

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES IN GOVERNMENT

SESSION TWO

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 11 JUNE 2008**

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 10.56 am

CHALMERS, DR RON

**Director General, Disability Services Commission,
examined:**

CARROLL, MR MICHAEL

**Principal Policy and Research Analyst, Disability Services Commission,
examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for coming in this morning. I ask that you respond to questions verbally rather than nod or shake your head so that it can be recorded. This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect as the proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an "Information for Witnesses" briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Chalmers: Yes, I would like to make a couple of comments. I thank the committee for the opportunity to lodge a submission and for the invitation to come in and expand on it. The process of preparing the submission has given the Disability Services Commission an opportunity to reflect on its endeavours over the past few years to create joined-up government. Members will find from our written submission that we rely very heavily on collaboration across different government agencies and that we will continue to do so in the future. Reflecting on what has happened over the past few years has reinforced for us the absolute importance of buy-in at very senior levels within agencies to give the imprimatur for joined-up government. It is vitally important for the commission because much of what we do revolves around trying to get mainstream agencies to step up to the mark to ensure that the provision of services to people with disabilities is as it should be in Western Australia. Although we have a service provision role, much of our focus is on getting mainstream agencies such as education, health, transport and housing to make sure that they are doing their very best for people with disabilities. It is very important to get senior level 1 or level 2 officers within these organisations to buy in and to give the green light to field officers and junior managers to carry out collaborative approaches. We have a number of examples of that. We stand behind the notion of greater collaboration across government departments.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ron. As you said, the Disability Services Commission has been successful in developing collaborative initiatives and outcomes, perhaps even more so than any

other government department. Why is the department so successful at these collaborative arrangements?

Dr Chalmers: It is partly what I have mentioned already and it is also because it is the reason for our existence. We spend a fair amount of our budget on direct services and on purchasing services from the non-government sector. The third element of our role is advocacy at a very high, systemic level to make sure that mainstream agencies do what they should be doing. The legislative changes that led to the creation of disability access and inclusion plans have given us enormous leverage to work alongside state government departments and local government authorities to make sure that at the very forefront of their consciousness is the provision of accessible services for and inclusion of people with disabilities. That single initiative has given us the vehicle for collaboration with other state government departments as they shape up their access and inclusion plans. We have also felt it necessary to get senior people from other government agencies around the table to address either specific issues or individuals—we have some very good examples of good outcomes being achieved on that front—through to more systemic collaborations that have led to good outcomes as well. There are good examples of that in the submission.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: In the written submission, the key issues refer to a formal collaborative arrangement that is usually based around a memorandum of understanding. What do you believe is the value of an MOU, given that it is not a legal document and is not binding? You said it was very important for level 1 and 2 officers of mainstream agencies to come on board with a collaborative approach.

Dr Chalmers: We have had mixed experiences regarding the creation of MOUs with other agencies. In some instances they have been very successful avenues for building collaboration to achieve better outcomes. However, it is also fair to say that in and of themselves MOUs do not solve problems or build collaborations across agencies; they are just the vehicle for it. There is some evidence that if things are not built around an MOU, they can be counterproductive instruments against building collaboration. A colleague of mine said quite flippantly one day that the primary purpose of one MOU was to be rolled up to beat the other mob over the head with. As I said, that was said fairly flippantly. It is important to have some documentation that clearly specifies the points of engagement and how the agencies are going to collaborate together. However, when there is high-level support for that documentation, it gives people at the field officer and junior levels within the organisation much more confidence to step forward and engage in collaboration. Professor Eugene Bardach from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University wrote a wonderful book called *Getting Agencies to Work Together*. The Australian and New Zealand School of Government relies heavily on that text. It is a wonderful description of how agencies—albeit in the United States—have managed to capitalise on collaboration across government agencies. I keep going back to some of the principles about that, which are espoused in the book. I have talked about more than MOUs, but the arrangement needs to be about more than just having an MOU.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Obviously the MOUs state what is required. The range of disabilities that the Disability Services Commission deals with span from simple to complex disabilities. How does the department maintain that level of communication regarding the requirements, especially for NGOs? When I speak to them, they say there is always a need for more. How do you communicate with them and keep those MOUs alive?

Dr Chalmers: If I can clarify one aspect of the question, when you said the NGOs want more —

Mrs J. HUGHES: They want more beds, services or money. There always seems to be a huge need for housing etc. How do you keep the frustrations at bay?

Dr Chalmers: I will quickly talk about the three different levels of MOU arrangements. For many years we have had a very productive memorandum of understanding with the Department of Housing and Works. Some years ago, the commission owned many assets around Perth. However,

we realised that from a whole-of-government perspective, our business was not to maintain buildings but to provide services for people with disabilities. We consciously and deliberately reworked that arrangement when we decided to hand over to the Department of Housing and Works the bricks and mortar assets that the commission owned. On the basis of what has been a very productive MOU, the Department of Housing and Works is locked into the provision of housing units that we need based on our specifications for people with disabilities. That was a very intentional, deliberate process of asking what the commission was good at, what our mandate was and what the mandate of the Department of Housing and Works was. We are still bound by an agreement, which is due for revisiting. That is a very good example of very good and sensible outcomes from a memorandum of understanding.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the south west region over the past three or four years we have developed, again quite deliberately and consciously, a series of interagency agreements whereby the commission has entered into not only bilateral agreements with different non-government and government agencies in the south west, but also multilateral agreements. Those agreements clearly specify what the smaller agencies are doing—most of the agencies in the south west are quite small—to improve the accessibility services and inclusion of people with disabilities.

We have 30 or 35 of those agreements in place. We celebrate and acknowledge them. They have provided for the strengthening of relationships not only between the commission and its partner agencies, but across the partner agencies themselves. When it comes time for agencies to step forward on behalf of a homeless person with a disability, that relationship is already in place and is underpinned by the partnership documents. At the very macro level, they are useful; at the micro level, we have seen some great outcomes.

[11.10 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: It appears that communication from the top to the bottom is well and truly in place. Are there clear lines for communication from the bottom up? If a small agency in the south west needs to speak to you, Ron, what channels are there for that type of interaction?

Dr Chalmers: We have been quite clear that we want a second tier buy-in on some of these issues. The commission is structured with a director general position and six director positions. I have made it clear to those people that they have not only the delegated authority but also the responsibility for switching on the green lights when they are needed. I do not want people at the junior levels, especially those in the regional areas, having to struggle and grapple with issues without knowing that they have absolute backup at the senior level to say “go” or “yes” or to provide them with resources. I have been at the junior level within the organisation and there is nothing more frustrating than knowing what needs to be done in a collaborative way at the ground level—commonsense things—but having to go through layers of bureaucracy to get to the top to get things happening.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Does the way that that is managed have an impact on your funding?

Dr Chalmers: It is fascinating because it is not put in place as a way of saying the commission needs to be the solution provider or the resourcer of the solutions. The essence of the joined-up stuff is getting the responsible agencies to do their jobs. The people in whom we have a particular interest come in contact with multiple agencies. The danger in that situation is that each of the agencies says that another agency will respond, so there is a backing away rather than a collaborative effort to find a good outcome. Our approach is to ask them to not back away and to not give other agencies the opportunity to back away. If we jump in and say “Step aside, we will fix this and fund it”, all we will do is give the agencies in not only that situation but also future situations the opportunity to back out.

The CHAIRMAN: We have received a number of submissions similar to yours that have stated that resourcing is sometimes a barrier to collaboration. Why is resourcing a barrier? Is it because of

a concern over cost shifting between departments? Would it be useful if resourcing for collaborative initiatives was a separate line item in a lead agency's budget?

Dr Chalmers: I have a number of things to say about that. There is no doubt that agencies are protective of their budgets because they are responsible for those budgets. Resourcing is an issue when one looks at collaboration that involves an individual and so on. Over the past decade the commission has moved very deliberately to a model of individualised funding. In the 1990s we funded organisations with block funding. We would fund Activ Foundation, Nulsen Haven and Rocky Bay—all the big iconic organisations. We believed that because they knew their clients, they would do the best they could with the amount of money that they were allocated. Over the past decade we have led the nation in turning that around. We now allocate money to the individuals whom we support. In that respect the commission is reasonably unique as far as other government departments are concerned. When we work with other departments that do not have a model of individualised funding—our mental health services, the Department of Housing and Works, Department of Corrective Services and Department of Education and Training—it can be a barrier that prevents them from stepping forward to help tailor a solution for an individual. I am not sure that any of those major organisations would ever want to move down the road of individualised funding. I suspect they would not. However, they know that we have that model in place and that we can bring resources to bear for the individual. I will refer to a classic case that almost became a case study of joined-up government in Western Australian agencies. It involved the Office of the Public Advocate, the Department of Corrective Services, mental health services and the Disability Services Commission. About six agencies were involved in helping a young Aboriginal man who had spent a number of years in the most secure part of Casuarina Prison after committing a minor offence. Things escalated—

The CHAIRMAN: The Public Advocate was here this morning and she explained the case to us.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It sounded fabulous.

Dr Chalmers: It is a fabulous example of how we were getting nowhere with a person until I, the Public Advocate at the time, the senior person in mental health services and a couple of other key people got together around a table to work out a solution. Those senior people had the capacity to direct resources and to turn on the green light. Out of that came a good solution for that individual. It is still not perfect. He is back in Graylands. We are working on another model. However, it was a good example of what can happen when issues are elevated quickly within the bureaucracy to get action.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Obviously, the man's quality of life has improved considerably even though he is Graylands. On the topic of dealing with individuals, do you find that that is time consuming or is it more effective to deal with individuals?

Dr Chalmers: Clearly the latter. I will stick with the same case example. The time that was invested at the junior level with people knocking their heads against the heads of people in other organisations was time wasted. It was only when things elevated to a "we need an outcome" mentality that things—

Mr S.R. HILL: Ron, was there not a champion for that gentleman? Was there not an officer who said "Bang"? The executive team sitting in St Georges Terrace would not have had a clue about that person. It took a lower-level officer to say that enough is enough and to step outside the parameters and bring his situation to your attention and to the attention of other government agencies.

Dr Chalmers: Absolutely. I am sure not sure whether it was described this morning by the Public Advocate but out of that situation has come another initiative called People with Exceptionally Complex Needs. We are kicking that off with no recurrent funding. Government agencies are putting in some non-recurrent dollars. It is not rocket science. Rather, when things are not working here, it is a coordination capacity that determines how we can achieve a coordinated approach

across agencies to elevate it, deal with it, fix it and implement something for the individual. We have learnt a bit from that particular case study.

Part of the question I did not answer was about separate line items within budgets. I think that that would be counterproductive. The danger is that if we set up alternative structures that are called the joined-up section, agencies will back away from their core responsibilities. The solution must be coordination, collaboration and clout, rather than saying that the problem belongs in a new structure called collaboration.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Ron, when I asked you a question during the budget estimates, I referred to the heading “Strategic Coordination”. You might remember that I asked for a breakdown of that.

Dr Chalmers: I do indeed. We are working on that as you speak.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Thank you, very much! Would not collaboration become a part of that strategic coordination area without too many specifics?

Dr Chalmers: Absolutely. You are dead right.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: In terms of enabling collaboration, how important is the Disability Services Act 1993 to your work? Are you confronted with any issues or frustrations as a result of that act? Should the act be amended so that collaboration can work to the ultimate extent?

[11.20 am]

Dr Chalmers: The short answer is no. Our legislation has been well struck and has served us well since 1993. It is primarily enabling legislation rather than legislation that provides the commission with some sort of statutory role in the lives of people with disabilities. That puts us in a very good position to collaborate with those agencies that have a statutory or mainstream role.

If, for some reason, our legislation was changed in some way to have us becoming more “responsible” for the lives of people with disabilities, again that would give mainstream agencies the opportunity to say, “This is not our problem; we can back away.” We spend a lot of time—in fact our minister spends a lot of time—trying to get the message to her colleagues and to departments that if an issue is a transport issue for a person with a disability, it is a transport issue; it is not necessarily a disability issue. If it is to do with housing, if it is to do with how children with disabilities are educated in our school system, it is an education issue, rather than saying it is the disability issue. I think when we get that reaction from mainstream parts of our government and community, that is when we know we are building an inclusive community.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: What you are saying is, if we felt that any changes or amendments were needed within this act, if we actually overprescribe the collaborative component, you will be left with it and the other people will back away?

Dr Chalmers: There is a danger of that.

Mrs J. HUGHES: On a similar vein; obviously what you have been talking about is also a culture that is actually within the disability services, whereby, from the top down, there is this need to collaborate in order to get positive outcomes for the people that you deal with. If the leadership changes, are you trying to instil that, so that that culture will remain through a leadership change? Also, how do we then engender similar cultures into the collaborating agencies also that you work with? Have you any thoughts on that?

Dr Chalmers: We are in the middle of a restructure at present. Our existing organisational structure in the commission is close to a decade old and our organisation has doubled in size over those 10 years. We are going through a process of looking at what our structure needs to be to give us the capacity for the next 10 years. This has come up—the importance of culture and the values that underpin what we do. We are very conscious that if that changes, we could lose an awful lot. A couple of things have helped us, one being that we have a very flat organisational structure, so there are not layers upon layers of organisation. People operating at the field level within our organisation

do not have to find their way through the multiple layers that exist in other government agencies. I think that has helped us a lot and we would want to keep that as much as possible. I personally get to know a lot about individual circumstances, whereas I am not sure that that is the case in other government departments where that level of knowledge is not quite as great. That organisational structure has helped the culture.

We have also benefited, I think, from being the first system in the world, actually, to establish what we call a “local area coordination system”, which has been driven, since the late 1980s, on the notion that you put the person in the middle and you say what sort of services and supports need to be brought to that person’s life, rather than saying, “Here is the suite of government services; if you can fit into that, well good luck to you.” We have got a statewide system of LAC that has been driven with that basic principle of the person in the middle, and their family and so on; how do we build around that? That has helped us a lot.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, just in working across these different organisations, you say you have got the LACs around the state.

Dr Chalmers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: How do other agencies lock in with the LACs? The further you get away from the metro area it appears to me that it is always more difficult to dilute the services because you have not got the people and all those sorts of things. How does it work out in the more remote communities?

Dr Chalmers: I was in Karratha yesterday and then Hedland the day before, working with our LACs, and in fact catching up with some of the organisations that they work with on a daily basis. I used to be one of those country LACs in the wheatbelt area for a number of years myself many years ago. It is interesting, because you can fall for the belief that the supports and services to people in regional and remote areas are of lesser quality than for people living in central Perth. I am not convinced that that is the case. We have a number of examples where families have made a move to Perth and lasted a matter of months before going straight back again.

The level of collaboration that I see in regional areas, I think, is very strong, although it is not uniform across the state. Our LACs live and breathe this all the time, fostering relationships with government agencies and non-government providers that are there as well, and some community groups. There are some wonderful examples of that out there. I would say it is probably easier to work in a joined up way in regional areas than it is in the middle of Perth.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Obviously, from what I have gathered through this, your experience of the grassroots is very knowledgeable, being part of the grassroots and coming up into a leadership position.

Dr Chalmers: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Has that knowledge made it much easier for you then to make cultural changes and decisions from a leadership perspective? Would it have been more difficult for someone who had come in possibly without the actual on-ground experience that you seem to have had?

Dr Chalmers: The second part of your question, I think the answer is yes. I do not want to make sweeping generalisations here either, but if my background had been solely built around policy development, from that perspective, without the benefit of having worked directly with people with disabilities and their families, I think it would have been a bigger challenge for me. Now I have forgotten the first part of your question.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Just basically the leadership, and then you being able to make different choices and decisions through that experience.

Dr Chalmers: Yes, there is a certain sort of authority that comes from being able to speak with some grounded experience on these matters. Returning to the case study that was mentioned this

morning; just being able to talk with some real authority about how things play out on the ground for, in this case, Aboriginal people, cultural issues, fellow from the central lands, just being able to talk with some experience there, rather than if it had been a generic senior bureaucrat position perspective on these things. Yes, I think you are right.

The CHAIRMAN: While we are on leadership, Ron, how important is leadership to collaboration, and are there any special leadership skills that you think are needed to foster this collaboration?

Dr Chalmers: I actually think that risk taking is a pretty important ingredient in all of this, that you get the sense from time to time, that if—there is a certain comfort that comes from relying on policy frameworks and other rules of engagement, if you like, within big organisations. Sometimes it does take a little bit of risk taking, even at fairly senior levels to get good outcomes for people as well. If one of the qualities of leadership is risk taking, I would have to say that that would be right up there near the top. I guess, too, if good leadership reflects a focus on getting good outcomes for individuals, that would be another quality that I think would be rated up fairly high there as well. It does not mean that you throw out the rulebook on these things or you start treating one person wildly differently from how you would treat another person and their circumstances. Fair and equitable access to government resources is very much a plank of what we do, but being flexible in responses, I think, is pretty important.

The CHAIRMAN: Could you give us a bit of an idea of how you think you should develop these skills in your leadership team, if they are not there already?

[11.30 am]

Dr Chalmers: There are a couple of things. We have invested quite heavily over the past few years in straight-out leadership development within our senior team.

I was actually fortunate to be chosen as one of the first people to go through the Australia and New Zealand School of Government executive fellows program, which was a major commonwealth, and now state-funded initiative for senior public servants—a very high-profile program. A lot of the expertise came from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. We also have put senior people through the Leadership WA program. Therefore, latching on to good-quality programs that invest in leadership within our senior executive has been pretty important, and we will keep doing that too. Half of our corporate team are people who have found their way up through the ranks, so again they bring with them grounded experience as well, rather than people who have come to us from other walks of life or other parts of the public sector. I am not saying that that needs to be across the board. I think we benefit from external views and new ways of doing things as well, but that has certainly helped us. Also, there is the continuity. If your corporate team and senior management are continually changing, then some of the messages about getting outcomes for people can start to lose focus.

Mrs J. HUGHES: In your submission you talk about autism and the early intervention programs.

Dr Chalmers: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Does that sit then with the education department, and is it your job to monitor to ensure that the young kids are actually getting the required assistance and so forth, or do you leave that to the education department? How do you interface on that level?

Dr Chalmers: Yesterday afternoon at about five o'clock in Karratha I actually met up with the district director of schools for the Pilbara, and we were talking about a range of issues around children with disabilities. Whenever I travel to regional areas, I usually knock on the door of the school system. She was just mentioning bits and pieces, issues, and she mentioned one of their clinical psychologists. She said, "Yes, and she's got great skills in autism assessment", and my eyes and the eyes of my colleague, the country services director, lit up, because one of the things that we do is look at what happens locally in regional areas where the expertise is that we can purchase from, or, if it is a government department, we can draw them into actually doing autism assessments

for young children who need to be assessed and diagnosed within those regional areas. The alternative is for us to have a presence in each of those locations, which would be a very inefficient way of doing business. Through knowing who is available in education, health and other departments—corrective services is a good one—but also knowing what is available in the private world in the regional areas, we are now in a position to click into gear very quickly people who can do those quite complex autism assessments of young children. Therefore, again it is a joined-up approach, rather than just saying that we are responsible, so we have to build a whole new lot of infrastructure ourselves around that. In recent estimates, the message is out that, by using that approach, we have driven down the waiting time for families to actually get an assessment done on their youngster.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It is very important. The earlier they are assessed, the much better it is for their education and so forth.

Dr Chalmers: Absolutely.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It is very interesting. In the city, for instance, we have an integrated schooling system, with aides and those types of things. Do you work with the education department to get guidance on what these children require, and then would you expect the education department to come on board and deliver on those issues, or does the department take that in hand itself?

Dr Chalmers: In the metropolitan area, again we rely heavily on our local area coordinators to be strong advocates for the families that they know and have an enduring relationship with over time. Therefore, as issues start to emerge for families of children with autism, there is a ready-made mechanism for LACs to be engaged with the school system and school principals and to work with them on those issues. That happens on a daily basis. In fact, the district director of schools in the Pilbara was saying yesterday how smooth that relationship is, and it gives a wonderful conduit from the homes of the families into the school system itself around disabilities. Again, I have lost the first part of the question.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It was about collaboration. Do you instruct the education department or does the education department ask for your advice? How does that collaboration work? Is it simply the disability services that do the assessment and then the education department comes in? Are they siloed?

Dr Chalmers: We do not have the mandate to instruct the education department to do anything, quite frankly, so we do not have that role; but again it is collaboration that is built up through practice over quite a period. Again I will give you one example. The commonwealth government has just released money for a series of initiatives around autism here in WA, one of them being training for X number of schoolteachers in mainstream situations and teaching children with autism. The other is a series of workshops for parents in different locations in Perth and around the state. Therefore, they are investing in that. The education department came straight to us and said, “How can we work together?” John Brigg, who is my contact in the education department—a senior officer—and I spent about two and a half hours planning how we could make this work in a very collaborative way across the families, across the teachers and across our specialist staff as well. That side of things works very well.

The CHAIRMAN: I thank you again, gentlemen, for coming in this morning. We have to be across the road by midday, and we have a few things to do before then. I will read you the final closing comments and let you know where things will go from here.

Thanks for your evidence before the committee this morning. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Would you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 days of receiving it. If the transcript is not returned within this period, we will deem it to have been correct. Again, gentlemen, thank you very much for coming in this morning.

Hearing concluded at 11.37 am