

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 9 November 2012

Members

Mrs A. Coote
Ms G. Crozier
Mr D. O'Brien

Ms B. Halfpenny
Mr F. McGuire
Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

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Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officer: Ms V. Finn

Opening statement by Chair

The CHAIR — Good morning, everyone, and welcome to day three of the inquiry into child abuse. Before starting today’s hearing I will take this opportunity to outline the general character of activities the committee has been engaged in and indicate the way in which we are approaching our task. A great deal has already been done and our work is continuing.

Our terms of reference specifically focus our activity on the handling of child abuse — that is, to consider how organisations have dealt with these issues in the past and whether they have dealt with them appropriately.

The importance of the work we are undertaking hardly needs to be emphasised and is well understood by the committee. It is reflected in the more than 350 submissions received and more than 120 requests to appear in public and confidential hearings.

Child abuse within religious and non-government organisations — and its often devastating consequences — has not only profoundly affected a very substantial number of families and individuals in our community, but has presented fundamentally important questions in relation to the bodies concerned, and indeed affected our investigatory and monitoring agencies.

It follows that our processes of exploration of how these issues have been handled must be broad ranging and conducted with sensitivity. As you would expect, the hearings and submissions form only two parts of a broader process of evidence gathering and analysis. The methods we employ to address these issues in order to arrive at appropriate findings and recommendations are multilayered.

Several components contribute to informing the committee. These include:

- calling for submissions and receiving input from those who are interested to participate;

- undertaking hearings;

- actively pursuing information from relevant individuals and organisations; and we have taken action to obtain documents from the Catholic Church;

- undertaking investigatory analysis through the committee’s powers under the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003; and

- researching the outcomes of previous inquiries, reviewing academic literature, considering existing organisational policies and procedures, and looking at options for possible legislative reform.

The hundreds of submissions received by the committee vary in length, in the issues they raise, and in their complexity. Public submissions will be put on the inquiry website following their review by the committee. The committee determined that the early release of submissions by organisations was in the public interest and the majority of these have already been published.

A large percentage of submissions received by the committee are from individuals, many of which are sensitive and personal in nature. Many contain detailed information about incidents of child abuse, naming victims and offenders and locations. The committee must ensure that it does not encroach on the responsibilities of investigatory agencies and the courts, and it will be reviewing the individual submissions carefully before they are released. This is an inherently complex process, which takes some time to ensure that each submission is given the attention it deserves.

The committee will act in accordance with the usual protocols and practices that apply to parliamentary inquiries — that is, we will not engage in public commentary through the media. It is important to avoid potentially compromising the integrity of hearings or pre-empting outcomes, and in the interest of allowing the inquiry to proceed in an impartial manner, I hope that media outlets will understand the reasons why we will not engage at this point.

The committee will hold hearings in Melbourne and in regional areas across Victoria until the end of this year and into 2013. In addition to hearing from individual victims and their families, we will hear from expert witnesses, government departments, victims' organisations, professional associations, religious organisations, and non-government organisations.

The committee has contacted or will be contacting all those who have requested to appear at a hearing. Given the large volume of people, this process will take some time, but I reassure people that our priority is to hear from everyone who has requested to give evidence. You will have the opportunity to talk with the committee.

All of those affected — and our wider society — have a right to anticipate that there will be full accountability and justice for any past wrongdoing or failures, and that we can develop mechanisms to ensure that abuses of the past will not continue. We have begun the process, let us get on with it.