

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

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Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESS

Mr Paul McDonald, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Rowena Robinson, Adoption Information Service Worker, Anglicare Victoria.

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The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Settle): Welcome. I would like to, first of all, acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet and to pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here with us today.

I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I ask that all mobile telephones now be turned to silent.

I would like to introduce my colleague Meng Heang Tak, who is the Member for Clarinda, and I am Michaela Settle, the Member for Buninyong. I would like to welcome you both, Paul McDonald and Rowena Robinson. Welcome to our inquiry.

All the evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by that privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible unless confidentiality has been requested.

The committee is interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services that your organisation provides, but also what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. I would, first of all, invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement, and then there will be some questions from myself and Heang. So if I could hand it over to you, Paul.

Mr McDONALD: Good. Thanks very much. We really thank you for the opportunity to be invited to address this inquiry. I too want to acknowledge that I am appearing on the land of the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I would like to thank you for the invitation. I am here as Paul McDonald, CEO of Anglicare Victoria, and I have got Rowena Robinson from our adoption information services, who I have invited along as part of our agency to talk about her work, which is absolutely relevant to the inquiry, some of the people we have seen, the inquiries we have seen and some thoughts about how we can probably improve our service to those seeking assistance through such services.

Just as a short history, I suppose, of our historical ownership in this area—if I could put it like that—and our involvement in this area, Anglicare Victoria was formed actually under an Act of Parliament in 1997. It brought together under that Act three organisations, the Mission of St James and St John, the Mission to the Streets and Lanes and St John's Homes for Boys and Girls, and later, in 2014, St Luke's also amalgamated into what is known as Anglicare Victoria.

We have identified that the entities that were engaged in historical adoption practices were primarily operating within the Mission of St James and St John through the St Gabriel's Babies Home and its predecessor babies homes in the early 1930s called Ramoth, Arms of Jesus and also the Kedesh Maternity Home. St Gabriel's Babies Home looked after the majority of babies from Kedesh and from the Royal Women's Hospital whilst they were awaiting adoption, operating until 1975. The Kedesh home operated from the mid-20s to around 1986, catering for young single mothers whose babies were frequently placed for adoption. Reports indicate in the early 1980s, though, the focus shifted from adoptions to supporting young mothers to keep their babies, and this evolved into a pregnancy and parenting support program, but prior to that it was in relation to assisting in adoptions. The Mission of St James and St John continued to operate registered adoption programs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and they transferred to Anglicare as part of the 1997 Act that brought the three agencies into the one entity. Thus we have the adoption information service that we have had since 1997, but since the 1980s from our former agencies, at which Rowena has worked for 10 years and which we will talk to you a bit about.

Also, as a result of that merger we are now currently Victoria's largest out-of-home care provider and very familiar with the issues in relation to removal, placement and reunification of care. Also the organisation runs a heritage service, serving the needs of our past residents and clients who have been involved in the service. They assist in locating records, providing supported records for release and referrals for local support services, organising of course annual reunions and referring clients to free independent legal advice and a range of other services.

Back in 2012 we welcomed the Senate inquiry along with the Victorian government's formal apology in 2012 and also the commonwealth government's apology in 2013. At the time the president of the Anglicare Victoria Council, the Anglican Archbishop of the Diocese of Melbourne, Philip Freier, delivered also an apology on behalf of all Victorian Anglican entities at synod in 2012, with the following words. He said:

The story of Melbourne must be open and honest about our faults of the past. We have made mistakes. Mistakes are normal in the story of any organisation, but some behaviour looks very different with the passing of time. Forced adoption may have seemed right to some people at the time it occurred, though the pain and grief of the victims, parents and children should have been hard to ignore.

On behalf of our diocese and entities:

I am sorry for the hurt inflicted on those involved and the loss they have suffered. Today a different understanding of family relationship and of the ability of single parents helps us to see forced adoption as simply wrong.

And then further to that our board have expressed a further apology, which I am happy to refer back to, but in the interests of time I may move forward.

Let us move to the adoption and information service. I may ask Rowena to address the inquiry just about her experience and what that service does and also the terms of reference of this committee. Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms ROBINSON: Thank you, Paul. And thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As Paul said, I am Rowena Robinson, and I am Anglicare's adoption information service worker—I call it AIS worker, so I will abbreviate it to that. I have been in this role, as you were saying, for about 10 years now. My background as a qualified social worker includes working in London in child protection and family support as well as adoption before moving to Australia. I worked as a case manager and also team leader in Anglicare's adoption and permanent care team before having kids, and then I came back in this role part time. I am also an adopted person, and although this is not directly relevant to the context of this inquiry and deliberation, it helps me to understand some of the complexities of adoption on a deeper level.

The adoption information service, AIS, operates from Yarraville as part of the adoption and permanent care team. We are kind of like an entity to ourselves in some respects, though. We have a dedicated AIS role, and I currently work three days a week with some admin support. The service is currently partly funded by the Department of Justice and Community Safety, which I will refer to as DJCS, which was formally the DHHS, and partly funded directly by Anglicare due to the demand for service. Anglicare Victoria currently is one of three community service organisations in Victoria that provides an AIS service. Historically Anglicare AIS was the only agency to my knowledge out of these three who had a dedicated AIS worker, and I am excited to hear that other agencies have moved towards this or are moving towards this model. The service is available to all eligible applicants under the *Adoption Act*.

Now, I want to say that within our practice we use the terminology that our client feels comfortable with. Terminology can be very emotive for many, so please excuse my use of terminology today when distinguishing between the different parties eligible under the *Adoption Act* who can apply for their AIS records; I do not mean to offend in any way. Today I will use the terminology that was recommended in the Senate inquiry report.

I work with adopted persons; natural parents; adult children of adopted persons; natural relatives, which are brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and grandparents; and adopted parents. I would say the majority of the clients I work with and applications I receive are from adopted people, followed by, natural relatives, natural mothers and adult children of adopted people. The service provides counselling and mediation support as well as search and outreach services on behalf of people affected by adoption. We release records directly to applicants and in response to requests for records, predominantly from DJCS.

I thought it would be good to kind of give a bit of an idea of how many applicants and the type of enquiries we have received. Over the last nine years the AIS has responded to about 530 duty inquiries or inquiries. We have opened or received 194 files, and I thought it was interesting here that 135 of these were from adopted people, so it kind of shows how significant that amount is. We have completed 153 section 87 interviews—the interviews are where adoption records are released to the applicants—and 116 of these were for adopted people. We have also had predominantly DJCS record requests, so 277 of these, as well as offering other support services for contact support to about 367 returning clients. We believe in having that open-door policy—that people know they can come back and speak to me at any stage.

I thought it might be helpful to talk through some of the general adoption records application process to bring my role to life a bit. All initial AIS phone calls are put through to me on duty. This duty is not shared within the team. We feel it is important where possible that all AIS inquiries come directly to me. It is important to note what a big step this first phone call is for most. They may have been considering doing it for years, and it is really important that I give them the time and the space to be heard and answer any questions they may have. Where applicable, I then send out our AIS registration forms and supporting documentation. We believe that our service needs to be client focused, empowering the inquirer as much as possible for them to make the decision to send in their application form when they feel ready to take this next step.

Records are released to the applicants in what I mentioned earlier, the section 87 interview. The aim of this interview is to provide a safe, supportive environment for these records to be released. I always ask if the applicant would like to bring a support person with them. I find I get a mixture of people taking me up on this offer. Generally speaking, it might be a partner or an adopted parent or an adult child. Some prefer to come by themselves, which is important to them. I have also had some families who come together. It might be a natural relative bringing their mother, who is the natural mother, or the adult children of adopted people bringing their parent, the adoptee too, with this trusting relationship with the applicant pivotal to these developments. These interviews tend to last for 60 to 90 minutes for the applicant to receive their records and to be able to speak freely and to be heard and understood. I always have a box of tissues on hand because it can be very emotional.

The significance of even the most basic information is something I am very aware of. For adopted people I normally start sharing their records with their adoption court records, so their pre-adoption birth certificate. Hearing their name given at birth can be very surreal— seeing their natural mother's name, her age, her signature can be so powerful. The bringing together of the story they may have heard growing up or may have just found out about— confirming it and supporting them with this information is worth more than gold and is something most take for granted. That is why record keeping is so important and should be invested in to help our clients to piece together and process their lives.

The information I share with individuals for the first time and the experience will stay with them for the rest of their lives. I am a worker privileged to support them through this step, and I value this opportunity to work with them and support them as best I can. I am conscious of the continued emotive work that applicants are faced with following their interview and the importance of having appropriate client-focused and needs-led support services available to them moving forward. This is where support services such as VANISH are also pivotal in my opinion, and many of my clients make contact with VANISH for further support.

Anglicare Victoria has until recently offered outreach support services to natural relatives and natural parents. Adopted people do their own searches for their families, with this search discussed during their interview, with the information regarding next steps, consideration and support services included in the shared information. As mentioned, when an adopted person registers for their AIS records and attends their interview, they receive identifying information about themselves and the circumstances of their birth and adoption. They also sometimes find out about other natural siblings that were also placed for adoption. They then can register as a natural relative to find out more about any natural siblings that were also placed for adoption. If they registered as a natural relative, they would then receive non-identifying information and I would outreach to that sibling on their behalf, acting as a go-between until they feel comfortable to correspond directly.

It can be very exciting yet confusing, with conflicting feelings. Some feel an instant connection; others grapple with the fact that they are related but they also feel like strangers as they know so little about one another. Current DJCS service standards for funded agencies appear to recommend that all natural relative applications are to be transferred to DJCS. However, in order to be client focused, I would like to be able to continue to offer this support to natural relatives.

Mr McDONALD: Madam Chair, we have got some areas of improvement that we think we can summarise. Maybe it is a good point just to say if there is anything to explore there or if you would like us to go into some of the areas that we think could be improved.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes. Well, there are a few things I would like to ask about. We have obviously heard from a lot of people in different circumstances, and the section 87 interview has been described to us by some adoptees who feel perhaps it is disempowering. So I think the idea is that somebody else has access to what they believe to be their information, and it is almost—and I am not suggesting that you do this—that people see it as a paternalistic structure. Do you have anything to say around how you think the section 87 works as a process?

Ms ROBINSON: For me, just having somebody there who understands some of the complexities of adoption and can answer any questions they have and actually go through their records with them is important, not all of their records, because that may be all too much. I also then give them a pack of other information that they can take home with them, which they can go through at a different stage, because I think you hear stuff and you take in a certain amount, then you read stuff and you can kind of digest it on a further level. So I see it as a supportive, empowering interview, and that is the aim, but I have had people who have felt like ‘Am I being judged?’ or ‘Are you evaluating me to see whether I can receive my records or not?’. So those are the kind of questions that I would normally answer on duty, and that is why I think it is so important that you have got me—I talk about me as Anglicare’s AIS worker—answering those initial queries and then talking them through the process. I have had a lot of really positive feedback as to the nature of those interviews. I do not know if that answers your question in that respect.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes. I am just interested. It is an interesting idea, because I can see it as a service that you are trying to wrap around—

Mr McDONALD: Yes, that is right.

The ACTING CHAIR: but you can also see that perhaps someone on the other side of the chair thinks, ‘Why am I being questioned?’.

Mr McDONALD: No, that is right.

The ACTING CHAIR: So I am very interested to hear.

Mr McDONALD: Well, it is good to hear that feedback, too, in a sense, because the feedback to us is probably that they would probably prefer to actually give the feedback to a committee like this in relation to what their experience was like, rather than to the deliverer, and I think that is something for us to be interested in looking at, that evidence, to see if we can learn anything from that anyway.

The ACTING CHAIR: In regard to the records that you can supply, we have heard—and again, not to do with your agency, just on a very general level—that people often receive information that has been redacted. I am just interested to understand on what grounds information is redacted. How do you decide what someone can and cannot know about their own history?

Ms ROBINSON: I suppose from my side we have got some guidance. We had some guidelines initially stemming from the *Adoption Act* and then from the department—they are now called DJCS, but it was historically FIND, who then became DHHS—so we had some general guidelines that we use. I try to release as much information as possible. I just think information is gold. It might not seem important to me, but to somebody else it is just so important. But obviously there need to be guidelines that we work within. So information I would be taking out is for example if there is information about another sibling who was in the adoptive placement who was also adopted. That is their private information, so I would be taking their birth details and that kind of thing out if they were in the records. It would be information like that that I would be taking out, so it would be more to do with the privacy of somebody else in that respect. Some information in there about the adoptive parents assessment is also redacted or not included in their records, but that is from guidelines that we have that we work towards.

The ACTING CHAIR: And from the beginning of the journey, from that first contact, what sort of time frame do we look at?

Ms ROBINSON: We do not have a waitlist or anything like that within Anglicare. It is so important when somebody has made that first phone call that we respond asap. I only work three days a week, so I am aware that sometimes I am getting back to somebody a day or two after they have made their phone call. I always try to respond on the same day that they have corresponded. I would say between three to five months from the receipt of their AIS registration form. I think we have got a new directive that is 70 days, and we obviously will try to work within these timeframes. I would like to release the records to people as soon as possible, I just want to make sure that I have everything and that I also do it in a supportive way for them. I always think that correspondence is just so important with our clients and applicants, so I will contact them and keep them updated. They might sometimes put me off and go, 'Actually, do you mind if we do it during the school holidays as I am a teacher,' so there may be things like that that affect timelines too. That is where I think communication and that mutual respect is important, and the understanding of how it might have taken somebody 60 years to make this phone call but now that they have made it a day may feel like a year to them, so we obviously try and do as much as possible to try to offer that service to them as fast as possible but also in a timely and client focussed manner.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes. Queensland have a centralised system so that it is all managed by government, and we here in Victoria, as you know, have the individual service providers. Do you have any reflection on those two systems?

Ms ROBINSON: Yes. I think there are pros and cons. That is why I said that I was pleased to hear that the other agencies were also having a dedicated AIS worker like myself. We feel that that is really important that there is a dedicated person that they speak to that sees them through that whole process where possible. My adopted clients do then go on to VANISH, who I think is such a big resource—they really are. I mean, they have been around since 1984–85 with open adoptions. We have got a good working relationship there, I believe. I think that it is really important that there is the continued experienced support, which I think works well, I think it could be developed further. We need to look at how we can make it more user friendly, as such, for clients, even in terms of the collating of information and all of that.

Mr McDONALD: We have got some search arrangements that we have with the Victorian Electoral Commission—they are under an agreement between us and them in relation to the search—but moving to a wider thing with the Australian Electoral Commission's ability to search so that we can collate. We have invested in the past in archivists and a number of other activities.

I think just on the observation of centralised versus through the agency though, there are going to be strengths in both. I think, as you have heard from Rowena, it is that ability to find that information and then how to communicate and how to own and, I suppose, feel responsible for the finding of that. We feel our dialogue, not only through our adoption services but our heritage clients, is an important dialogue, and it is important, I suppose, accountability back to them from us about our ability to find those files where they are. I think the 70 days—I mean we have been landing them between two and five months, but I think the 70-day goal is really—

Our experience is that it has been a big step for the first approach, so from our end we should not be dragging our heels. We know what they have gone through before they have approached first, and we want to be prompt. So the 70 days thing is something we are going to see if we can nail each and every time.

The ACTING CHAIR: Did you have some particular questions, Heang?

Mr TAK: Moving on, in terms of parents now who are thinking of or wish to relinquish their child, how does Anglicare Victoria—I do not want to use the word 'ensure'—accommodate that in terms of support for the parent to come to what we call consent?

Mr McDONALD: To come to that decision—

Mr TAK: That is right.

Mr McDONALD: from their request.

Ms ROBINSON: What I would say is that in my AIS role I do not work with—you know, even the word relinquishing can be upsetting to some, I do not deal with or I do not work with mothers or parents that are

looking at adoption as an option. I have historically, but my information there is from about 14, 15 years ago, when I was the team leader of the adoption and permanent care team. So I would like to say that we take real pride in trying to—not pride, that is not the right word—but we really try and learn or try and listen to history in terms of empowering mothers to look at other options to adoption.

I actually spoke to one of my colleagues yesterday, and I understand that only about 12 babies are placed for local adoption a year in Victoria nowadays. If you look at that compared to the amount historically—and in that there are just so many different things that have been implemented to try to support all parties better. Nowadays they have to have at least three relinquishment counselling interviews with a gazetted social worker through the process, but we offer so many more than that to try to support them through this huge decision. Because I think that is the thing: initially it just looks black and white, like there are not many options, but actually once we speak with them and they can explore family members and other supports as well, they often realise they have other options to consider, we explore those as much as possible to try to make sure that they are making the best decision for their baby as well as themselves. So I do not have up-to-date information on that but I hope that kind of answers it, it really is about listening to the mother and trying to involve the father too, in that—and other family members—because we recognise the ripple effect of it all, is lifelong.

Mr McDONALD: The relinquishments have happened with an older age group—that we have been involved with. Prior to my current position I worked in the department at one stage as the deputy secretary of the children, youth and family division, and the number of relinquishments based on those times, and it was consistent, had been in relation to parents who no longer felt that they were capable or able to look after the challenges of the child. Now, I do not mean in the sense of challenges in their behaviour but often with disabilities and high-care needs that they had from physical ailments. Moving back to sort of the option of relinquishment as babies, the number being 12 is showing that in fact maybe both from a societal but also a service perspective there are better options to help young mothers come through that.

Mr TAK: Okay, just one last question, Madam Chair. Specifically, of those who sought the service that you have said, are there any overseas parents?

Ms ROBINSON: Sorry, any—

Mr TAK: Overseas.

Ms ROBINSON: Overseas, like the UK? So in terms of adopted people who have moved overseas?

Mr TAK: No, I mean for those who are thinking of or want to relinquish their child through your service that you have talked about. Are there overseas students or any—

Ms ROBINSON: We do have some, and I think that has been a thing. I do not have the up-to-date stats. This is talking from the previous hat I used to wear, but we might get students who were over here or young mums, and then it is almost just giving them a voice. Yes, so we have had those.

Mr McDONALD: And we are aware of—what would you call it, not the phenomenon, but overseas students who are needing to return home who have had babies. Certainly prior to COVID that was an issue of discussion in relation to what are the policy options there that we can assist with in relation to those mothers who are in this sort of situation from this.

Ms ROBINSON: It is very sensitive.

The ACTING CHAIR: I would be interested to hear the areas where you think that there is room for improvement in your service, but can I just clarify something initially? With the 70 days, is this a recent directive from the department or is this an internal—

Ms ROBINSON: It was from the department. It was from the recent service standards for funded agencies. So it was from that, under adoption. In there it said 70 days, so we are still rolling out the practicalities of it all—so 70 days. And I have to say we have actually been pretty good with our stats in that respect, because, as I said, we try to do everything we can to release records to a person—as fast as we can and as client focused as we can. So you were asking, sorry, about recommendations or—

The ACTING CHAIR: You had suggested that you had ideas that you said could improve the service, so I am intrigued to hear those.

Mr McDONALD: Well, maybe Rowena can speak a little bit more fully, but in three areas, Madam Chair: one in counselling in relation to the ability for clients of our service to maybe choose their own counsellor or the method of counselling that they feel most comfortable with. We think that a greater choice in relation to a range of independent counsellor recommendations would be certainly of assistance, for people to explore those. Tracing services is another one. I talked a little bit about the Victorian Electoral Commission and our arrangements that we have in relation to trying to assist our tracing. I am not sure if this is within the powers of this committee, but maybe the Australian Electoral Commission can have a look at some of these arrangements and see anything. This could be a common commentary, and maybe there is, through the relevant minister at one of those national ministries, some sort of discussion about the cooperation of the Australian Electoral Commission in relation to tracing services. I mean, we have had a good access from the VEC. And there is still a small fee that goes with that. So further funding on archiving I think was our reference. The third one was in relation to just ensuring that as we deliver this it is more of a person-centred service. I mean, it needs to be that informed. I mean, with some of our comments here about the adopted persons register and receiving adopting information and applying to the agency, we have seen this, I think, in the redress scheme. We have seen this in even agents in the whole stories that have come out of both Victoria's inquiry, *Betrayal of Trust*, and the national inquiry, about being more people-centred or victim-centred, and I do not mean that term in the sense of victim, but certainly orientating our redress support and centred services that have the right cultural, I suppose, touch, so that if you are going to get back to someone, you get back to them, you listen and—I think as in your commentary in relation to the interviews—you make sure they are positive human experiences for what is a very sort of big decision. They are the three areas; I am happy to expand on any of those.

The ACTING CHAIR: A couple of things out of that. Interestingly enough, with the redress scheme, what is Anglicare's position on redress in terms of forced adoption?

Mr McDONALD: Well, a couple of things. Of course we are part of the national redress scheme, but we have our own redress scheme also, internally in the organisation, that goes wider than the national redress scheme. We pick up physical abuse and trauma and really any issue, impact, that actually affected their care or affected who they are. So our policy that we have spent quite a lot of time getting right—and you can always continue to learn—has been used as a benchmark for other Anglicares around Australia. In relation to the adoption position, I think I could quote you the numbers I have got here, so I will just find that as I speak in relation to our redress scheme, and the reason why I am wanting to point out the numbers is because with our inquiries from adoptions, whilst we have had some engagement in relation to mothers who have had their babies removed, that has not eventuated—despite our willingness to consider—into any redress payment to this date. I mean, we have participated on average in 12 informal settlement conferences each year over the past five years, and in relation to our numbers on redressing inquiries and files, there is quite a number.

I can say to you in the history of my 10 years as being CEO, Anglicare Victoria, we have had maybe three or four inquiries along that where we have continued to engage the family concerned, and particularly the mother, but nothing has eventuated in relation to pursuit of a redress. We would certainly be, in our view and our policy, open to those matters being approached to the organisation.

The ACTING CHAIR: So when those contacts, minimal as they have been, come to you, what sort of services go around those people coming into that situation? Are you providing them counselling or are you seeking outside counselling, or is it really just directly to a redress? I am just curious to know what services—

Mr McDONALD: Okay. No, it is as I commented. I mean, it depends on the inquiry, but we certainly see them as being—what is the word?—from alumni to family to, you know, our past responsibilities. In the mergers of the three agencies to our founding we made this very clear: we take full liability for the founding agencies in all actions. And since 2014 St Luke's is the same—the full history of that. Our services that we offer are from file search to providing files to actually assisting with them creating and negotiating settlements and redress settlements both within the agency but also assisting in engaging in the national redress. Then we also have a range of services that we offer—well, refer to—in relation to either ongoing counselling or counselling services or support. We have events and social events, and we have got archives. We show film footage and slides and paraphernalia—if I can put it in that term—of past homes. We bring them together several times a year at a lunch and events, and I always attend and listen to their stories. So we do not define

what you can and what you cannot do by the approach to the organisation. We feel we are, I suppose, there to assist, resolve and apologise. Any apology that we make I make personally in my office—I give that offer. But otherwise we can provide the committee with some examples of the apologies we have given. Now, having said that, not related to the adoption history of those, they have been really only informal inquiries that have not amounted much further than further informal inquiries in relation to that.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Just on the same topic, in terms of the three or four inquiries that you had, you did talk about settlement. Could you talk a bit more about what settlement involved?

Mr McDONALD: No, they did not result in settlement. That is the observation that we made that I will say about those inquiries. For example, there was a mother who went, we believe from the records and her experience, through Kedesh house. Now, there is no formal policy that we can find in the archive to say that we were taking on the forced adoptions of the time. But in fact you would have to say, with the numbers coming through and participating with the policy, that we were part of the forced adoption behaviours and treatments and expectations of those current times. So we do not shy away from that, and in fact there were some 2000 mothers that came through the Kedesh house, or St Gabriel's by that time, depending on which part—a number came through there. Those discussions—for example, with that mother from the Kedesh house, we had a number of discussions with her and also connected her to some legal advice. From the conversations in that particular case, she was not quite clear what she wanted. She wanted the contact and wanted the discussion; but moving to what else she wanted—that never actually concluded from her end what was there. You know, I think one of the characteristics of our service is we want to be accessible. We want to actually take everyone and take what I would say is quite a humane and a caring approach. We own our past. There is nothing we will not avoid. I would put it like this. And I am happy to table our policy if there is some interest from the inquiry about our approach to our redress clients and the processes that they undertake with the agency.

The ACTING CHAIR: That would be marvellous if you are able to supply that. Just for our completeness of understanding, that would be marvellous.

Mr McDONALD: Absolutely. I would be happy to provide you with that.

The ACTING CHAIR: Can I ask one little thing. When we were talking about the three areas you could improve, initially you were talking around the counselling. What I am trying to understand is: is that a funding issue? Are you suggesting that perhaps government or something needs to provide more support for more counselling? What is restricting you from being able to provide that level of counselling?

Mr McDONALD: Maybe, Rowena, you might want to—

Ms ROBINSON: I suppose, with that counselling, I think adoption is lifelong. I think there are specific amounts of counselling that you could have received after the forced adoption apology. Some of our clients need more than that, and it is about empowering them to be able to have that extra support. I am thinking of a few of my mothers, who would really value that kind of ongoing support because it has had a really dramatic, lifelong impact on them, so I think in that respect. Also, you asked about going central or keeping it private. I really think that, as Paul was saying, there are pros and cons to that, but it is so important that there is that experienced understanding of adoption and the trauma connected to that, and that is where VANISH, I feel, have been so instrumental in that respect but other services as well, connected to that. But also giving our clients the choice for example, there are some clients who do not want to go to the department, they may have had a negative experience of the department. Everybody is individual in that respect and some people might feel like that with Anglicare as well and our connection, but on the other hand we also understand our history better than perhaps other people might—so yes, pros and cons.

The ACTING CHAIR: You say that it is the adoptees that are largely coming to you, and a little bit picking up on that: are the forced adoption mothers perhaps reluctant to come directly to Anglicare? Is there some way within the system that they can come and connect? Is there a third-party process through to you? I am imagining if I had gone through what those women did, perhaps going to the group that they see as having perpetuated it would be very difficult. So is there a third-party process for them to come through?

Ms ROBINSON: Do you know, we do. I do not want to mention too many different agencies, but an agency such as ARMS, we have had mothers who have gone to them for support and understanding and I think it is about giving them a voice. After the apology—I think it was 2013–14—we had an increase in mothers

coming and approaching our service and registering with us. I think we went up to eight registrations that year. So I think that kind of does indicate the impact of the apology on mothers coming forward, because you have to remember with closed adoption they were told they were not going to be able to have access and they were disempowered on the whole. So I think it is about getting that message out there and getting that information to mothers so that they know that they can, and perhaps it is connected to our agency but my guess is that perhaps it is more so a whole, Victoria-wide thing.

The ACTING CHAIR: The system.

Ms ROBINSON: I would say it is more system, but obviously that is my best—

The ACTING CHAIR: Wonderful. Do we have any further questions?

Mr TAK: No, no further questions.

Ms ROBINSON: Can I just also comment?

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes. Please do.

Ms ROBINSON: Although I have not had as many natural mothers come forward, I also have had a natural relative register on behalf of their mother, the natural mother of the adoptee. I also have different people who might have registered who I then encourage to bring their mums with them, involving them as much as possible. So I do not always think the numbers reflect the number of mothers we have actually worked with in that respect as well. I do not know if that helps as well.

The ACTING CHAIR: Okay. That is wonderful. Well, thank you very much.

Mr McDONALD: Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: It really does help us to understand the process, so we really do value your contribution. The committee absolutely appreciates the time and effort you have taken to come and talk to us and to prepare those figures and so forth. Please be assured that your evidence will help to inform our understanding of the relevant issues, and we will be making some very strong recommendations to the Victorian government in this sphere. The committee will table its report by 1 July 2021, and we will endeavour to keep you updated on the government response to any of our recommendations. Thank you again for your time.

Mr McDONALD: Thank you for your time. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.