

# **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT  
OF THE 2017 STATE GENERAL ELECTION**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 13 SEPTEMBER 2017**

**SESSION TWO**

## **Members**

**Mr P.A. Katsambanis (Chairman)  
Mr M.J. Folkard (Deputy Chairman)  
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup  
Mr A. Krsticevic  
Mr D.T. Punch**

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**Hearing commenced at 10.32 am**

**Mrs CHRISTINA WARD**

**Deputy Director, Edmund Rice Centre WA, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Ms Ward, thank you for coming along. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide evidence in relation to our inquiry into the administration and management of the 2017 state general election. My name is Peter Katsambanis. I am the chair of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I will introduce you to the other committee members. The deputy chair is Mark Folkard, member for Burns Beach; Zak Kirkup, member for Dawesville; Don Punch, member for Bunbury; and Tony Krsticevic, member for Carine. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, this privilege does not apply to anything that you might say outside of today's proceedings. Would you be able to introduce yourself for the record and the capacity in which you appear?

**Mrs WARD:** My name is Christina Ward. I am the deputy director at the Edmund Rice Centre in Mirrabooka, where we support refugees and migrants.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you. Before we begin with our questions, do you have any questions about your attendance here today or any brief opening statement that you want to make?

**Mrs WARD:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for coming along. Obviously, I think you understand that as part of our inquiry, we are very interested in making sure that every single person who is eligible to vote in Western Australia is properly enfranchised, so not only can they attend, but they can exercise their vote and their vote gets to be counted. One of the communities that has historically had issues around turnout and also formality of voting has been the CALD communities, the culturally and linguistically diverse communities, in Western Australia, and that is where we know the Edmund Rice Centre does significantly good work. Are you able to tell us what sort of involvement you had through your centre with the election process at the recent election that was conducted in March?

**Mrs WARD:** We have English classes at five levels—literacy 1 up to, I would not say advanced, but getting better. Whenever there is an election coming up, whether it is state or federal or even local councils, our teachers will do a few lessons leading up to that, just letting the students in the classes know a little bit about the process and who is running and what does it mean and what is the difference between the council election and the state election. It is very informal, but it is just part of the class for that week. We do similar things, you know, for Anzac Day, so they will talk about Anzac Day; Easter, whatever. So, that is something we would always do. We generally have someone who will come out. We usually get a few visits from sort of local politicians that will just come out and visit them and say hello to the people, which is great, because they are familiar with the people who they will be probably voting for. This year we were invited to be part of—it was not a steering group, was it?

**The CHAIRMAN:** The ambassador program?

**Mrs WARD:** Yes, the ambassador program. I am not really aware of how widely that was advertised within other organisations. I think we were asked for some feedback about what should be involved

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in that program. There was the two days. I think there was about 20 to 25 people attended the two-day programs. From what I can gather, the majority of them had been advised about it through the Edmund Rice Centre, which is great for us, but I am just a little bit concerned that there was not a great deal of language groups at the mentor training. I could be wrong. There could have been several groups running. But it just appeared that everyone was Edmund Rice-type people, whether it was the teacher who had brought some of her community, or one of our employees had brought some of their community. But it was very effective. The feedback I got from the people who attended was that it was simple to understand. It was informative. Of course, the majority of people that did attend that have been in Australia a significant amount of time. Their English was good and they had a basic understanding about the issues and about voting generally, I guess. So the feedback was good. Then what appears to have happened is the people who were picked to be mentors were the ones who were more familiar with using a tablet. We have a Burmese lady who works with us who is 75. She is very good, but she is not computer-literate and she is certainly not tablet-literate. I do not know if that is an issue. I think perhaps they got enough mentors who were able to use the tablet. So as far as the training was concerned, the feedback was really good and quite a few of those mentors were selected and attended the polling stations.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And did you get any input into the information that was included on the tablets?

**Mrs WARD:** I am relieving our director at the moment. I think he was asked to give some information, and I assume that that is what the information was. We are pretty much on the same level, so I am sure I would have agreed with what he was suggesting.

[10.40 am]

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** With our fantastic CALD populations within our community, do you think that the link between their literacy levels and the informal votes are an issue or is there any strategy that we can possibly take forward to try to reduce this level of informal votes?

**Mrs WARD:** I was a booth captain at Koondoola Primary School. A wide range of nationalities attended that booth. A South Sudanese mentor was in the polling station. Quite a lot of South Sudanese people attended and they found it was great. I think what they felt was just a bit confident that there was someone from their community who was actually working there and they could see that they were part of it. I had a Burmese girl working on my team. There are a lot of Burmese people in that area. Although she was working on the team, the polling station was very happy for her to assist. I really think, going forward, there should have been maybe a Burmese speaker in that polling station. I do not know how they were selected. I am assuming you looked and said, "This is the make-up of this community; maybe we need a South Sudanese." But I saw how effective that was—people coming and being able to speak to someone in their own language. A lot of people had a basic idea. They were not coming to vote because they knew that if they did not vote, they would get fined. They were very excited about it. I have seen this over the years; I have been doing Koondoola booth for a long time.

Also during the scrutineering, it appeared to me that the informal votes—there were quite a lot—were not from the CALD community. There were some that you think would be CALD by the way the figures were written. Most had made an attempt. Even if it was an informal vote, it was just informal, if you know what I mean; they made a few errors. The only thing I would say about leading up to it, I think the Office of Multicultural Interests was supporting some civil and civics workshops to CALD communities. They came out to us but the level of information that was being given to the students or the clients was very difficult for them to grasp or understand. I think it was reasonably simple if English is your first language and you have come from a country where voting is something that is familiar to you. Of course for a lot of our people living in refugee camps for so many years—

the Burmese, the Burundi, South Sudanese—there is absolutely no understanding about the three levels of government. I think that plays out when they see you and they say, “I’m here to vote for Mark McGowan.” We say, “You can’t vote for Mark McGowan; you have to vote for Janine.” They say, “Oh, no.” There is that level of understanding that they want to vote for the Premier or the Prime Minister. Sitting in on the civil and civics workshops, the Office of Multicultural Interests said, “We’ll put some money in there, so give them lunch to get people along.” People came and had the lunch and then left because they said they did not understand it. Although we had interpreters, it was going right over their head.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** Is that an issue about targeting the education to those specific stakeholders or do we need to have the Electoral Commission actually doing a lot more work in that particular space?

**Mrs WARD:** Sometimes it is difficult for people who are not working with those communities. If we have an interpreter, they will understand, but it is not necessarily the words that they do not understand, it is the total concept. I think it really has to be simplified. I think that is possibly where they get better information when they are getting it in the classrooms because the teachers are aware of the level of each of their groups.

I do not know if this is something that is in the adult migrant English program, if that is targeted—if there are workshops in there. Personally, I would think that rather than having workshops, the information could be given to the teachers or someone in those institutes who could then, from the information, run a workshop that they believe that their students could understand. From my experience, as soon as they get their citizenship, they are very excited about having the opportunity to vote and they want to do it right. It is fine if you are in Mirrabooka because there is always going to be someone working there who is from a CALD background. Even if it is a different language, it is that understanding of “we can’t speak the same language but I know where you’re coming from so I can guide you”. I think people from both groups at the election were helping different people.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** Ms Ward, can I just clarify. At the start, you said you were a booth captain. Was that for Edmund Rice or in your private capacity?

**Mrs WARD:** In my private capacity.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** Okay. I was just curious. I suspect the scrutineer was also there in a private capacity in that case?

**Mrs WARD:** Yes.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** With respect to both your experiences with CALD communities and just generally, outside of, say, communities of interest where there is obviously coalescence of those culturally and linguistically diverse groups—the example we will continue to revert to is Mirrabooka, where there are obviously some services and support there—how do you see supporting those sorts of communities that do coalesce in areas all together? For example, if you have a culturally and linguistically diverse person from, say, Byford, Mandurah or the Pilbara, is there any provision of services or support in those environments?

**Mrs WARD:** That is why I am asking about AMEP, because that is everywhere. The majority of migrants or refugees would be attending those classes. I would even suggest putting it into the settlement program, because it is not in there at the moment. When people first arrive, they get inundated with information. Even if that was something very simple and there were some contacts when it comes to voting time, “Call this number or go and see your teacher” or something. I just think it is something that is often totally ignored until the election is coming up, and three or four months before the election, everyone thinks, “We have to make sure everyone is enrolled to

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vote and everyone knows how to vote.” Maybe it is something that should be a settlement topic, because I think it is very important.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** When you say “settlement”, do you mean someone who has migrated to Australia?

**Mrs WARD:** I think of someone coming more from a refugee background. I would suggest that for our Iraqis—maybe not Syrians—and some of our communities that come from cities that have not been in camps and they are educated, it is not difficult. Something in their own language would explain it fully, but so many of the communities that we work with are illiterate in their own language. It does not matter how many languages it is in, if they do not read or write, the information is not going to get through. Also, there is feedback from people from different ethnic groups that we have in our centre. When it comes to talking about voting, they say, “We understand that; we know that.” I think with the more established communities—the Vietnamese and perhaps Croatian—I would imagine that it is not endemic within those communities that there is an issue with informal voting.

[10.50 am]

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** Within those communities that you work with, do you see any patterns or trends for—I am trying to couch this correctly. I am keen to understand the level of engagement by gender, I suppose, within those communities, who perhaps if they have come from backgrounds where women were not so engaged or were not franchised. Is there enough of a targeted program to encourage or to help support specifically and target women in those instances to participate in the democratic process? Is there any need for that? Are there any programs that support that? Do you see any black spots in particular communities where particular genders within those communities are not engaging—that the Electoral Commission needs to be focussing its attention and effort to help enfranchise them here?

**Mrs WARD:** The issue, I guess, with this is that those women who are disenfranchised are usually in the house, so it is very difficult to engage with them anyway. But we have about 175 people come to our English programs each week and the majority are women, but quite a few men—all different nationalities and backgrounds: Middle Eastern, African and Asian. We have never segregated our classes; they are always together. Everyone gets on really well. So I think perhaps if the information is given in our classes, then you would hope that it would go out into the communities, and I think that was one of the ideas of the mentor program. I can only really talk from the northern suburbs perspective, but maybe targeting Ishar Multicultural Women’s Health Centre. It has many women going through its services each week and it does engage with some of the more, I guess, vulnerable women through their counselling programs. I think what needs to be done is, from experience, it does not work when you say, “Okay, we are going to run an information session and people are going to come.” It is having those sessions where the people already are. I suggest somewhere like Ishar and Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre. Also the people we are engaging need to understand the information they are getting to be able to pass that around their communities.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** In terms of the informal votes, when you were scrutineering, for the upper house and lower house, was there more—or did you find that the informal votes had nothing on them or did they have an attempt of a vote? What was the sort of —

**Mrs WARD:** That is what I meant before: if someone has had an attempt, it might be informal but they have tried. There were a lot of comments about what people thought about the government—either side—and a lot of quite obscene pictures drawn, so they were clearly informal because it was not an accident.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** They were deliberately informal?

**Mrs WARD:** They were deliberate.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** Were there a lot of deliberate informals?

**Mrs WARD:** There were quite a few, yes. I would say certainly more than there was informal because they were just completed incorrectly.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** We have the information here, just to help the conversation. The deliberate informals—of the 2 000 informal ballots in Mirrabooka, 600 of those were considered to be deliberately informal, 860 were considered to be unintentional.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It may have varied by polling booth too.

**Mrs WARD:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Obviously Edmund Rice Centre engages with communities, so you are dealing with the most engaged people in those communities. There are people who are not necessarily engaged with services, or are not engaged too overtly with the service providers. We know with technology that many people from CALD communities get all their information from non-local sources, so there is plenty of information out on the internet that they access in their own language. Do you think that the WAEC could do better to target their advertising to these communities through those sources?

**Mrs WARD:** You mean on the internet or on radio?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, both. There is radio obviously. The WAEC did attempt to provide information in English online. Can it be tailoring its communication to the languages that people are using on the internet rather than just solely targeting in English?

**Mrs WARD:** I certainly think it would be accessed if it was in different languages, but there are so many. I think probably the concentration, from my understanding—I think it would be more targeting the refugee-type languages as well as the more established languages of Vietnamese and Croatian. But then again, it is not easy because there are so many people who are not literate. I think it is a difficult thing. Particularly in the last election there was a concerted effort out there to get the information to the people, but I do think that groups are probably the best way to get the information across, like targeting churches. I guess that was probably part of the mentoring program as well, because I know a South Sudanese guy who was one of the mentors, after his church he said he asked people to stay so he could talk to them about the process. That is what I meant before by saying it is better to go to the people rather than trying to get the people to you. I think the cost of putting these things in lots of different languages on radio and television, I personally do not think it would be particularly effective, just from other things that we have seen. I mean even for domestic violence at the moment, there are a lot of ads on there, but if you speak to our communities they would be saying things like, “Why aren’t they doing something about it? Why don’t we see it on TV?”

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** I am seeing a general theme come across. I do not want you to perceive this as a criticism, but your observations are that the Electoral Commission seems to be quite distanced from the CALD communities in that they come and set up a workshop and expect people to come to them, rather than them actually out there engaging with the community; is that the theme that I am picking up here?

**Mrs WARD:** I think they made the effort to ask people to run information sessions. Part of that workshop was civil and civics and then the Electoral Commission talking about that. It is not easy, you know. We get the calls all the time, “This is happening. Can you do an information session and can we get a minimum of 50 people?” You can do your best. I mean, we will shut the doors and say,

“You’re not going home from English,” so we have got a targeted audience. Often we will push it if we think it is an important issue. So they are coming out to agencies

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** Are they coming out specifically around election time? Are they doing it over the four years?

**Mrs WARD:** No, it appears to me that we get the calls and the emails a few months out.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** Rather than educating the CALD community across the term of the four years, they are focussing in on, “Oh, the election is coming, best we go and do something about it just so we can tick that box.”

**Mrs WARD:** I am not that cynical. Things are a priority when they are a priority, aren’t they? But that is why we were suggesting having it in the settlement program. I mean, when people first arrive here as refugees—not necessarily as migrants—there is so much they have to do and have to learn that they try to limit these things. But I also think that voting and citizenship is a huge issue for them. I think maybe it should be something. I think they possibly say that we are a democratic country and you get to vote. But maybe a little bit more information when you have that captive audience when they first arrive and they are going through this process and everyone has a case worker and everyone is working together, particularly for the Syrians. We have had 1 000 Syrians who probably will not even consider an election, what it means, until a couple of months from the next election.

[11.00 am]

**Mr D.T. PUNCH:** I guess the sense of people’s understanding of what the democratic process is would be very much coloured by the experiences they have had in the country of origin. Then there would be a process of them taking that understanding and rejigging it, in a sense, in terms of the experience here. I pick up on the member for Burns Beach’s comment. Is there value in a more considered approach to engagement around the electoral process and the democratic process on an ongoing basis as part of the settlement programs as opposed to a more topical bolt-on type workshop activity, or maybe a combination of both? There are certain messages that you need to get across close to an election. There is a more fundamental understanding that needs to be built leading up to the process. I would be keen to get clarification from you on that. Secondly, in terms of post-election debriefs, in a sense, is there any conversations with the community about the experience of having gone through an election and what they found worked and did not work?

**Mrs WARD:** Something must have been working because we only had a few people with fines for not voting. Two of those would particularly go to not understanding the whole system. One person had moved over from the eastern states. One had moved suburbs and had changed their address with Centrelink but had not even considered changing it on the electoral roll. They went to vote and could not vote because they were not on the roll. That comes back to the understanding of the whole process. Someone else said, “I went to vote and they said that I was not on the roll.” She was visiting friends in Fremantle. She lives in Merriwa. She just said, “This is my name.” They said, “Your name is not on the roll.” She did not have enough English to say, “I do not live here,” and no-one asked her. She was really upset when she got this letter, because she said, “I went to vote and they said I wasn’t on the roll.” People could probably understand it when they first arrive, but clearly those are the types of things that we do not consider being part of their initial settlement. Also, I think through AMEP. It is not just refugees; there are many migrants attending that. If it was built into the programs in TAFE.

**Mr D.T. PUNCH:** As an integrated package.

**Mrs WARD:** Yes.

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**Mr D.T. PUNCH:** Any comment on the notion of having some sort of workshop post-election for people to give feedback on the experience itself and using that as a basis to inform future work?

**Mrs WARD:** Yes. I can speak for the people but not on behalf of the people. It is only from my experience and what people are saying. Often from that first experience they can give you feedback—for example, this was uncomfortable. I think it would probably be much more difficult, as you mentioned, if you are in an electorate or voting where there was not many people from a CALD background there as well. It might be a bit more intimidating. I think that in Mirrabooka, because of the make-up of the community all over Mirrabooka, there is always going to be someone who can help you, even if it is not someone who is employed to help you. It is kind of hard.

**Mr D.T. PUNCH:** I understand. Thank you.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** What is the feeling like on election day for the people when they come to the booth in terms of the paraphernalia, the people that are there, the bunting? Generally, some people do not like running the gauntlet and the how-to-vote cards. How do you find that in those communities?

**Mrs WARD:** From my experience, they seem to quite enjoy it. It is all kind of exciting. They are very excited that they can actually vote and their vote is going to count. They take all the cards. I think they really appreciate the fact that they are able to vote. They want to do it and they want to do it right.

**The CHAIRMAN:** There is a lot less cynicism, isn't there, from some of those communities? They are just grateful for the opportunity to vote.

**Mrs WARD:** Yes. They really are.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** In terms of your role with Edmund Rice as well as your role during election day itself, do you find yourself afterwards having discussions with people where they say they did it wrong and what happened and how they had an informal vote, or does that discussion not take place? Just in terms of yourself and the group that you deal with.

**Mrs WARD:** The only feedback I really got, apart from people saying that they voted or they voted for the winner or they did not vote for the winner, was more about the process—their names not being on the roll or going out of area. One woman in particular with very little English said that she was trying to show them her Centrelink card to say, "Are you sure I am not on this roll? Here is my card." She said that they would not look at it. If they had looked at it they would have seen that, "You do not live in Fremantle. You will have to do a postal vote or an absentee vote." I think that maybe it is some education for the people working there to ask these things.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** The Electoral Commission at the moment is not doing debriefs in the CALD communities, from what we can see, so how would they know?

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** I think it also depends on who you come up with. We have all had experiences in our lives when we deal with someone somewhere and they say they cannot help you and the person next to them is listening and says, "No, you can actually do something." The person giving the information is not trained or maybe they just could not be bothered. It is not just that they are trained. Sometimes they might just dismiss it and say, "Who cares? Next!" As opposed to someone who actually cares about the process and wants to make sure of that. Electoral Commission officials should be making sure that they go out of their way to make sure people can vote and they find out why, if they are not—going through that extra process of checks and balances, as you said. It is about maybe reinforcing that back to the Electoral Commission and saying that their staff need to go that little bit extra, especially with people who have language issues, to make sure that they are in the right area. Nine out of 10 times they are on the roll but are in the wrong area. That maybe needs to



be some advice going to all the Electoral Commission staff saying that if you are in these areas—actually, anywhere—if these people come to see you, chances are they are on the roll and you just need to ask these questions.

**Mrs WARD:** Pretty much if they are not on the roll, ask to see some ID.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** That is correct.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** I am actually saddened by that story. Someone absolutely wants to vote and wants to engage, produces it, and then we hear that for whatever reason, she did not have that opportunity. To me that shows that we as a Parliament and as parliamentarians need to be looking at supervision of the Electoral Commission ongoing. What are your thoughts on that?

**Mrs WARD:** I would agree with that. She was very affronted that she got fined. We wrote a letter so she did not have to pay the fine. I think that a lot of it comes down to the staff in the polling booths. Again, it is different in Koondoola or Balga. A few times the manager of the polling booth —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Polling place manager.

**Mrs WARD:** That is right. He came out a couple of times and said, “Look, this person—I cannot communicate with them but they have got Janine Freeman’s card and they are saying they want to vote for her. Can you come and help them? They are clearly telling us who they want to vote for, so rather than them not voting, is there someone who can come in and show them where to put the cross?”

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** That is a great polling booth manager.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But in the commonwealth election, for instance, you get the opportunity as a party to nominate a scrutineer who can do that job inside the polling booth, whereas you do not in a state election. In other states you also get that opportunity, but you do not here at these elections. You are saying that there are informal procedures put in place to make it work, but they are not formalised.

**Mrs WARD:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Quite evidently, the CALD focus on areas of large CALD communities may fray the further away you get from the centre. That is what you get with the example of the lady who visited a friend in Fremantle and was told that she did not appear on the roll without getting asked where she lived in case she appeared on another roll, when there was an electronic roll sitting there with her name on it at the next table.

[11.10 am]

**Mrs WARD:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Perhaps awareness of these issues beyond the concentration of large numbers of CALD communities may assist to enfranchise more people.

**Mrs WARD:** I totally agree with that. I think often it is that working with the communities, you will consider different options, but if you have had no contact with anyone from a CALD community, you are not even going to probably consider that they cannot read in their own language or that it has not been explained fully. It is just very much, “No”.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have Aboriginal clients?

**Mrs WARD:** We do.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How do you think the WAEC goes in engaging with Aboriginal clients?

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**Mrs WARD:** Again, in the Mirrabooka area, now that the Wadjak resource centre has opened in Balga they did some workshop engagement things at Wadjak. Clearly, having the resource centre there has made such a difference to so many people in the area. We engage with a lot of Aboriginal families through their children. We have sports programs for Aboriginal children but we do not have programs for adults. Just from the feedback from a lot of those parents and the contacts we have they say it is great to have their own place that they can go to for their information. Again, it is great for service providers who can then come to that place and engage with the Aboriginal community. There is going to be someone there from all of the families, probably, who can then disseminate that information. Again, that comes down to going to the people rather than calling a meeting at Herb Graham and saying, "Come along and we will talk about voting."

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think the WAEC could do any more than just simply look at how informality rates go in relation to measuring how they are engaging with CALD communities? Are there any other things they can do to measure the success of things like their ambassador program?

**Mrs WARD:** I think a lot of that would have to be feedback from the ambassadors themselves and maybe a survey or feedback from people in the local areas. If those surveys are done through an agency or an adult migrant English program, there is going to be a much better chance of them being completed because there will be someone there to help them. I would be quite interested to know how it went in areas that ambassadors were where there is not a high CALD population.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. You will get a transcript of the hearing sent to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 working days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned, we will deem it to be correct. You cannot use the corrections process to introduce new material or change the sense of the evidence that you have given today, but if you want to provide us with additional material, we are always welcome to receive that separately as a supplementary submission and we will definitely consider it. Thank you for your time. I conclude today's hearing.

**Hearing concluded at 11.14 am**

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