EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO ABORIGINAL YOUTH SUICIDES

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
MONDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2016

SESSION FIVE

Members

Dr G.G. Jacobs (Chair)
Ms R. Saffioti (Deputy Chair)
Mr R.F. Johnson
Ms J.M. Freeman
Mr M.J. Cowper
Ms J. Farrer (co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 3.11 pm

Mr RALPH ADDIS
Director General, Department of Regional Development, examined:

Mr GRAHAME SEARLE
State Reform Leader, Regional Services Reform Unit, Department of Regional Development, examined:

The CHAIR: Thank you, gentlemen. On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to discuss our inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide. Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and expressing my gratitude that we are able to meet here today. I would also like to pay my respects to local elders past and present. Graham Jacobs is my name; I am the Chairman. On my left is Janine Freeman and on her left, Rob Johnson, and on my right is Alison Sharpe and Catie Parsons, who are our executive, who are helping us with this inquiry. This committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. It is a formal procedure, hopefully not too formal, and commands the same respect given to the proceedings of the house itself. I am not asking you to give evidence on oath or affirmation but it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it will assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we commence, have you each completed the "Details of Witness" form"?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Have you each received and read an information for witness sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: If you state the capacity in which you appear before the committee today, maybe you could also give a little brief before you start and we can ask some questions.

Mr Searle: I have the title of state reform leader, working with the Department of Regional Development fundamentally running the regional services reform unit looking at how we deliver services to remote communities.

The CHAIR: Maybe you could tell us a bit about the regional services reform unit and why it was formed and where you are going.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: And what you have done.

Mr Addis: The Department of Regional Development's primary role is to facilitate the state's regional development agenda, including the royalties for regions program. The remote services reform agenda was borne out of processes under the Aboriginal Affairs cabinet subcommittee process and gave rise to formation of the regional services reform unit, aimed at understanding and improving how government works to deliver outcomes, particularly in regional and remote Aboriginal communities. The regional services reform unit sits administratively with the Department of Regional Development and Grahame reports directly to the joint ministers,

Minister Mitchell and Minister Redman, for that agenda. The Department of Regional Development's primary role is to both administrative support of the RSAU and through royalties for regions we provide funding opportunities for key initiatives.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Why Minister Mitchell? Minister Redman I get, because he is the Minister for Regional Development? Minister Mitchell—why?

Mr Addis: When the cabinet subcommittee and cabinet made the resolutions to establish the reforms, it was a joint ministerial lead between those two ministers. The fact that the unit is attached to the Department of Regional Development is more an administrative arrangement rather than —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: No; what part of her ministerial portfolio?

The CHAIR: Mental Health, is it?

Mr Addis: Child Protection and Family Support and Mental Health, primarily through the child protection department. Sorry; I misinterpreted the question.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yes, no worries. Keep going, sorry.

Mr Searle: I was appointed to this role in the middle of last year. By the time we set up, advertised and filled positions, it was basically the first week in October last year that the unit became operational. In the intervening 11 months now, we have done a number of things. We have talked to a range of stakeholders across the sector, a lot of senior Aboriginal leaders and a lot of government agencies and NGOs. I have been based primarily in Kununurra for most of the period for a number of reasons and worked really closely with the empowered communities leadership in Kununurra about the direction, future and the sorts of things they wanted to see and the changes they wanted to see. We established district leadership groups in both east and west Kimberley and in the Pilbara. Basically, they were a means to get the funders and providers of services in the one place together to talk about issues. Whilst there have been human service managers groups in the regions for a long time, they were not all that effective in actually driving change or getting everybody on the same page, so we have worked very hard to try to get those groups to focus on what significant issues within those regions are and how they can better work together to provide solutions to those problems.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Who is on them, Grahame?

Mr Searle: Fundamentally, there is the human service managers within the regions; the regional managers, as appropriate. Local governments are invited and send a range of people, from CEOs to community development managers, the commonwealth government is represented on them and a range of NGOs who are service providers in the regions are represented on them, so there is really quite a wide range of people in there.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: How do they differ from the groups you talked about before? That was just the human services managers previously, was it?

Mr Searle: Yes; one, it was just the government departments before, so it is a broader group. It is also more action oriented. What tended to happen when the human services managers got together was, they would get together and talk about what was wrong. They would then have to go back to their day jobs and come back next month and have the same set of complaints usually. Some of them worked better than others across the state. If somebody had a bit more time to invest in developing a group and working across the group, things worked a bit better. Where they did not and there was not that sort of support for the group, it was basically just a get-together once a month to talk about what was going on.

[3.20 pm]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: And that was a working meeting, not a delivery meeting?

Mr Searle: Absolutely. As I said, it varied a bit, usually in terms of who chaired it and the amount of time they had to dedicate to it. That was pretty much the driver of that.

We have worked really hard on both addressing what they thought the issues really were but also bringing in some professional development for those groups. For the last couple of meetings, of all of them, we have had Ernst and Young present on collective impact as a model for problem-solving to try to get them used to working together and developing a unified approach to how they solve and address problems and understanding what they can do to affect each other's priorities. I will talk a bit more about that in a minute.

The other thing we have done is set up strategic regional advisory councils. They were set up before I arrived. They have been operational for the best part of 12 months. They have four Aboriginal people from the region sitting on each of those, along with four directors general, a senior person from the commonwealth and an NGO rep.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Which directors general?

Mr Searle: They are the directors general of Regional Development, Child Protection and Family Support, Aboriginal Affairs, and Housing, which, from most of the sorts of issues we are talking about, are the four most relevant directors general. That has been quite a time commitment on their part.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: What did Ernst and Young do?

Mr Searle: Ernst and Young worked with the district leadership groups, which was the more practical level down. They were providing training and development around collective impact and the collective impact model and how that could work.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Are there three strategic industry advisory councils?

Mr Searle: There are two—Kimberley and Pilbara.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: So you have to attend both those meetings?

Mr Addis: Yes. I chair the Pilbara one and Emma White from Child Protection chairs the Kimberley one.

Mr Searle: They are interestingly quite different in terms of how they operate.

The CHAIR: I know it is obviously still in formation but what are the priority actions that are coming out of this? Is Aboriginal youth suicide one of them or addressing some of those issues?

Mr Searle: They are absolutely addressing some of the causal issues. The importance for us is about trying to move some of the Closing the Gap measures. Closing the Gap criteria in some cases are getting worse not better and a lot of that is about how government delivers or does not deliver services. We are trying to focus on whether there is a more efficient and effective way of delivering government services. Again, I am happy to talk about that in some detail.

The CHAIR: Can you tell us some of those impediments? As a community and as a government, both federal and state, we are spending money but obviously the gaps are getting larger. Tell us what you have learnt about some of the impediments to that and why it is getting larger and we are not making a difference.

Mr Searle: I think there are about four major impediments. The first one is the structure of government. When we fund agencies, we fund agencies to do very narrow things. The problem is that in regional remote settings, you need a holistic treatment, not a narrow, single-issue treatment. What we provide is single-issue treatment almost across the board, so we lose the effectiveness of it. We end up with lots of small contract-for-service delivery with overlapping services with no-one held accountable or responsible for the result. It is very hard to find a contract that has an outcome measure in it. It is very hard to find a contract that has a client satisfaction measure in it. So, trying to separate the role of funder from the role of client is something that has not happened very well.

There is a lot of detail in the location-based expenditure review that was done, particularly of Roebourne. That is not atypical. I think there was something like 19 different providers of youth services in Roebourne over 35 different services for 247 kids. The biggest local provider is Yaandina. They had 11 contracts with 10 different agencies and five contracts with five different state government departments to deliver services. If you wanted to devise an inefficient and ineffective way of delivering services, that is how you would go about it.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Who is responsible for it?

Mr Searle: It is the structure of government.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: It is unusual it is so huge but that is an NGO thing, is it not? There are NGOs out there getting bits of money from everywhere to deliver programs.

Mr Searle: But if government was better organised, it could consolidate the contracts.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Absolutely.

Mr Searle: Yes, you can get away with it in a metropolitan context to some degree because there are so many service providers of different types and you can tap into it where it suits you more broadly. When you get to a remote location, that changes dramatically because the providers are there from 12.00 pm to 2.00 pm on a Thursday maybe. If you are not there then, effectively, you do not get the service. There are a whole lot of those things. There is also the issue of policies that are philosophically flawed from a remote location point of view. For example, housing has an income limit. You get to the income limit and because we are rationing a scarce resource, you get asked to leave. In the metropolitan area, to a greater or lesser extent that works because there are rental properties available. You get to a place like Halls Creek, there are 1 400 people. According to the council, there are 21 privately owned houses. If you get a job and you get to the income limit, you have a choice: do I want a house or do I want a job? Because there are no other houses to go to, you quit your job to keep your house. It is an economically rational thing to do but it is the exact opposite of what we want people to do and that is a direct response to a government policy that is fundamentally flawed in terms of its application in a remote location. NDIS, when it comes, will be another one. NDIS is based around the idea of consumers having choice and consumers developing their own packages. That might well work in Perth but if you are in Balgo, where is your choice? You are lucky if you have a provider. Some of these things are just flawed in their design.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Has that always been flawed? In your stakeholder discussion with people, is that something of a recent nature because government has progressively stopped delivering services and started to contract services? Have people said to you, "In the past we used to have a government agency here and it used to deliver the youth services that we need all the time"?

Mr Searle: It would be fair to say there has been a fair bit of feedback that is about, "Gee, we wish we had ATSIC back." There is a bit of that because that was a regular stream of money into a lot of these communities. But, by and large, communities talk about white cars with blue plates coming in and out and they have no idea what happens, so it would have been the same when government agencies were providing it. By and large, these people have not had a history of government public servants based there. It has been drive in, drive out or fly in, fly out services.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Who is addressing these problems?

Mr Searle: Me.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: You have a big task on your shoulders.

Mr Searle: Yes, I have but it is a worthwhile task.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Would you get cooperation from the ministers in cabinet who are responsible for the areas that you are dealing with—the Minister for Housing, for instance? You used to be with Housing, did you not?

Mr Searle: I did.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I remember that.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: He was with DOLA before that for a long time.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Yes, I know. He knows some friends of mine.

Are you getting the cooperation from those ministers that you need and the funding that you need to be able to carry out what, hopefully, will be good outcomes from your decisions?

Mr Searle: We are a relatively small group. We are in the low 20s in terms of numbers of people. We produced our first four cabinet submissions seven weeks ago and all four got through cabinet and were supported.

Mr Addis: And by multiple ministers.

Mr Searle: That is a pretty good strike rate. We have no power or authority to direct other departments to do things but we are working collaboratively with them and with their ministers and to date we have had quite good support.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: They can get things through cabinet but have actions been taken from those cabinet decisions? Have they been signed off and are actions being taken from those different cabinet decisions?

The CHAIR: And they are on the public record now, are they?

Mr Searle: Yes.

The CHAIR: So you could describe some of the examples for us.

[3.30 pm]

Mr Searle: Of the four cabinet submissions we put up, the first one was the road map document, which has now been published. That was relatively well received. That was a pretty good start. The second document was about education in the Kimberley—a schools project in the Kimberley—looking at changing the way we get kids ready for school and the way we teach kids once they are at school because the results in that part of the world are scarcely anything to write home about. There is a $25 million fund to work with, we hope, about 22 schools. That project we worked up with the three education systems, so the Catholic education system, the state system and the independent schools were involved in that process. All three sectors supported the proposal, so that is a pretty significant achievement in terms of going forward. The next project was around Aboriginal employment, and there were three major components to that. The first was direct employment by government agencies, and it set a target that reflects the percentage of the working-age population who are Aboriginal in our region. So, for instance, in the Kimberley the target for filling vacancies—that is what it is about; filling vacancies—will be 38 per cent or 37.8 per cent. I mean, that is a target by any measure. On a region-by-region basis it will reflect the percentage. The only exceptions that have been agreed so far are around where there is a specific qualification required. The requirement there will be that the department works up a plan with the Public Sector Commissioner as to how they will get there. So it is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. It might be cadetships or traineeships or whatever. There is a significant body of work there.

The second part of that submission is around employment by people who are contracting services or major construction contracts to government. That will be on a similar basis. So, if you have a government contract there will be a mandated requirement for you to employ local Aboriginal people at that same sort of percentage level, which is significant.

The third part of that is some preference in direct purchasing through Aboriginal corporations, given that they are more likely to employ Aboriginal people statistically. There are three major components to increasing Aboriginal employment, given employment and education are both key factors in changing most of the outcomes we are talking about.

The third requirement is around housing, and that is the creation of the north-west Aboriginal housing fund.

The CHAIR: Transitional housing?

Mr Searle: There is transitional housing in there. It is based on a transitional housing model. There is $200 million that has been set aside to do that. The transitional housing model has been running at Kununurra now for four years, and it is different in that, first, you have to be Aboriginal to get into those houses; second, somebody in the household has to be employed; and, three, the children, as a condition of your tenancy, have to go to school at least 85 per cent of the time, which, given Aboriginal school attendance in the Kimberley is in the 60s, was a significant benchmark. Last term last year the school attendance rate was 98 per cent for the kids in those houses.

The CHAIR: Is that right?

Mr Searle: That is so far off the chart it is not funny. I know those numbers are right because one of my commonwealth colleagues did not believe them, so she went and checked; she assures me they are actually right. The people in those houses get a range of support of services. What tends to happen is that if the kids do not go to school, the school rings the support services and the support services chase the parents up and follow through. Also with the 40 houses that were in that first tranche, four of the families have actually bought their own homes, which is a real step forward. So we are really encouraged by the numbers coming out of that first pilot. The expansion is to build on that pilot; not to mimic it directly, but to understand the strength of it and apply it where sensible. So the first thing that will happen is that we intend to build 50 houses in Kununurra and Wyndham. Those contracts will be structured in such a way that they guarantee Aboriginal employment—direct employment. But they will also be structured over a four-year build program. So one of the requirements in there will be for Aboriginal apprentice electricians, plumbers and carpenters to be taken on as part of that build contract. All of a sudden, for one spend on housing that we probably would have made anyway we are now going to get four or five different outcomes, and these are the sorts of things we are trying to talk to the district leadership groups about. We are going to get a direct employment outcome in terms of the local Aboriginals employed under the contract, will get a training and workforce development outcome in terms of the apprentices taken on and, hopefully, completing the works long enough to complete their apprenticeships. We will get the houses themselves, we will get encouragement for people to stay and work, given the tenancy condition, and we will get kids to go to school. So all of a sudden for the expenditure on the housing we will get five different outcomes, rather than just the one. That is the way we have to look at how we do things in the right locations.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Ralph, can I ask you a question?

Mr Addis: Yes.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: You said that these programs are being funded by royalties for regions.

Mr Addis: Some are, yes.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Some are? But these sound like core government business. I thought royalties for regions was supposed to be over and above normal core government business and expenditure. Can they not find the money to spend in royalties for regions or are they simply subsidising main government expenditure now and flagging it as royalties for regions?

Mr Addis: Our objective is to invest in those things that fundamentally change the way services or opportunities are delivered, so that the housing fund that Grahame just described is a really good example. It is a fundamentally different way of providing housing that creates an incentive for the family and the kids to get the outcomes we broadly seek, which is jobs and the kids doing well at school. I suppose it creates a direct conduit for the support that that family needs to do well. It is about trialling and shifting the housing system to be moving from something that is provided just because you need a house, to being something that provides housing with a direct purpose to help

the family climb the ladder of opportunity. So it is quite a significant reform and a different way of doing it.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: But surely that is still core government business, to provide all those initiatives that Grahame is providing?

Mr Addis: The fund that has been established, which is $200 million in total, includes a portion from the commonwealth out of the national partnership on Aboriginal remote Indigenous housing.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: That is fine; I am happy to take money from them—more than happy.

Mr Addis: Indeed.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: But I just cannot see how you can justify calling it royalties for regions, other than trying to badge it for the National Party. To me, everything you have said so far should be core government expenditure to care for the people in these remote areas. It is core government business; core government funding should be there.

Mr Searle: There are two separate funding issues here. There is how the unit was established and funded—how we are funded—and then how the projects are funded. We are funded with half royalties for regions money and half money out of the 10 biggest departments in the region. Core government funding has gone in to establish us. In terms of the $200 million in the program for housing, there is $25 million of commonwealth money, there is money from R for R from the units fund that was set up, but there is also money out of Housing itself.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: How much R for R money?

Mr Addis: I think in total it is about $125 million; there is about $50 million from Housing, and $25 million from the commonwealth. But I think it is absolutely about housing reform. It is providing a different sort of housing in a different way that is for people who otherwise would have been not eligible for the mainstream —

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Excuse me, but that is just painting the house a different colour. The house is the house they live in —

Mr Searle: Hopefully, it will be a slightly better house than social housing.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I could not agree more, but that should be core government business—core government expenditure. I do not see how anybody can justify saying, "We're going to take $1 billion of royalties for regions out of the normal budget, and increase the debt even more, and call these projects that are going to be funded one way or the other by government", and they are; they are simply badging them royalties for regions. I have a bit of a philosophical difference there.

Mr Searle: At the other end, for the employment strategy document there is no royalties for regions funding going in there. Departments are being told to change the way they actually do business to meet those mandatory targets.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: That is their job.

Mr Searle: Yes. But I am saying that they have done that in that space.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: All that should be their job.

Mr Searle: I have one last thing, then I will shut up Janine. What we are actually trying to do is provide funding to transition from one way of doing business to another. So we are not trying to fund the core activity going forward. So with the school one we are funding them for a couple of years to go from one method of teaching to another method of teaching—not pay their teachers; not the underlying activity.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I think you know where I am coming from.

Mr Addis: We would say that we have all seen these service delivery arrangements evolve over 20 and 30 years; they have not turned out that great and they clearly need reforming. That is why

there has been an imperative to set up the reform unit. Reform takes investment, and that is the way we are using royalties for regions—to support that reform.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I accept that, and I do not blame you for using it. You have $1 billion coming out of the normal budget process and we are going to say, "How can we spend this money?" and the powers that will say, "We can do this; we can spend that money there. It should be normal government business, but we can get the glory for it."

[3.40 pm]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I would like to ask a question about royalties for regions. The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People tabled a report in May 2011 and she made specific recommendations regarding Aboriginal children and young people. Recommendations 14, 16, 17 and 18 made specific reference to the use of royalties for regions funding for the provision of mental health services for children and young people living in regional and remote WA. Has that been progressed?

Mr Addis: There have been some investments in mental health and related services.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Were they based on those recommendations?

Mr Addis: To be honest, I am not sure if those have been based on those, but essentially, our role in regional development is to facilitate and fund based on proposals from lead agencies—in this case, it would be the Mental Health Commission. We have funded some initiatives in that space. I am not sure if they are directly linked to that report.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Are you able to give that as supplementary information given that the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People said those recommendations should be met and funded through there?

Mr Addis: We would be able to take that on notice, yes.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Thanks. Do you know the other ones for mental health? Can you —

Mr Addis: I can track them down. Let me have a look.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I can ask you the question: the suicide coordinator roles, were they done through the regional review?

Mr Addis: No. My understanding is they were not. My understanding is they are funded under the suicide prevention strategy 2020.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Given that you are doing the state reform stuff and talking about coordination and delivering services differently and not siloing them and all of that, were you consulted about the establishment of those suicide coordinator roles?

Mr Searle: I talk with the Mental Health Commissioner on a regular basis. The challenge for us is trying to work; we do not want to put government into a time warp while we go away and do our reforms. We are trying to talk about the principles in the strategic long-term. Government clearly has to do business every day on that path. Whilst we are trying to make sure that things are coordinated in a way to get the best outcome, we cannot afford to stop things along the way. What we are trying to do is, as tenders and contracts come due for renewal, we are trying to get agencies to talk together about how they might restructure them and how they might cocktail them, if you like, in order to simplify the reporting processes and simplify the acquittal processes for NGOs.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: You talk to the Mental Health Commissioner on a regular basis. When I asked that question of the director of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, he said he first heard about them when they had a meeting—he did not say unrelated, but it was clearly an unrelated meeting—with the Mental Health Commissioner, the director for Health and a service agency. That is when they were discussed. Was that the same way for you? Was it just more of

a general, sort of, "We're going to do this" or did you read about it in the paper? How did you hear about them doing it?

Mr Searle: No. It was in a discussion with the commissioner, more broadly about Aboriginal issues and the issues of remote service delivery. But the thing you have just identified reflects the whole way we structure government. Everything we do from budget bilaterals onwards drives government agencies apart. There is absolutely nothing in the structure of government that encourages agencies to work together. In fact, they are all set up to report directly to ministers who are interested in the narrow portfolio responsibilities of their ministry. No-one has got accountability for the broad, overall progress and overall delivery of services within any community in the state.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: One would think that that is why you have like the commissioner for young children because they become responsible for the broad, yet I asked a question about the commissioner for young children's recommendations in terms of regional development. We are here investigating into suicide and the director could not answer whether those particular recommendations had been responded to when they were directly involved in recommendations around youth. Grahame, you are saying we are broke and we are not working as we should. We all have goodwill; I am not suggesting any of you do not have goodwill. I have great faith in the public service wanting to service the public. I know that that is what the public service wants to do but the difficulty is that there is this aspect of it. Then we, as policymakers, go and set up a commissioner and they make recommendations, yet we do not—we have had that many reports in Aboriginal areas. They must have felt like you were the bloke turning up in the white car with the blue number plate, as well, Grahame.

Mr Searle: Absolutely.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: How do we ensure that we deliver on the reports or the data or the studies, from your point of view?

Mr Searle: With the commissioner for young people, what authority or responsibility does he have in terms of government agencies? He does not have the authority to direct. He does not have any accountability in terms of service delivery on the ground. He sits as a commissioner whose job it is to report on things and that is this problem; it is this problem of getting accountability and responsibility at a broad enough level to actually drive change. These people, whilst they are set up to report and there have been a couple of them that have done good work, there is no link to that to the actual accountability and responsibility on the ground for delivery of the service because that is responsible back to a minister who has no allegiance or alignment, necessarily, with what the commission has written.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yet, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs director said that there is now a cabinet subcommittee. One would think that that is what you are talking about, the sort of high-level cabinet subcommittee that drives these things. Is that where you do it? Is that really the point where we do it? Do we basically say, "Ministers, you've got to stop siloing by coming together as a cabinet subcommittee and have people that you direct in through your departments"?

Mr Searle: It is certainly one option to do it. The other option is to actually look at the structure of government departments outside of metropolitan Perth. Is the current structure applicable when you are getting into a regional environment? If you are a family in trouble in a place like Kununurra —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Kununurra—you go to the Northern Territory!

Mr Searle: Sometimes it is close. You are dealing with 12 different government departments at least—maybe more: two commonwealth departments, local government, five or six NGOs, none of whom have got overall accountability for what is going on in your family and are all worried about their own little bits. They do not share data. They do not share plans. They do not share what they are trying to achieve.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: And they share nothing in common with what is going on in Perth.

Mr Searle: Let me think about why this does not work. If you were going to design it to fail, you would build what we have got.

The CHAIR: In relation to the work you are doing around supporting families, Grahame, you work with community leaders and organisations, they you have to sort of co-design and redesign a system by which to deliver what they locally need with better outcomes and, presumably, better value for money.

Mr Searle: Sounds easy, does it not!

The CHAIR: Tell us about that co-designing, reorientation because that is the bit that is going to be pretty tough. Give us your views on how you are going to move that forward.

Mr Searle: Yes. We have started on a couple of things at the moment, one about an early intervention program in Kununurra. Does everyone know about Empowered Communities? We have the Empowered Communities group, plus the local service providers, plus the government departments working together to work out how better to intervene at the early stages with families in crisis in order to stop them getting to a worse spot. That process is literally afoot as we speak now; they are meeting regularly to devise that program in order to try to deliver that locally. So much of what we do, particularly in remote communities, is equivalent to parking an ambulance at the base of a cliff and waiting for people to land, then we worry about it at a tertiary treatment end. We do very —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: That is right, yes; critical incidents instead of preventive.

Mr Searle: Absolutely; crisis management, whereas we do very little at a tertiary or even a secondary level to respond to challenges. We try to work with those groups to do that. Similarly with the housing initiative, we have met with the EC groups to talk about the style of housing they think is appropriate and the sort of houses they want built as part of a collaborative effort.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: But that has been going on for years. We did that when I worked for McGinty all of those years ago. We went into those communities and said, "What's the style of housing that you think's appropriate?" and things like that.

Mr Searle: Yes. Whilst varies from community to community for a whole range of reasons, it is not an embedded method of practising government agencies. It is, "Here's the one thing we have got. We developed it in Perth. We know it works. We're just going to roll it out across the state."

Mr Addis: Perhaps I can give a view. I spent 20 years working on that side in Kununurra and I have never seen the level of fair dinkum engagement and conversation and actually seeking better ways of solving the problems that we are seeing at the moment. Yes. People used to turn up, ask questions, and then they would go away; you would never hear another thing. This is quite a structured, mandated and fairly targeted approach.

[3.50 pm]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Ralph, when we went to Kununurra and we went to visit with some of the communities, we saw a divided community that complained about creating communities and were completely aggrieved by the white card. I put this to the Telethon Kids Institute as well and, rightly so, they said, "Well, sometimes these reforms are difficult." We took evidence from people who were aggrieved at what you are saying. Do you want comment about that?

Mr Addis: I am not saying anything other than that for the first time government is taking a structured and deliberate approach to try to resolve some of the things that everyone agrees are broken. You will not find too many people in Kununurra who say, "The status quo is great; let's protect it." They will say we have got to change it and there will be violent disagreement about what are the nature of the changes. But 10 years ago in Kununurra, you would have had absolute disagreement with some of the things that the government is trying to.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Is that because of the land and sea councils now? You are dealing with one of the empowered communities; do they not come from one of the groups that have had a native title agreement?

Mr Addis: Miriuwung–Gajerrong?

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yes.

Mr Addis: Over 10 years, you have seen movement from being completely excluded and disempowered to now: we are moving forward. It ain't perfect and it is long way off it but at least groups like Miriuwung–Gajerrong have some connection—some capability.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I think Grahame Searle is a very good bloke. I think that just saying that has happened because of that—you have also had changes in the last 10 years in environmental and organisational aspects as well. I am really fascinated. What do you do in the Kimberley to say that you are not going to have this? If you want a different structure, have you got an idea, or is there an idea, or is there a discussion paper coming out on a different structure? I do not disagree with you. I went to Kununurra for the first time ever. I have always completely thought that I cannot understand how anyone who would be in that part of the world has anything in common with how I see how the world works in downtown Mirrabooka. You have got all of those layers and they are coming from there. Are there discussions about how that could work better?

Mr Searle: We are aiming to have a paper for the next Aboriginal cabinet subcommittee at their meeting in October. There are some framework documents around at this stage. It is a very complex thing to change the structure of government, especially where there are statutory responsibilities. If you devolve something other than a standard departmental structure, how do you take care of the statutory responsibilities and the reporting back? There is a range of things that we are addressing.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Are you having discussions with the Northern Territory? I am just talking about that top half of the state at the moment.

Mr Searle: No. To be fair, the Northern Territory for the last six or eight months has been a bit preoccupied, so we have not. You were talking before about the cashless debit card. One of things that, for me, is fundamentally different about that at this point in time is that that was introduced into Kununurra at the request of an Aboriginal leadership group. It was not the commonwealth government imposing it of its own volition. There is a group that included Miriuwung–Gajerrong, Wunan, Gelganyem and Waringarri who all came together and all the leaders of those groups signed a letter to the commonwealth saying they wanted it introduced. That is significantly different to things like imposing the basics card that has been driven by government.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: You are right. What we have heard around suicide prevention—not parking the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff—is that you have to engage community and to get community to develop their own solutions and get that the community to be able to deliver them, not without performance indicators and not a carte blanche, "Here's your funding and we're going to walk away." We get all of that. It is very embedded in community. Equally, you can say that but maybe what we also need to be saying to community, if we are playing the role as policymakers, is, "You've got to find some dispute resolution when you do those." You cannot just stand there and say we agreed to it, because we met with quite a number of people who had the opposing view and very strongly had the opposing view. Maybe that will wash out; I am not entirely sure. We have had submissions here that say it is one of the contributing factors. If you think about it, it makes people feel dispossessed and powerless. You and I do not know what it is like; we get to choose how we distribute our finances. Most taxpayers would say I am just a welfare recipient in any event. In terms of that road map, how does that interplay with that communication with Aboriginal—broader than just those leadership groups?

Mr Searle: One of the intents of developing a road map is to give us something that we can go out and talk to communities about. To go out with a blank sheet of paper, I regard as being a fairly

futile exercise. The intent of the road map is to give us a document that we can go out and talk to communities about, in terms of how they might engage and interact with that, by stating, to some extent, what the government was prepared and what it was not prepared to do, before we start. A succession of people over generations have gone out, been given a wish list, come back and done nothing. The road to hell is that winding. What we have tried to do is put out a framework to give a starting point for the discussion. We have, in the last three weeks, started the consultation process. We have been out to places like Warburton, Bidyadanga, Jigalong, Balgo and the Dampier Peninsula in the last three weeks—that should give you some idea that we have been pretty busy—trying to start the conversation with communities and community councils: this is where we are going; these are the sorts of things that we are interested in. How is your community interested in going forward? What are your aspirations for your communities and your kids? What are you prepared to do about it and how can the government help you?

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Are their responses going to be transparent? In a way, you can say, "I went out to Bidyadanga and they told me this is their response to the road map." A year later, I go out to Bidyadanga and they say, "We never said that to the department or to the government." How are we going to ensure that those consultations that you are doing have that transparency so it becomes more grounded and bipartisan?

Mr Searle: We are entering all of the feedback into a database. We have a huge spreadsheet of all of the communities, who went there, who attended the meetings, and what they said collectively. In no community do you get everybody agreeing on the path forward. In ours you get people split 50–50 pretty much across the board, depending on when the election is called. The same thing happens in Aboriginal —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: As a public servant, you are highly un-politicised!

Mr Searle: We understand the mechanics of it and how it works. The reality is you get those disagreements within Aboriginal communities as well. We are trying to work through those issues. The bigger communities, we will be going back to on multiple occasions. We will be working it up, going back and saying, "This is what we heard you say last time. This is what we think could happen." I think some of the bigger communities like Bidyadanga have the potential to become local governments in their own right and fully empowered to do all the things that "normal" communities do. Similarly, up the peninsula you have got the potential for those communities to form, given the economic potential that is up there. Everything involved in this is about where a particular community is and what its aspirations are. If a community says to us, "We just want you to leave us alone and go away", we will.

[4.00 pm]

The CHAIR: Grahame, in relation to some of the Aboriginal communities that we visited—and I had visited a few of these communities 10 years earlier—Pandanus Park was one. In the intervening time it seemed that some of those communities had lost focus and lost their way. When I went there the first time, they had a CEO and they had a governance structure and they seemed to be in control of their own destiny, if you like, as a community. What I sensed this time was that they had lost their CEO—it was not a position; someone had taken it on on a voluntary basis—and the community had seemed to lose their way and lose focus, and I reflected on that as far as how that will impact on the community supporting, or not supporting, families and therefore making Aboriginal youth more vulnerable to suicide. I suppose that is not too long a bow to make. So, while we are developing this road map, I think there are some communities that are withering on the vine because of the uncertainty in the space as to how this will look into the future. They get this feeling of people trying to close their communities and move them into town, and we get this in the media as well. What I learnt today is that there is a lot more good in this program and reform. But what we get focused on is these communities are withering on the vine, and by just leaving them there in this area of uncertainty, they are not clear about their future and how it is going to

look into the future. We need to continue to provide services for these communities, and I am not sure how we can do that.

Mr Searle: I could not agree with you more. The ministers I report to have both been very clear—Minister Morton before, and now Minister Mitchell—for 12 months now that they are not going to close communities. They have said it publicly and they have said it frequently. The Premier said it at the WACOSS conference. There may be some people who it suits to sell the story about closing communities, and people will always react to fear rather than reassurance. So I think you are seeing some of that. It is really clear when you talk to the Aboriginal communities that when they have a good chairperson and a good CEO, they work so much better than when they do not. They become really functional and they work really well. If either the chair dies or the CEO leaves, the wheels can fall off really quickly. We often talk generically about governance in Aboriginal communities. I think we are probably better off talking about administration in Aboriginal communities. I think it is the administration bit that is really lacking. The issue then becomes at what size should we intervene in terms of making sure that there is governance within the community—is 20 people enough, is 50 people enough or is 100 people enough—and you can argue about that; and then is there a role for government to fund the administration in some of the bigger communities, and to what extent? Those are all on the list of tasks. We have actually had some preliminary discussions with the commonwealth about that. I think talking about governance is just wrong, to be honest. I was in Jigalong two weeks ago. The adults there now, their parents walked out of the desert in the 70s. So to talk about governance in the sense that we know about it is inappropriate. I would be surprised if there were too many people in that community who could read a balance sheet. So how do you have governance in the sense that we talk about it? It is just improved administration. So we need to get the discussion more towards how do we administer these communities and run them in terms of CEOs, and the governance is a different issue. Some of these communities are actually registered under the associations act that was set up to run footy clubs and cricket clubs!

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: And HBF and RAC!

Mr Addis: I can put my perspective on that. Up until roughly the mid-90s, the commonwealth was building remote communities, and then up until 2002 it was funding them. Since then, they have been pretty much withdrawing from them by stealth. This is not a negative comment—that is not the intent—but, essentially, from about early 2000, the level of certainty and clarity of the status of services and things like CEOs being funded by someone has been getting much, much, much less clear. I think this process that Grahame talks about is trying to make sure that the state government is quite clear, because people have been in probably 12 to 14 years of flux and just do not know what is going on.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: This is probably a final question. How many Aboriginal people do you employ in the regional services reform unit, given that you have put employment parameters on everybody else?

Mr Addis: As a department?

Mr Searle: Him or me?

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: You! You got a clean slate. You got to employ people. You have set these employment targets. I am just seeing if you walk your talk.

Mr Searle: Of our 23, there are three, and two of them are quite senior—there is a level 8 and a level 9.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Does that reach your 37.8 per cent?

Mr Searle: The metro percentage is three; GESB, 10.

Mr Addis: So above the average—the parity average.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: You are living in Kununurra, 37.8 per cent.

Mr Searle: I have one staff member in Kununurra! It is a bit hard to get 37.8 per cent!

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Were there Aboriginal people working on the road map with you from that area?

Mr Searle: Yes, absolutely. The Kimberley education strategy project was led by one of our Aboriginal staff.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us, Grahame and Ralph. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors as you see that necessary. If you do not return the transcript within 10 days, we will assume that you think that it is a correct representation of what happened today. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered, but should you wish to provide any additional information or elaborate on particular points, please do so, and any supplementary submission to the committee will be considered. Thank you again for your time and for helping us get some understanding of this very challenging area.

Hearing concluded at 4.06 pm

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