, week, month-to-month proposition about which cases need to take priority based on the safety and wellbeing of children. Every month it is a really important discipline that we actually make sure that the data is up to date so that when we get that data off, it is as accurate as it can be to truly reflect the workload for that month. The executive directors across the districts send out emails persistently before data day for that very reason. We then look at the data results, and from time to time there is a child protection worker that has got suddenly 19 cases so we then look closely at that. It might be because there is a large sibling group that has been allocated to that worker in the intervening month. There is also then a direction from the executive director, the district director and the team leader to re-look at that case load so that we can make that adjustment. It is quite a live process. With regard to team leaders and the monitored list, the monitored list is not a full-blown case management situation. Monitored lists are managed by either new or longstanding cases that are considered to be low risk, but it does not mean that there are not activities that are required on those cases from time to time.

The CHAIRMAN: What does monitoring mean?

Ms White: Monitoring means that they are actively monitoring the circumstances in that case and we are actively transitioning those matters to caseworkers depending on the need and risks to that child in that case. It means we are monitoring but they are not able to be allocated at that time. We do prescribe quite formally that no child under two should be on the monitored list.

Children under five are to be placed on the monitored list only if a safety and wellbeing assessment has commenced and immediate and serious risk is deemed not to be the case. Each district has a different way of monitoring that list depending on local circumstances. We have a lot of districts in the country in particular that do not actually have a monitored list but then we have some districts in the metropolitan area that actually have quite a large number of children and young people and families on that monitored list. For example, they might allocate two of their caseworkers full time just to actively monitor that list and do tasks from time to time. It might be that a longstanding child is in out-of-home care in a well-settled, supported placement when, suddenly, the department needs to support an application for that child to go on a school excursion interstate and that requires the departmental decision because of the legal obligations to the child in care. Alternatively, a new development can occur on that case where it immediately needs to be reallocated because the circumstances of that child have changed. Team leaders do have it allocated in their name, and after a period of time they can reallocate that case to the district director. It is about trying to escalate up responsibly the obligations and responsibility for that monitored list. It should not sit on the shoulders of individual workers. This is an organisational responsibility and so we try, through the order and our mechanisms within the department, to have an escalation process.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: As we have heard from parliamentary questions, there are over 600 children on that monitored list. Can we really have any confidence that all these children are safe when they get little or no contact with a caseworker?

Ms White: As I have just been describing, the conditions within the case that would facility them being on the monitored list is, by definition, that they have been assessed and determined to be low risk. Risk changes from day to day and week to week, so the act of monitoring those cases is really important. We have mechanisms in place that we can make changes to if that case is monitored or not, based on new information. Children generally on that list, if they are in care, are really long-term children in care. From time to time that is not the case, but it is based on a case-by-case circumstance. I think the active nature of these things is really important to note and to continually assess and reassess children's safety within the context.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Do you have any policies of rules around how long a child can remain on the monitored list and how often a case on the monitored list has to have some sort of interaction?

Ms White: The length of time a case is on the monitored list is determined by the risk to children rather than length of time, and I think appropriately so. We try to prioritise and reprioritise the work in all parts of the system based on impact to children. The formal arrangements that we have in the department and the written guidance that we have is that it is an active monitoring process, so there is a monthly review of the circumstances of that case as a system, but, of course, if new information comes in, that can be more frequently than once a month. Let us say that we get a report from the school regarding a concern for a child in care, such as how they are presenting or that something that has occurred. On that day we can make the determination on what sort of response is required and we make adjustments.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Thank you. Ms White, we heard evidence this morning that the child protection system is in crisis. Would you agree?

Ms White: No, I do not agree that it is in crisis.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: The chair raised comments earlier about the number of children in care having risen by about 40 per cent since 2009. We also know through parliamentary questions and by other means that the number of child protection workers has risen by less than half that. Surely that is a concern.

Ms White: The department is, without doubt, under pressure for some of the reasons we have spoken about and also under pressure from the work you need to do as an organisation to try to

balance the need for stability and preservation of what we know works but also the need to review and make changes. Some of the work that we have been doing in recent years is very much about, “Let’s review how we have progressed against the intended outcomes of the Ford review. Let’s look at our current pressures and emerging issues, including the impact of ice, and the impact of other parts of external systems that actually impact on families, and, therefore, families that present to our system. Let’s also look at how can we make our next set of improvements and reforms to responsibly meet today’s need, but, just as importantly, future needs.” We are not in crisis but we are under pressure.

[11.30 am]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We have heard a couple of times about the WA Industrial Relations Commission decision in 2007 to mandate a maximum number of cases. You have alluded to the fact this morning that there seems to be more of a prevalence of meth or drug-related issues in relation to some of the cases we are dealing with now, and there is more. We know, for example, that police report that the incidents of domestic violence continue to rise. We have heard before from child protection workers that kids are coming into care earlier with more complex needs and behaviours. Is it time now to have a relook at that mandated maximum of 15 cases? Is that number still valid or is there rigour behind it given the complexity of cases that we are dealing with these days?

Ms White: I think there is a step before that. I think, as I flagged earlier, the need for us to review and rebuild the demand model based on contemporary settings this year is really important for us to continue to have our budget settings keep in step with demand. Family and domestic violence being prescribed in the act in a very different way from 1 January is a really concrete example of where that needs to be included in a different way than it has been previously. I think that that will give us the right evidence base and process with Treasury and other parts of the system to both confirm what our demand and budget settings need to be and what the demand model needs to be, and how we measure future demands so that we can continue to keep in step. I think the work in child protection grows in our understanding. For case workers, organisations, research groups and other stakeholders, our understanding about what is happening in families changes every year. It has been methamphetamines but we have always had something new and intense that has impacted on families and therefore the protection of children—family and domestic violence, mental health issues in families and drug and alcohol misuse. We have done recent research at a very granular case-by-case level and some data linkage with the Telethon Institute and beyond and that has really confirmed what those drivers are, so we need to be, as we have been, very targeted and very evidence based in where we are putting the resources and why and how our partnerships with other parts of the human services and social services systems are tracking because we know that the demand for child protection is not necessarily within the gift of the department. Of course, demand is driven by external things and other things happening in families. So we really need to develop mechanisms, like through our early intervention family support strategy, where we are developing joint outcomes for WA, for the social services system and for families most at risk of their children coming into care. It really is a welcomed development because there is an enhanced partnership and accountability and I suppose an outcome focus about where we are all putting our effort and why. These are important systemic issues. We have grown over the last 10 years as a social services or human services system in both complexity and capacity and the department’s work. Our partnerships and strategies need to reflect that and we have become larger and more complex. We have to build new systems both internally and in partnership to make sure that we are identifying families most at need and there is a collective and integrated response to those needs. We are really working to build capacity right across those settings.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: So that work on the demand model is happening now. When do you anticipate that will be finalised? When do you anticipate that you will have some sort of agreement with Treasury? Will that be in place before the next budget cycle?

Ms White: That is hard to answer completely accurately. Certainly our joint goal is to have something ahead of the next budget. We are just commencing the work. We are in the process of setting up the correct governance to oversee that work including setting up an expert reference group, which needs to comprise team leaders, assistant district directors and people who are very well placed to talk to the absolute activity-based level of detail about what it is that they do in the work, but also negotiate with external folk like Treasury about how do we do that, what counting rules need to apply and so on and so forth. We are going to expedite that work as quickly as we can but we also need to take the time to get it right. Our joint aspiration and our commitment is to have it ready for the next cycle.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We all know that early intervention is vital in working with families at an early stage. It pays dividends in the long run. We are aware that changes are being made to the program of funding for Responsible Parenting. Can you please identify to the committee what those changes are? I am aware that you have lost an amount of funding or you are losing an amount of funding. Could you let us know what those amounts are and, in practical terms, what that will mean for those services that have been run on the ground and what you anticipate doing differently to ensure that those families are actually given that assistance at an early stage?

Ms White: Just while we find the dollar detail for you, as has been discussed for some time now publicly and certainly internally, we had a proportion of our Responsible Parenting services—that is Responsible Parenting and Best Beginnings—funded through the royalties for regions program. They have been funding part of that program up to the tune of \$10 million out of the total \$23 million spend for some years now. We have been funded to transition the program in the next two years, so it is a scaling down of the money through the royalties for regions program. The department considers those programs critically important as part of our suite of responses to families. We have been working on an early intervention family support strategy as I have already mentioned and we see those services in combination with other resources within the department. We are also looking at expansion and improvement to other external programs such as the family support network, and, into the future, practical in-home support services that are designed and delivered purposely for Aboriginal children and families because they are most at risk of coming into our system. The Responsible Parenting and Best Beginnings workers that remain have been redistributed, as it were, across the state. They will sit within newly formed intensive family support teams where we will join forces between the remaining workers and other FTE that are already providing child-centred family support and other family support services within the department. They will form part of an intensive family support team of which there will be one in each district office across the state. I will just try to provide those dollar figures for you. I might just ask the CFO to do so.

Mrs Beamish Burton: Are you after the budget funding for this financial year?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: What we had, what we have lost and what it will lead to.

Mrs Beamish Burton: As Emma said, there was \$10.62 million in RFR funding and that is been transitioned out over the two years. It is \$6 million this year and \$3 million in 2017–18.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: And the year after is zero?

Mrs Beamish Burton: Yes, but there is also consolidated funding, so there was funding in the metro area, Kimberley and Peel regions already. That will be \$15 million in 2018–19.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Sorry, that is an expansion?

Mrs Beamish Burton: No, that was the existing funding. There was \$27 million in 2015–16.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Ms White, Ms Davis might be able to give you a hand with this question that is based on the regions. How many caseworkers are based in the regions and how many cases do they manage?

Ms White: Approximately 33 per cent of all our case management capability in this state is in regional WA. Julieanne has got her hands on the figures region by region.

Ms Davis: The actual total number of caseworkers is about 280 senior child protection workers and child protection workers. That does not include team leaders.

[11.40 am]

Hon PAUL BROWN: How many cases would they be managing?

Ms Davis: They are managing 3 048.

Hon PAUL BROWN: How many was that?

Ms Davis: It is 280 established FTE.

Hon PAUL BROWN: And how many cases are there?

Ms Davis: There are 3 000.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Of those roughly 3 000 cases, are the regional caseworkers located in the regions or do they also work out of Perth?

Ms Davis: No, they are located in the regions.

Hon PAUL BROWN: How many caseworkers out of Perth would also be managing cases in the regions?

Ms White: I might just say here that we have a number of children in care who were from a particular region who because of their individual circumstances have been transferred to the metropolitan area, some of whom are allocated to a caseworker at a metro district and others have formed a co-working relationship between the country district and the metropolitan district. We also have a small team—the country relieving team—that operates and is based in Perth, but is deployed to regional and country WA where there are assistant vacancies. It has been difficult to recruit in, let us say, Meekatharra for a period of time and/or there are some emergent pressure points in a particular region that needs central deployment to, I guess, back up and add to the effort. There is that aspect. We also have the service delivery case practice unit, based in our head office, which is a team of senior child protection workers. They are not carrying cases, but they are available to the state to support workers on the ground right across the state with regard to complex cases, advice about particular issues, so on and so forth. There is some broader support outside of the district.

Hon PAUL BROWN: They are support workers, but they are not the primary case managers in Meekatharra or Halls Creek or anything like that?

Ms White: That is right.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Are there any primary caseworkers in those far-flung communities, some of those very outreach communities, who are primary caseworkers based in Perth?

Ms White: No.

Hon PAUL BROWN: This is one of the questions I asked in the previous hearing. Obviously, a number of staff come into the system from a range of backgrounds; some would be new graduates and some would be coming with experienced backgrounds overseas, interstate or coming back into the workforce. Does the department have a process by which staff are allocated, either in the metropolitan area or regionally, based on their experience, or is it more about expedience?

Ms White: There are two parts to this. We recruit child protection caseworkers and other professionals in the department based on our preferred qualifications that are defined as most appropriate to support this work. But when staff join the department, they are unable to carry cases until they have undertaken the mandatory training that all new staff need to engage in, whether they are really experienced from other places or, in fact, brand-new graduates. We have a supervision

policy within the department where every child protection worker must have supervision in a very formal one-on-one way with their team leader or line manager that is an opportunity to not only really unpack and discuss the cases, seek advice, get input into critical decisions, but also discuss workload. We have a professional judgement model within the department that the workload management measure does allow for looking at the experience and expertise of staff. We have some really new staff that manage very well, very quickly. We have some more experienced staff who because of their particular set of skills, knowledge and expertise we keep at a lower case level for their particular purposes. There are several parts of how you would consider people's backgrounds and experience. I think that becomes more difficult in regional WA at times. Not with regard to the formal ways in which we support staff into the department, but, if you are a very small team in Halls Creek or Collie, you have a smaller team to draw on for support, which is why we have senior positions, in say, if it is Collie, in the Bunbury office, or a team in Perth, where staff can reach out and get that live support through videoconferencing or phones.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Those 208 regionally based caseworkers with 3 000 cases—that is pretty much a full complement for all of them if you look at it across the board. It is roughly 15 cases for each caseworker.

Ms White: An average of 11.

Hon PAUL BROWN: On top of that, in regional WA, is the monitored list. I heard you say earlier that the monitored list is managed by team leaders and team leaders only. Is there a requirement for caseworkers to be active inside that monitored list in either the metropolitan area or regionally?

Ms White: It is probably worth clarifying here. Yes, caseworkers are often involved in the active monitoring of that monitored list through tasks they might do, but there is a team leader—district director oversight of that monitored list. The caseworker is not responsible for that monitored list, but they may be responsible for some activity within those cases if that is a helpful application.

Hon PAUL BROWN: In regional WA, is that tasked over and above the roughly 15 allocated cases per caseworker?

Ms White: It will really depend. For example, we have other positions outside of the caseworker role that can assist with some activity. We have some districts that have allocated FTE caseworkers that that is all they do; they do active tasks on the monitored list. In regional WA there are some districts that do not have a monitored list at all. There are some districts that do have a monitored list and they have a particular way of both resourcing and oversighting that list.

Hon PAUL BROWN: How is it determined if one region and one district has a monitored list and one does not? How does that come about?

Ms White: It is demand through the front door. It is a changing proposition because, of course, we do not always know what is coming in the front door.

Hon PAUL BROWN: Today they might not have a monitored list, but tomorrow they might.

Ms White: Yes; in a month's time they might do. The monitored list and the results and data have remained pretty consistent over the last few years. We know that there are some pressure points with some regional districts, like the Peel district and the south west. That is in part about what is coming in the front door. They will—as we would support them to do—make a system around that monitored list that makes sense to the local conditions of that region. Whilst we have a statewide obligation to make sure we review and uphold the conditions of the order, which we welcome, we also want staff to be able to manage what makes sense in Collie as opposed to prescribing a statewide system.

Hon PAUL BROWN: How do you allocate or shuffle staff around the state given that obviously meth and drugs have a very big impact on your case load management? When Bunbury and Geraldton have been identified as the two major hot spots for meth use and we are seeing,

particularly in the Mid West–Murchison—Gascoyne area figures, I believe, that show a 65 per cent increase in domestic violence, how do you manage at a local level out of those local offices? When you are seeing a hot spot in meth use and a corresponding, I would think, increase in domestic violence, how do you manage those cases out of those district offices? Are you tasking additional resources into those offices to complement that case load?

[11.50 am]

Ms White: This is something that we are currently doing some work on. If I take us back to the Ford review, in 2007, where we developed the demand model, we were coming off such a low base as a department with regard to the resources we needed to deliver on our statutory obligations. New resources in the intervening years were very much about getting that spread in regional WA. Moving much more people living and working in regional WA rather than what it was before, when we did a lot out of the metropolitan area. Our resource allocation internally really from about 2008–09 and five years since has been about plugging what we knew were already the pressure points. In more recent years, in the way that you have described, and we have had some changes in our budget allocations, and we have different pressures than we had in those earlier years, we are in the process of, again hand in glove with the demand model, trying to build what would be a sensible resource allocation model for the department. It is an active conversation. You can see where the hot spots are. Sometimes where there is a spike in drug use or more family and domestic violence, you do really need to dig in and say, “Okay, are there NGOs and community sector organisations that are active in this space? What is the impact on us at the local district?” And district directors and senior staff that manage the operations in that area make those determinations.

We have moved staff from time to time from say a less active district. Can I just say, all districts are busy and working very hard in this complex area, but from time to time we might, for example, move FTE from central Perth office down to the Armadale office, because they are having, clearly, a busier time of things. It is the same in the metropolitan area, where we have examples when we have moved FTE from one country district to another for the reasons that you have highlighted. We would like to become a lot more evidence based and have a mechanism by which we do the resource allocation as a department going forward in a different way than what we have done to date, because our situation is very different from five years ago and so on and so forth. We are looking to do that work as part of the demand model rebuild.

Hon PAUL BROWN: One final question from me then I will let someone else have a crack at it. The boundary for the metropolitan area for your service delivery—where is the boundary between metro and country north, east and south?

Ms White: Driving down the highway, out of Rockingham and you flick into Peel, that is considered regional WA. We have traditionally followed what were the police boundaries and, of course, the regional development commission boundaries.

The CHAIRMAN: We are rapidly running out of time, because a couple of our members have other duties that they have to attend to up at Parliament House in a few minutes. There are a couple of question that I will try to ask briefly. Perhaps, if we can deal with them briefly, that would be good.

I talked to you about privatisation of services. Could you indicate what level of services, perhaps by percentage, are being delivered by the community or non-government sector?

Ms White: Thirty-three per cent of our total budget for the department is invested in the community service not-for-profit sector.

The CHAIRMAN: Are there any plans to expand or contract that level?

Ms White: The department’s point of view is that particularly in our out-of-home care space, where we have seen the most growth in investment in the community sector over the last 10 years, we feel quite strongly, and the evidence supports this, that you need a diverse out-of-home care system to

best meet the needs of children. We think there needs to be a balance between departmentally run and managed placement options and options that are managed by community service not-for-profit organisations. We think that is about sustainability, about innovation and about having enough flexibility and maturity in the system to know that one size does not fit all for children and young people in out-of-home care, and that we can offer a suite of options and pathways for them and their families.

The CHAIRMAN: Would that indicate an expansion of the non-government organisation role or has that already happened?

Ms White: We flagged quite formally in out-of-care reform directions papers and consultations and launched reform that where it makes sense to the child, where it adds to the sustainability of the system—there is a cost and demand issue within these decisions—we would be open to expanding the work of the community services not-for-profit sector. It is not a policy position and drive that we have seen in other states and territories. We have learnt from, I think, those experiences. It has to make sense to the children. It has to be sustainable. That is the temperament and flavour in which we have approached that.

The CHAIRMAN: Will case management be transferred to the community sector?

Ms White: Not at this stage—no. We have piloted delegated case management with a very mixed result. To truly delegate case management to a community services sector you need a change in legislation. You also need a capacity and economies of scale within the community services sector to support the delivery of that. It is not something that we are exploring at this current time, and we are certainly not in a position in terms of capability of a system to do that.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: I have some concerns around what you call the data day. Page 5 of the CPSU–CPA hearings summary report refers to number shuffling and that caseworkers are given direction that they need to move around their case loads so that they have only 15 when it comes to data day. Is that correct, what we are reading in the summary report?

Ms White: It is correct that every month we send correspondence to districts to say that data day is coming and to please make sure data is up-to-date so that we can have a true and accurate representation of how many cases and where they are. I will state again: there is no advantage from the frontline worker right through to myself, as a district director, to do nothing but represent those cases in the most accurate way.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: I just want to point out though that it states here on page 5 —

‘I am a team leader and each month I am 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.

Is that right?

Ms White: We correspond quite formally by email to say that we need to review the cases and make sure that the data is compliant with the issues in the order. This is not a “do something different because it is data day”; this is a prompt to: we know sometimes you allocate a case and you do all the work on the ground but you have not had a chance to update the system. It is really in that context. We have had this conversation with districts and district directors before. It has come up at our joint consultative committee with the union. If people are feeling that that communication is kind of like somehow a direction to do something extraordinary or improper, we just really welcome being told the details. It is not the intent; it is not our position.

Hon SAMANTHA ROWE: You do not think that if caseworkers have 20 case loads, when it comes to data day they then feel forced to move five off their case loads?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: And then take them back the next day, which is what we have heard.

Ms White: It should not be happening. It is not our position. If it is happening, I would really like to know about it.

The CHAIRMAN: How we can make progress, and I think it would be a good outcome from this, is that we will provide you with the information that Hon Samantha Rowe was referring to earlier. I am sure that as a director general if there is some breakdown, and it looks to me like it is in about half of your offices and teams, you might like to focus on that that.

Ms White: Is this the office survey results?

The CHAIRMAN: Whether it is a perception or a reality, there is a clear inference that people think: hang on, we are an organisation which is promoting dodgy number shuffling and it is improper and we do not feel comfortable about it. Perhaps there is something there that you might like to pick up and correct in whatever way if it does need to be corrected. We will provide that to you.

Ms White: Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Drawing to a close now because we have exhausted our time. I want to personally thank you for attending today. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction. If you believe any corrections should be made, because of typographical or transcription errors, please indicate the corrections on the transcript. I think you are familiar with the process. If there is any further information on reflection that you would like to provide to the committee, we would always be delighted to receive it.

Finally, in closing, and thanking you again for your time and advice today, the committee and all my colleagues are inquiring into this matter and having this hearing because we are concerned about making sure that our agency from top down is properly supported. We respect the very difficult work and level of responsibility that each of you and all of your staff throughout the organisation have, and we want to offer encouragement to each and every one of you. If you could convey our compliments and best wishes, Ms White, to all your staff from the Legislative Council, we would appreciate that very much. But now our time has expired, so I will have to bid you good day. Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 12 noon
