



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Ms. Danielle Chartier, Deputy Chair
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Mr. Muhammad Fiaz
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Mr. Todd Goudy
Melfort

Mr. Warren Steinley
Regina Walsh Acres

Hon. Nadine Wilson
Saskatchewan Rivers

[The committee met at 15:00.]

The Chair: — Welcome to the Human Services Committee today. I'm Chairman Dan D'Autremont. With us today we have MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] Muhammad Fiaz, MLA Todd Goudy, MLA Warren Steinley, and the Hon. Nadine Wilson. Substituting for MLA Danielle Chartier is MLA Vicki Mowat.

Today we'll be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services and Bill No. 86, *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017*.

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — We now begin our consideration of vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). This is the second day that we have been doing these considerations. Minister Merriman is here with his officials. Minister, would you please introduce your officials and make any opening remarks you may have.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My opening remarks will be brief as I was told my last opening remarks were a little lengthy. So I'll keep it a little tighter this time.

Thank you to you and the committee and Ms. Mowat for attending. I have my deputy minister, Greg Miller, here beside me; my chief of staff, Morgan Bradshaw; Natalie Huber from child and family; I've got Tobie Eberhardt, Joel Kilbride, and Janice Colquhoun. From the disability programs I have Bob Martinook. From finance I have Raymond Arscott and Winter Fedyk. And I've got from our housing side of things, I've got Raynelle Wilson and Tim Gross; and income assistance I have Tracey Smith and Jeff Redekop and some other supporting ministry officials.

Very excited to be here today to go through our final round of estimates for two hours and finish off our legislation side of things. And with that, I will turn it back over to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you. We'll now consider vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01). Are there any questions? Ms. Mowat.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I want to thank the minister for his opening introductions. I didn't catch who everyone is, but we'll figure that out as we go along.

So before we get started, I do have quite a few questions as they relate to housing today, as the critic for housing, but I wanted to follow up on something that my colleague, Mr. Wotherspoon, asked the last time around, or maybe he just didn't get full clarification on. And I'm not really looking to get the verbal reply. I was just wondering if we could get a document tabled perhaps by the end of today or wherever the minister finds appropriate. What he's looking for is the number of recipients

for all income assistance programs and the supplementary programs, so everything from SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program] to TEA [transitional employment allowance], PTA [provincial training allowance], rental housing supplement, any of the programs and benefits number of recipients for the past five years as well as present.

And so I realize this is quite a large undertaking. So if there's a way to be able to get it today or the end of the week, whenever, you know, the minister finds would be appropriate, we would appreciate just having a track of how many recipients are on these programs so we can get a sense of what the usage is.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks very much for the question . . .

The Chair: — Mr. Minister, if you're supplying written documents, the committee would ask that you supply eight copies of each and that they be supplied within 30 days to the committee.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. There was some documents that Mr. Wotherspoon had asked for in the last committee. We had committed that we would get some of them to the end of the week, and we have followed up with all of that and sent eight copies through the Chair to everybody and that. There were some other documents that he had requested by the end of the month and we're still compiling that information, but we will have it by the end of the month.

Ms. Mowat: — So for this, is this a new ask then? Like maybe that's confusion on my part, this particular . . . the number of recipients for each program.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, that was one of his original asks and we said that we would get it to him by the end of the month, and he agreed that that was a viable timeline.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So if we do have it any sooner, we will provide it to the committee.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Yes, we would appreciate it as soon as possible. Thank you, Mr. Minister. So the first questions that I have are around the rental housing supplement. So on budget day, the Finance minister made a statement implying that the national housing strategy would seemingly replace the current provincial rental housing supplement. I'm quoting *Hansard* here: "Social Services will be co-developing a new rental support program with the federal government as part of the new national housing strategy." And this is in reference to the discussion of eliminating the rental housing supplement as of July 1st.

I've had a look at the national housing strategy quite closely. It seems to me that the national housing strategy does not have a plan in place for how to implement what the presumed replacement would be, which is the portable housing benefit that's planned. So is there a sense of when this strategy would be coming forth?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. Just for clarification and for the record, we're not eliminating the rental housing supplement. We're suspending new intakes as of July 1st of 2018. We are still investing over \$46 million in the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement.

As far as the national, we signed the multilateral agreement on April 9th with the federal government. I have been told that the housing benefit will launch in 2020, and we're continuing to work on the bilateral agreement with the federal government. We're constantly working with them, back and forth.

Ms. Mowat: — So if we are not planning to implement the portable housing benefit in the next year, why was the rationale used in this budget year to justify . . . If we're not calling it the elimination, I don't know what to call it, Mr. Minister, but to justify not adding new applicants to the rental housing supplement starting in July. How do we expect that those gaps will be filled?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'll get to the crux of your question, I guess. We're continuing to work with the federal government on this portable housing benefit and how it would benefit Saskatchewan residents directly.

Some of the historical information that I'll get and I'll put on the record with the committee is, we have had a very good track record in supporting the rental housing supplement within our government. In August of 2008, we increased the shelter rates of \$160 a month; 2009, the shelter rates went up \$18 a month; April and October of 2010, they increased the shelter rates of \$165 a month; 2011, increased the shelter rates of \$19 a month; October 2011, we increased the shelter rates of \$23 a month; the following year in October 2012, we increased the shelter rates \$69 a month; and October 2013, we increased the shelter rates of \$47 per month.

And the reason that this was done was specifically to react to what was happening in the market. We had a vacancy rate that went from 4 per cent down to 1 per cent and we felt at the time that we needed to help subsidize some of the renters out there. With the vacancy rates in the province at 9 per cent, within our own Sask Housing Corp. having 740-odd units in the two major cities not being utilized, also 3,000 units that are chronically vacant across the province, that combined with the rent, average rent coming down in the two major cities, this was a policy decision. But I do want to again say that we do have over \$46 million that we are currently supporting in the rental housing supplement right now.

Ms. Mowat: — So just to get back to the second part of my question was about gaps. So if folks are not going to be receiving the rental housing supplement and there is current program utilization as you have identified, what will fill this gap with folks who are in need? What do you expect will fill that gap?

[15:15]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks again for the question. I guess a couple of things. When this policy change was made on budget day, when the Minister of Finance did rise in the House and deliver the budget, we had a period from April 10th till

June 30th. So if there was anybody that felt that they were eligible for the rental housing supplement, they could apply for it at that time. So we did kind of slow walk this policy change in.

Again and I want to again . . . We haven't cancelled the rental housing supplement. This is not a program that has been cancelled. It is still ongoing. \$46.2 million of Social Services funding is going towards the rental housing supplement and will continue for anybody if their eligibility hasn't changed. They have the opportunity to relocate if they choose. Again so nobody is leaving this program or nobody is getting kicked off this program. It is only new applicants as of July 1st.

Ms. Mowat: — So I understand that you're saying there's no gap that's left by this change. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again waiting for the federal program. Again working with our federal counterparts to be able to make sure that that program is up and running in 2020. We do have a high vacancy rate within the private sector but also within the public sector. We have social housing — Sask Housing Corp — that if that is something that somebody is looking at, that can be used, and it's 30 per cent of their income is within Sask Housing.

So we would like to utilize those government assets to their best potential. And right now they're sitting vacant, so if there's an opportunity from somebody that applies for social assistance after July 1st, that could be an option for them. That would be filling in the gap that you've referenced.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Thank you for your answer. In the Human Services Committee on May 1st, you noted, Mr. Minister, that "We anticipate the utilization will increase to about 15,800 households by July 1st." Can you explain why you expect increased utilization between now and July?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The reason we did have . . . And the numbers aren't, like, I don't have them at my fingertips, but it was 11,000 that we currently had on, and I think that was on the record in projecting up to 15,000. And again that is a projection. We're not sure what that number is.

But based on historical and the rental housing supplement coming into the news and people talking about it, there might be some opportunity for individuals that are on social assistance to be able to ask their workers about that. So we wanted to make sure that we were planned and we were ready for that, that if there was a sudden uptake, that we were ready for it.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay, so the projection is preparing for an uptake based on the news that new applicants won't be accepted after July 1st?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It's just a projection. We're just preparing for, if there is an uptake, that we're ready for it.

Ms. Mowat: — Has the number of households that are utilizing the rental housing supplement been increasing? Is this a continuation of the trend?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks. I thought I knew the answer,

but I just had to double-check. It's been a little too soon since the budget announcement. We haven't got the data in yet to see if there is an uptake in the applications or the approval for the rental housing supplement, but we're certainly keeping our eye on it.

Ms. Mowat: — Over the past few years, like the last three years, has the number of households utilizing the rental housing supplement increased?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay. Thank you. Sorry for the delay on that. To answer your question, what I said was in *Hansard* was that there was in and around 13,000, currently, people that were on the Sask rental housing supplement, and we were projecting that to go up to 15,800. The reason, as I stated before, is because of increased awareness of the program, and we've also seen from the last few years that there has been an increase of people using the rental housing supplement.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. With reference to the lower rents, I believe a couple of times you've referenced lower rents in Saskatoon and Regina. I know for sure on April 11th, citing a report you had received and you were asking if the members opposite had seen the report. Can you clarify which report you were referencing on April 11th?

[15:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. It was a Colliers report in Saskatoon which was called the *Research & Forecast Report Saskatoon Multifamily Market 2018*.

Ms. Mowat: — Can I ask that you table that document please?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes. I will get a copy to the committee before we finish up today.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. According to the CMHC's [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation] rental market reports for 2017 for Saskatoon and Regina, for Saskatoon the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom was \$1,082 in October 2017 compared to 1,100 in 2016, which is a decrease of only \$18. The Regina CMA [census metropolitan area] report from CMHC said that the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment was 1,116 in October 2017 and 1,109 in October 2016, so that's an increase of \$7.

So year to year with those particular CMAs, Saskatoon and Regina, the vacancy rates are clearly not leading to substantially lower rents. We're talking about, you know, a handful of dollars in these cases. So I'm not sure why the vacancy rates are being used to justify removing the rental housing supplement or adding less new applicants on to the program as you suggest. So can you just clarify that for me? My logic is not leaping in that direction, so I'm just wondering if you can clarify how you see these interplaying.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. What I'm looking at is a multi-year trend since 2018 where the rent has gone up. It has increased from 2008 from \$841 in the same report that you're talking about to a high of \$1,100 in 2016. It's starting to work on a downward trend and this, from what I understand, this report was done in October 2017, and from . . .

The one that we have from Colliers would be the most recent report, and I think anybody that is involved with the market has known it has changed since October of last year.

Ms. Mowat: — I look forward to seeing the report. With regards to vacancies, you've made reference to the vacancies that exist in Sask Housing as a justification for this change to the rental housing supplement program. Can you provide your best guess as to why there is such a high vacancy rate in Sask Housing right now?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks again for the question. Typically within Sask Housing we've had high vacancies in rural Saskatchewan, some of the housing units that are there. But for the first time there's a trend moving into the major centres that we have a high vacancy rate. And currently right now within Sask Housing Corporation we have a 16 per cent vacancy rate.

Ms. Mowat: — And is there any indication — I'm sure that folks in the ministry are looking at this and trying to problem solve and figure that out — is there any indication of a reason why the vacancy rates are so high right now?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess the answer to the question is, the vacancy rate is in the private sector as well as in the public sector. Generally they trend with each other. We have a high vacancy rate in the public sector that is in and around 16 per cent, and in the private sector we've got a vacancy rate of in and around 9 per cent. So they tend to trend with each other.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of the overall fit for . . . to use Sask Housing units in place of a rental housing supplement, I'm just wondering if a needs assessment took place to determine whether these vacancies were a good fit for folks who might be coming on with the needs of the rental housing supplement.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — When a client comes into the income assistance branch, one of our regular business practices is to refer them to Sask Housing to see if there's an opportunity and a fit for them. If it works for them, then we have a successful match. But if we don't, or if there's some other mitigating factors, then I guess they look at the private sector.

Ms. Mowat: — Just in terms of an overall analysis of the impact of this change, of not accepting new applicants, was there analysis done of what the rental housing supplement clientele look like versus what is available in terms of vacant Sask Housing units? I'm just wondering if the analysis of fit has been conducted, if we're expecting that the Sask Housing will fill the gap. I'm just wondering if we're looking at square peg, round hole or, you know, that sort of thing, or how it's going to work. I think it's square . . . Yes, square peg, round hole. That's right.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you again. I guess when a client comes through our door and is looking for housing options, we have several housing options. We have the excess shelter benefit. We have the basic shelter benefit, which we have increased 63 per cent over the years. We also have Sask Housing. So there is a variety of options when they come through the door to be able to access shelter.

[15:45]

Ms. Mowat: — Would you say that you're relatively confident that there are accessible units available for folks that come in? Just with regards to the fact that many of the recipients of the rental housing supplement are on SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability], I'm just wondering if that analysis has been undertaken.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — On the accessibility side of things, we have two categories. We have accessible units and fully accessible units. There's a little bit of a difference. On the fully accessible units we have 531 provincially; the accessible units we have 8,602, for a total of 9,133 accessible units provincially.

Ms. Mowat: — So are you confident that that is going to meet the need that exists for accessible units?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I can tell the committee that we haven't seen a lot on our SAID clients. It has levelled off at just over 15,000, so we haven't had a lot of intake on that. It has flattened out. So this number that we have seems to be meeting our needs right now.

Ms. Mowat: — I've also heard from folks who work on the front lines that many rental housing supplement recipients are considered to be too high-needs for social housing right now. Do you have any comment on that?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks again. I guess we have heard the concerns as well that there is some high-needs clients out there within the private sector and certainly within the public sector. And what we want to do is make sure that we're trying to address their needs in the best possible way that we can. We do want to work with the stakeholders, with other organizations to make sure that we are able to meet our clients' needs.

Ms. Mowat: — I've also heard that folks are not accepted into social housing if they aren't able to provide rental references for a period of time of where they've been living. So my question is, in terms of eliminating homelessness, getting people off the street, what impact that would have. Is that going to continue to be the policy if there's an expectation that social housing will be used to fill this void and to get folks off the street?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks again. I guess I would almost come back to the previous answer that again if there is a specific client that has some needs, we will work with them, with their stakeholders, with their income assistance worker, to be able to see if we can meet their needs. But I'd be curious, is if there is any information that you can forward on to our office, if there's a specific client or somebody in a specific area of the province where we can help them out, I would very much appreciate if you could forward that information on.

Ms. Mowat: — Sure. So there's no plan to review the application process as it stands then?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again if there is some specific one, I would certainly encourage you to forward that information on to us. As far as the application process, this is something that we want to continuously work with our stakeholders, with our clients, and with the community-based organizations to be able

to try to meet their needs.

Ms. Mowat: — Just with regards to the transition period, have you increased any staffing levels to deal with the transition in the rental housing supplement? Is there going to be a temporary workforce that is provided to help with processing applications and maybe helping folks out if there is a need to place them somewhere else?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess just to answer the question in general, within Social Services we're constantly shifting our staff to wherever the greatest needs are within that, whether that be within child and family services or emergency services as we saw today and that we have done in the past. We will continue to make sure that the great people that work at Social Services have the flexibility and the cross-training to be able to meet the needs of wherever there is an emerging need within the file that we represent.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of grandfathering in folks who are currently on the program and the idea of them staying on the program, I understand that it's common for SAID recipients of the rental housing supplement to miss reporting periods, sometimes as a result of their disability. If an applicant misses a reporting period, will they be considered a new applicant or will they be grandfathered and still honoured to be on the rental housing supplement program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — To answer your question, I mean we . . . There's a couple of things. If there is somebody that misses the reporting period and it's kind of a one-off and they can work with their caseworker, we can certainly do that on a case-by-case basis.

But the other side of it is, is if there is something that has been missed, they have the option of appealing that to the regional appeal committee with Social Services and also being able to appeal that to the provincial appeals committee. So if there is something that they have felt that they have missed or that they are eligible for, then they can go through that appeal process at any point in time. There is a 30-day notification that they have to get that information, that appeal process in, and it will be seen promptly by the Social Services appeal committee.

Ms. Mowat: — What if they find employment for, say, three months and then they're laid off? Would they be considered a new applicant at this time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — On which program?

Ms. Mowat: — For the rental housing supplement. If they were receiving the supplement but then they find employment, and they no longer need to receive any benefits, but then get laid off, are they new after a period of three months?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The answer to your question is, as long as their eligibility maintains the same and it's the same status, and they're within that threshold of earned income that is allowable within, then there would be no change.

Ms. Mowat: — So if they start to make a little bit of money . . . Like what I'm concerned about here is are we disincentivizing folks to go out and work. So that's what I'm trying to get at. So

if they go out and they get a full-time job and they are supporting themselves and they're laid off, then they would no longer be . . . They would not be considered a returning applicant. They would be considered a new applicant if they applied for assistance after that point. Is that correct?

[16:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — If they are off the program for an extended period of time, then they would come in as a new applicant to the program. But I also want to say that the program is . . . The way our programs are set up is that they are there to support people who are earning some income.

So there is some flexibility there. There is some allowance of flexibility as far as people earning income that are on our programs. And I think if somebody is off our program for an extended period of time, they would come back as a new applicant.

Ms. Mowat: — I understand that there are some teams of folks, housing teams set up to act in an advisory role to the minister, such as the Disability Income Support Coalition or DISC, which I think is made up of around 40 organizations, and a smaller team, PIAT, program implementation advisory team.

Can you advise on what consultations took place prior to making the decision to not accept new applicants into the rental housing supplement as of July 1st?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. The answer is, along with a lot of organizations throughout the province, I've had the opportunity to meet with them. I've met with DISC and PIAT several times. Right after being appointed as minister, I met with both organizations. We have ministry officials that sit in on the PIAT meeting. The DISC meeting is not appointed by the ministry or the minister. It is community based, and I have met with them pre- and post-budget.

Ms. Mowat: — What did they have to say in respect to the elimination of the rental housing supplement?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry. Which one?

Ms. Mowat: — Either of them. Yes. Both.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I had the opportunity to meet with both organizations just about three or four weeks ago, and the PIAT group was very thankful that this wasn't going to affect or impact any existing clients. They did have some questions about eligibility around if somebody had moved or if they had any other changes in . . . And it was made clear to them that if their eligibility stays the same, that they will still maintain on the program with the rental housing supplement. But they were very thankful for the grandfathering or the continuation on the existing people that are currently receiving the rental housing supplement to the tune of \$46 million.

But again we're open to continuing the conversation. We always look for input from our stakeholder groups, from our organizations, from our committees to advise us on what their opinion is and what they're seeing out on the ground level. And those conversations are ongoing with all, especially PIAT and

DISC.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. So thank you for providing some information about the rental housing supplement. I've got some broader questions now as they relate to housing. With regards to the co-development of the plan with the national housing strategy, what conversations have been had with the federal government in working to develop the national housing strategy and what will it look like on the ground in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The officials within Social Services within Saskatchewan have been continuously working with the federal counterparts to be able to get this agreement in the best interest of Saskatchewan. To date we've had one meeting with CMHC, and we're expecting that that's going to pick up over the summertime, as the federal government's in session and we are in session. So we're assuming that that will pick up once the summer comes around.

Ms. Mowat: — What role did the government have in working with the federal government to develop the homelessness partnering strategy for 2016?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The answer to your question is the federal government works with municipalities and organizations directly. We're a partner at the table, but we don't have . . . We're not participating in that. It is more direct with the federal government.

Ms. Mowat: — So there's no point person at the provincial level who's helping to coordinate between municipal groups and the federal government. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — That's correct.

Ms. Mowat: — Considering the implications that these federal policies have at the provincial level, is this something that the ministry is looking at changing in the future?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I guess it would be up to the federal government to invite us to participate in that, and as of now they're working directly with the organizations. So it's kind of . . . They're running it, so if they wanted to invite us we would be interested in participating.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you provide some information about how much money was put into affordable housing last year and how that compares with the past 10 years? Is there a general trend?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. I'm very proud of this record that we've had on housing within our government. I'll give you a few numbers. Since 2007 we've invested over \$781 million to develop and repair 16,104 units. Out of that, 724 to develop 11,709 units, and \$56 million to repair 4,395 units. We have \$40.8 million to develop 539 units and to repair the units specifically in the North. We've partnered with First Nation communities to provide 587 units with funding of \$50 million, and in addition to that is also our Sask Housing where we have 17,307 social housing units. So we have had a huge investment in housing throughout the province and specifically in the North.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. Can you provide the full spread

year by year for the past 10 years, whether it's provided now or perhaps later?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We'll have to compile that information, but we will get it to you with the other documents that we committed to get to the committee by the end of the month, and Mr. Chair will have eight copies.

Ms. Mowat: — Just making note, thanks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just for clarification, that's historically going back 10 years? Or would you like to go back even further?

Ms. Mowat: — Yes. Ten is fine.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay.

Ms. Mowat: — With regard to the housing partnerships with non-profit organizations, what consideration has been made for their costs going up including the expansion of the PST [provincial sales tax] on insurance and construction labour?

[16:15]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So our funding isn't specific to a dollar amount; it's a percentage. We fund a project up to 70 per cent of its total. So if the cost of the project increases, our percentage still maintains the same. So there would be no impact on that.

Ms. Mowat: — With regard to the rental development program, I understand that the loan is forgiven for a period up to 20 years, depending on the amount of the loan. Has the payment schedule for forgiving these loans changed in the past five years in terms of what percentage they receive back?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — To answer the question, the general formula has stayed the same. There's been some minor tweaking of the formula here and there, but the general formula has stayed the same on the forgiveness.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you expand on what has changed within the formula if there have been changes?

Mr. Gross: — Good afternoon. My name is Tim Gross. I'm executive director of housing development and I'm responsible for the program that we deliver, the affordable housing program.

And just to give a little bit of background, the formula is designed so that the funding is forgiven over a length of time, and as the minister said earlier, we've tweaked with that. I don't have the exact details of the formula with me. It's part of our agreement with the group. And it's laid out over a period of time and with each month a set of payment essentially is forgiven over that time frame.

So I think that's probably sort of the broadest I can make it. It's basically a formula so that . . . very much similar to any mortgage payment that is done. The only difference is, is there's no repayment of the mortgage over the period of time. That mortgage amount is forgiven.

Ms. Mowat: — So in terms of a mortgage payment, I can expect that the same amount comes out of my account each month. I'm just wondering if the amount has changed of the . . . the amount of the payment has changed. Is it evenly spread across that period of time, or what does that look like?

Mr. Gross: — The payment is structured in a way that it will sort of be less forgiven in the earlier periods and then, as the loan gets older there's a greater amount of forgiveness that is given.

Ms. Mowat: — And has that always been the case?

Mr. Gross: — It's been the case for quite some time now, yes.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Do you know when that change took place? Or if there was a . . . Like basically what it sounds like to me is pushing some of those costs down the road so that the government doesn't have to pay them right now. So I'm just wondering in terms of when the decision was made to change the structure of the payment schedule.

Mr. Gross: — Well just two points to that. I don't have that . . . I don't recall exactly when. We could find when that has changed. But it doesn't really push the payments down. So the payment is an upfront grant that is given to the group. So when they build the project and, you know . . . Let's use an amount of \$1 million, and then that million dollars is given upfront. The group uses it to do the construction. It's then forgiven over a period of time so that if they use the project for the intended purpose — rent it to low-income people and at an affordable rent for the time frame that we've agreed upon — then it's given and they don't have to repay the loan. So it's not really about back-ending the funding of the program.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. We've also heard concerns about . . . with the rental development program as far as the standard that's been set for environmental issues or environmental initiatives. I would say that new affordable housing buildings seem like a tremendous opportunity to embrace green technologies, and I think we all must do our part to reduce emissions. So for example, the National Housing Co-Investment Fund provides funding to build or repair housing with at least 25 per cent better energy efficiency. Can you comment on the standard that has been set at the provincial level, and why it's out of sync with what some municipalities have provided as their standard for reducing emissions and the standard of the federal government as well?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think that's a good opportunity when we sit down and have our bilateral agreement with the federal government, that that's something that we could certainly include in those conversations to make sure. I think everybody in the room and everybody around the province wants to do their part to make sure that our carbon footprint is the lowest we possibly can. And we will continue to work with our federal counterparts to see if that is an option to be able to utilize that.

Ms. Mowat: — That's encouraging to hear. I think, you know, folks are going to build to the lowest common denominator, and I don't think that should be us. So I appreciate that endeavour.

In terms of getting into some of the discussion about the vacancies that exist within Sask Housing, I'm wondering — I asked a little bit about this already — but I'm wondering in terms of what rental prices look like within Sask Housing, and whether there is a policy about how often rent can increase.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Within the Sask Housing the rent is based on 30 per cent of the individual's income. And it does fluctuate with their income, but it does hit a maximum threshold.

Ms. Mowat: — What is the maximum threshold?

Mr. Gross: — Good afternoon. Tim Gross, executive director, affordable housing development. So there's a whole range of maximum rents. So it depends in the community. So we have different community sizes and so the rent changes with that. There's different types of buildings and the rent changes in that. And then there's different number of bedrooms — so one bedroom, two bedroom, three bedroom — there's different rents for that. So there's a whole range of different rent levels. If you'd like me to read through them I can do that.

Ms. Mowat: — No, that's okay. In terms of . . . Just trying to boil down some of the pieces around vacancies.

Has there been reported infestations of bedbugs in any of the units? And would you say that there's a frequency of them? Is there . . . You know, what is the story there?

[16:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. Sask Housing has spent a lot of money on bedbugs and other types of infestations, but this isn't exclusive to Sask Housing. This is . . . any rental unit that is out there could have some of these concerns. But what I can tell you is that Sask Housing has spent more than \$3.4 million on the treatment and prevention of bedbugs and other pests since 2014.

And actually year over year we're spending less money, so there is a general knowledge out there on how to treat bedbugs and what the indicators are and if there's any other infestations, so we can catch it before it spreads to other units or it spreads from household to household. So we are spending less over every year, but that's because the prevention side of things are working.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. Is there a record . . . So that's the record in terms of cost. Is there a record in terms of the types of treatments that are provided typically when there is an infestation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again it's a wide variety because there's many different types of infestations. But what we would do is have our local housing authorities to be able to work with a private company to be able to determine what the infestation is, what the best way of prevention is, and be able to treat that as quickly as possible so there's minimal disruption to our clients that are in the housing units. And again this is typical whether you're in the private or public sector.

Ms. Mowat: — And I'm in no way implying that it is exclusive

to the public sector. I'm wondering, I know in terms of treatment there are more cost-effective options and there are less cost-effective options. Is it . . . Like, can anything be said generally about whether there's a fumigation or a chemical treatment spray or sort of what the choice is? Or does it vary according to the housing authority?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it varies according to whatever is infesting that. We always want to use the most cost-effective and healthy way to be able to make sure that we're dealing with it. So depending on what it is, is how we would deal with it. But we would have our housing authority pull in a local expert to be able to determine what's the best process to be able to follow.

Ms. Mowat: — I've also heard complaints about folks that can't get into social housing because they have pets. What are the policies regarding pets, and are there any exceptions to these policies?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. I guess in general we have a no pets policy, but we do have, the housing authorities, the local housing authorities set the pet policy. Service animals are permitted everywhere, but when we're considering allowing a pet into units, we also have to be cognizant of the neighbours and to make sure that there's no allergens or no issues with that. And we want to make sure that the pet is either a service dog or compassion — or not dogs specifically, I guess animal in general — that it's more of that nature to make sure that it's in the best needs of the clients. But we also have to be cognizant of other people that are in the unit as well or corresponding neighbours.

Ms. Mowat: — So that makes sense. I'm just concerned in terms of folks who find themselves needing assistance and have existing pets and, sort of, what their options are when they are moving into social housing. Like, are they, do they have to get rid of their pets? Because it seems to me that would be a disincentive for using the social housing as opposed to a private option.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — In the private industry it would be, or in the private sector it would be very similar. There would be some buildings that would allow pets and some that wouldn't allow pets. Certainly within Sask Housing . . . Again and if it's a service pet, that we don't necessarily have any concerns with that if it's in the client's best interest. But since I was a kid, what has evolved as a pet has certainly changed. There are a lot of animals out there that I would not have considered a pet when I was younger, but it is now. And again we would have to make sure that it's in the best interest of all people that are in the unit.

Ms. Mowat: — From the Sask Housing annual report, it says that they will continue to build more modern and energy-efficient multi-unit housing in Regina, Moose Jaw, and Prince Albert, financed through the sale of Sask Housing Corporation's older stock of single-family social housing units. Just wondering how many of these units have been sold in each community since this initiative started.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — This would fall under our portfolio of renewal, and what we've been doing is selling some units in certain areas or certain units that are no longer meeting their full

potential and repurposing those units. We were just at one — it seems like a couple of weeks ago but it's probably a couple months ago — down in Harbour Landing where we had an opportunity to sell off a couple of units, I believe it was in Moose Jaw, that were no longer being used, and be able to provide a mom and her family an opportunity to have a house that was adequate for their needs. So it is a very good program and we are utilizing it quite a bit.

Ms. Mowat: — So just in terms of how many of the units have been sold in each community, could you provide that list of units, number of units sold?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I've got the three major centres here. In Prince Albert we have 30 single-family units that were sold, and we had 30 townhouses . . . units developed. Moose Jaw, we had 93 single-family units sold; we had 91 apartments/townhouses developed. And in Regina I have 55 single-family units that were sold and 76 townhouses that were developed.

Ms. Mowat: — Do you have the total number of units that have been sold altogether?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Through our portfolio of renewal, we have 178 single-family units that were sold and 197 units that were developed.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. And how many new units have been built since the initiative started?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. This was since inception, since it was outlined in the growth plan. We have developed a total of 197 units.

Ms. Mowat: — What's the breakdown for the type of unit?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We have 30 townhouses, 91 apartments/townhouses, and 76 townhouses.

Ms. Mowat: — Through the northern homeowner initiative, Sask Housing is selling up to 50 northern social housing units to current tenants who have their necessary financial resources to purchase them. In 2017 one former tenant became a homeowner through the NHI [northern homeowner initiative]. Has there been any other uptake on this program?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We haven't had any uptake in that in 2018, but in a conversation just a couple of weeks ago with the New North, it was brought up and we said we would have further discussion on it to see if we can increase the amount of people interested in that program.

Ms. Mowat: — Have any other initiatives been considered to support northern housing?

[16:45]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Again, very proud of our investment on this. We've invested \$40 million to develop 356 units and repair 362 homes across northern Saskatchewan since 2007.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. In 2017, reviews were conducted on the

following programs: the life lease program, Encouraging Community Housing Options program, the rental supplement program, and the portfolio renewal initiative. The reviews determined that the intended outcomes were being achieved. Recommendations from these reviews resulted in adjustments to programs. We know the outcome of the rental housing supplement program, but what were the findings of the other reviews?

Ms. Wilson: — Raynelle Wilson, acting assistant deputy minister of Housing. So the three program reviews that you mentioned, the first clarification I want to make is that the rent supplement program is not the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement. They're two different programs.

Saskatchewan Housing Corporation has a slightly older rent supplement program that they had put in place a number of years ago, and that rent supplement is tied in agreement to specific units. So it's not one that we necessarily actively use right now, but we have some agreements still in place where that rent supplement is still in place. So that was the one.

The second one was on portfolio renewal. And so one of the things we are looking at in the portfolio renewal was just in terms of, on the front end, how is our process in terms of the development on a portfolio renewal, and what lessons could we learn? So less of an overall program review where we made some changes; we just wanted to make sure that we were capturing any lessons learned if we wanted to do this again.

Because certainly on portfolio renewal one of the things we are looking to look at in the long term is, you know, around that energy-efficiency piece. So tracking over a longer term, what's the energy use in those older units that we disposed of versus the energy use and a few utilities and a few things like that in our newer units that we developed.

And then on the third one on the life lease, there weren't a ton of actual changes that came out of that although, as I recall when we looked at it, there was some client-centred changes, small tweaks that we could make. But that didn't necessarily result in a large program change for our life lease program.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. What about the Encouraging Community Housing Options program?

Ms. Wilson: — So yes, on our ECHO [Encouraging Community Housing Options] program, that program provides grants to communities to develop community plans. So we have a little bit of money left in that program that was developed a couple of years ago.

And so certainly coming out of that were discussions around how to, with a view to potentially in the North, how to encourage some of our northern communities to perhaps access that funding to develop those community plans. Because what we heard is that for those communities, like Pinehouse for example, where they developed a community plan and they have a non-profit organization to develop this housing, having that community plan in place really helped them in terms of how to plan and make the best use of some of SHC's [Saskatchewan Housing Corporation] programs and the funding available.

So that's certainly on our list in the upcoming year, to talk to our northern communities about those who don't have that community plan in place to perhaps utilize that ECHO funding as that first step to really engaging their community on what their community plan could look like. And then coming back and having those discussions with SHC about, you know, what kind of programs they can access to help develop the housing that they need.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, and that sounds exciting. I'm glad that we're looking at ways to use that funding.

Consultations were held in approximately 30 rural communities in 2017 regarding the potential divestment of social housing units due to high vacancy rates. I think this has been referred to a little bit already today. These consultations, I understand, are expected to continue over the next few years to allow SHC to target its investments in communities where there's a demonstrated long-term demand for social housing. What has been the outcome of these consultations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. We're in communications with our towns and villages about the better-use policy that we are working on. Since this policy was introduced in 2003, the majority of the units were sold in from 2003 to 2007. There's been a total of 654 units that were sold since the policy was created in 2003, 421 of those 654 units were sold under the previous government, and 233 were sold under the current government from 2008 to 2017.

The Chair: — I recognize Mr. Belanger.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just a couple of questions, Mr. Minister, just on housing in general. I wanted to ask, what's the process when a single person occupying a housing unit that was designed for a family, when they're asked to vacate the unit because they're going to move a family or a larger family into that unit and the single person doesn't have a place to go? Is there any other arrangements made to accommodate that single person?

Because obviously we want to see utilization of housing to the utmost and to the most efficient level. But for a single person having to leave a unit because they're moving him or her out, and the fact that they're trying to move a family in there, what rights does the tenant have that is being asked to leave the unit because he or she is single?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. I guess we have to look at what is the greatest need for that specific housing unit. If there is a family of four or five that needs that unit, we would want to make sure that that unit is utilized. If there is another unit available for a single individual, such as a senior's unit or something like that, we will try to make that available. But again, if there's a specific case, if you could please let us know, and we'd be more than happy to look into it if somebody has been displaced.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes. I'll share the name with you. And the individual that has contacted our office, while the individual understands that she signed this arrangement in 2014, she hasn't signed another lease agreement since then. And I think she does an annual lease, so she may have signed it in 2014, and she's

saying today that, look, I signed this in 2014. I understood that. But I haven't signed another lease agreeing to that since then, even though I am subjected to an annual lease. So she hasn't signed. So to a certain extent she may feel that she does have a right to that unit.

But she's willing to co-operate if she has another unit afforded to her, a smaller one because one of her plans is to adopt a child. She's in the process of doing that. She's willing to sign a letter to that effect. But before she can go to adopt that child, she obviously has to have her own accommodation, her own home. So this is kind of a complex need.

And I'll share with you the individual's name and contact information. She has a hearing this Friday. So she really wants to co-operate, but she does need a unit. So I just think that we simply cannot have her vacate the unit, all the while a family that is larger gets the housing unit she occupies. She accepts that, but she does need an alternative unit for her in her ambition to adopt a child. And if you can accommodate that, I'm sure she'd be very, very happy with that decision.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much for that. And again I can't get into the specifics of that case, but I'd be more than happy to pursue it and have my officials look into that after the committee meeting and get back to you promptly.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Ms. Mowat, last question.

[17:00]

Ms. Mowat: — Okay, thanks. The annual report of Sask Housing Corporation lists a number of ongoing challenges. One of them is sustainability of the social housing portfolio. Can you speak to the issues with sustainability of the portfolio and how they are being addressed, please?

Ms. Wilson: — Right, thanks. So in terms of sustainability issue, that's tied to our previous funding arrangements with the federal government and how that funding mechanism is falling off after a number of years on those agreements. And so how we're looking to address that will be through our bilateral negotiations and discussions around the National Housing Strategy.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you very much. We have reached the time of adjournment for this. I will give Ms. Mowat a chance for a very short closing statement if you want, and then the minister.

Ms. Mowat: — I just thank the minister and all the officials for their time today and providing a lot of information. I know we jumped around a little bit into a number of different areas, and I know that requires folks to be on their toes, so I appreciate your time today.

The Chair: — I recognize the minister.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

And thank you for the questions and your colleagues for the questions. I want to thank my officials for being here and having all the answers ready and all the prep work that they've done in getting me ready for this.

So I do want to table that report that I did mention earlier, Mr. Chair. I did get eight copies of it, and I will pass that to the Clerk and table that report. And if there's any questions, I would be more than happy . . .

Ms. Mowat: — That's the Colliers report?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The Colliers report that you requested earlier. And thank you to my staff for getting that down so quickly. And again I just want to thank my officials for the hard work that they do on the front lines and in the offices in dealing and working with our clients. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you very much. This ends our estimates for Social Services. I would like to thank the opposition for their questions, thank the minister and his officials for being in here. We'll give you a chance to rearrange your officials and then we'll immediately move into the bills.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — Okay, we will proceed. The minister has tabled a document. The research and forecast report, Saskatoon Multifamily Market, Human Services no. 40-28 is tabled.

**Bill No. 86 — *The Child and Family Services
Amendment Act, 2017***

Clause 1

The Chair: — So, Mr. Minister, we will now move on to consideration of Bill No. 86, *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017*, clause 1, short title. Mr. Minister, would you please introduce your officials and make your opening comments.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have Greg Miller, my deputy minister. I have Natalie Huber, my assistant deputy minister. I have Tobie Eberhardt. I've got Janice Colquhoun, and I've got Joel Kilbride here with me today, Mr. Speaker.

I'll go through my opening remarks. They're fairly brief. I'm here today to discuss the proposed amendments of *The Child and Family Services Act*. *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017* is the second of three phases of legislative renewal resulting from a review of child welfare legislation commenced in 2012. In the first phase, the ministry completed urgent amendments to the Act relative to the disclosure of information and First Nation-delegated arrangements.

The amendments before you today represent the second phase and are generally housekeeping in nature. These include new definitions for "dispute resolution" — replacing "mediation" in the review panel process — and "peace officer" have been added to enhance understanding in the interpretation of the legislation; modernized language to reflect current terminology,

including updated titles of federal and provincial legislation; revised provisions to conform to current legislative drafting standards; amendments to speak to child well-being represented by a lawyer and the role of the minister for children in care; repealed provisions related to family review panels and the family services board which were never operationalized; repeal amendments which were outdated and have never been proclaimed regarding to the transfer of guardianship, transfer of custody, and provisions of financial assistance; removal of any mention concerning *The Child Welfare Act* and *The Family Services Act*, as children taken into care under these Acts will have by now aged out of care; and alignment of revocation period of notification provisions for voluntary committals with *The Adoption Amendment Act, 2016*, which came into force effective December 1st, 2017.

The first priority of *The Child and Family Services Act* is to support families to safely care for their children and help keep families together. The Act includes provisions to provide focus on pre-apprehension services and mitigate the adversarial nature of apprehensions and the legal process throughout the core process. The Act acknowledges the importance of First Nations participation in decision-making matters relating to First Nations children and the delivery of service.

Provisions for the family review panel, a family services board, and mediation were introduced in 1989 with the proclamation of *The Child and Family Services Act*. It was intended that the implementation would be informed through the knowledge and experience gained by piloting these processes. The establishment of these out-of-court mechanisms were well intended. It was assumed that the stakeholders would perceive the volunteer minister-appointed panels and board as neutral arbitrators.

The minister was unable to attain the support of the First Nations community. However what emerged over the ensuing years was a broader interpretation of the application and alternative dispute mechanisms such as the integration of family groups, conferencing, and talking circles into the ongoing case planning process.

In 1994 the legislative amendments were intended to support the kinship care arrangements, including transfer of custody, the transfer of guardianship, and financial assistance as alternative approaches to focus on family preservation and time-limited interventions. While accepted and supported by many stakeholders, First Nations felt the provisions were counter to their culture and values. Instead over time, the ministry has continued to work and strengthen the kinship care through enhancing policies of person of sufficient interest program. This program has been prioritized to the transformative change being considered for phase 3 of the ministry's legislative review.

The repeal of unused and never-used proclamation provisions will demonstrate the government's continued commitment to work differently with First Nations and will enable the collaborative development of a new kinship care policy framework.

We have introduced the provisions to align with the CFSA [*The Child and Family Services Act*] and *The Adoption Amendment Act, 2016*. These include amendment to section 4, promote

holistic assessment of the child's best interests by including the requirement to consider a child's developmental needs, and plans to support those needs in addition to a child's cultural and spiritual heritage.

Moving from 14 to 21 days period provide birth parents additional time to consider the impacts of such life-changing decisions, and that aligns with the Saskatchewan revocation period with the majority of Canadian provinces and territories.

In conclusion, these provisions that I have before you today will address the required administrative changes to set the stage for future transformational change. I'd be happy to take any questions from the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. We have MLA Trent Wotherspoon substituting for MLA Danielle Chartier. We will begin the vote, Bill No. 86, *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017*, clause 1, short title. Are there any questions? Mr. Wotherspoon.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Minister, and to your officials that have joined us here tonight. I'm interested in establishing an understanding of who's been consulted and engaged through this process, and also I'm looking for identification of any concerns that have been brought forward by respective stakeholders through that process.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question. The stakeholders that we consulted . . . I can get a more detailed list, but what we have here is the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers supported this; Mobile Crisis, Regina, supported this; Corrections and Policing; Ministry of Justice supported this; the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner had no opinion on this.

[17:15]

We had the Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police support this. Ministry of Education, also the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] and the Chief Justice were also supportive of this. The Yorkton Tribal Council did express some concerns on that, but we did have the support from the majority of the First Nation communities that we did touch base with.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thanks. So I appreciate the list of stakeholders there. I guess the question would be on the . . . As far as indigenous stakeholders, who have you . . . You've identified Yorkton, but who have you consulted as far as indigenous leaders, indigenous peoples, First Nations, Métis?

Ms. Huber: — Natalie Huber, assistant deputy minister of child and family programs. So I'll just speak to the extensive consultation. We had a number of public consultations that actually commenced in 2010, and we gathered information from approximately 1,200 individuals and groups which informed the recommendations. That was related to the child welfare panel report.

As we embarked on our child welfare legislative changes, we started to engage with First Nations and Métis partners and first

met with them to help shape and form the engagement strategy. And actually we contracted with the FSIN [Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations] as well as Métis Nation to hire two targeted, or two consultants who would be working primarily with the ministry to engage in consultations across the province.

So engagement involved 10 task teams. It comprised of 140 participants from First Nation child and family services agencies, FSIN and Métis Nation, Ombudsman's office, the Advocate for Children and Youth, key stakeholders, and numerous provincial government ministries. And we met between February and April of 2013 to talk about legislative issues and proposed legislative amendment options.

So each team reviewed unique theme materials developed from the child welfare review panel final report that I talked about earlier, the 2010 report, as well as legislative discussions from spring 2012 and other best practices research. So our policy team internal in the ministry, along with the First Nations agencies, we worked on some best practice research, looked at other Canadian jurisdictions around the policy and legislative changes they had made.

So we themed a number of changes, including looking at children with disabilities, youth services, extended family care, quality of out-of-home care, appeals and dispute resolution, core processes. And there were 51 legislative amendment options that we put forward. To ensure adequate time was allocated, we gave direction around the legislative engagement process, which we planned to extend into 2014.

So we also worked very closely with First Nations around engagement, not only at the First Nation agency level where we have agreements on hand with the agencies, but also at the actual First Nation level with the bands. So we engaged with them as well as Métis Nation through those task teams, as I talked about, also shaping the legislative amendments we put forward through phase 1 and 2 that we're talking about today.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thanks for that report and that important work as well. At this point in time then, is the FSIN as well as the Métis Nation supportive of the legislative changes that have been brought forward, or have they identified any concerns?

Ms. Huber: — So we engaged . . . As I mentioned before, FSIN and Métis Nation were partners with us during the engagement process through those task teams and so were aware of the presentation and the legislative amendments we were putting forward. So they were partners with us in the process.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I appreciate that and that's important. And at this point where you're at with the legislation that's been derived and a product of that consultation, is the FSIN and the Métis Nation, are they supportive of what's before us here today for consideration?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — To answer the question, the FSIN stayed neutral in this because the ongoing consultation and conversations were very much at the local level with our local agencies and the First Nations at that level. And again as we

stated before, they were partners with us through this whole process and we were very happy to have them involved with this process from start to finish.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you. And what was the concern identified by Yorkton?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it was more to do with just the general authority of the province involved with First Nation children.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Okay, and certainly an important . . . In an important conversation, everything that we should be undertaking should be supporting children to be supported within families and within their respective communities. And certainly it's a concern to many to see the growth of children in care, for example.

I have a question as to . . . Have any of the changes that have been brought forward, have any of those been motivated or are they a result of advice around reducing liability or reducing exposure to litigation?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — To answer the question, our motivation would have nothing to do with liability. Our motivation is always in the child's best interest.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you. And that's obviously very, very important. I appreciate that response. Just around the family, the panels or the review panels that are no longer going to be utilized, you spoke to some length around the challenge of those panels. And I think you've identified that they were a problem to operationalize with trust and respect by indigenous peoples and communities. And certainly I very much respect the recognition then of, you know, this tool not being the most appropriate.

But I would like to hear just a little more about how those were utilized in the past, where they were utilized, how often they were utilized, and a bit more of the nature of the concern.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The answer to the question is, is that these were never really operationalized. They were never put in. But the evolution of that is there are organizations that do do the talking circles and that do perform this with the family and with the other. But as far as the specifics, I'll get Natalie to get into the actual details of it. But they were never really operationalized, and they have evolved over the last few years to what we are working with right now.

Ms. Huber: — So the intention of this piece, within the legislation, was to promote out-of-court processes, so to remove the formal court process that were providing an alternative. At the time, as the minister mentioned, this provision was never operationalized, so the actual boards never took place. Primarily it was through consultation engagement with the First Nations partners and communities, and they had significant concerns about the operationalization of the boards because these would be ministry-appointed volunteers. They did not feel that they would represent the voice of their First Nation. And so we moved towards more culturally appropriate options, such as the talking circles, Opiks that we have in Saskatoon, as well as other parts of the province. So those are more traditional ways

to engage in, not only the voice of the family and the parents in the planning, but also the voice of the child.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you for the response. As it relates to PSIs [person of sufficient interest], this is an area where I think some focus and some attention is needed. This legislation — am I correct? — that there's not changes on that as it relates to PSIs.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — If I've understood by the minister's comments that there's more substantive change coming down the road, and that there's a consultative process on that front, this is an area I think that really does require some strengthening and maybe some improvements. Obviously that consultation process will be so important to make sure that when changes are brought forward, that they're in the best interests of children. So I'd urge attention there.

And maybe just to the point of, I think the comments have been that the changes in this bill are generally of a housekeeping nature, bit of a modernization. I guess, to the minister, are there aspects here that he would identify as being more substantive than housekeeping?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The only ones that would be substantial would be the ones that we're dovetailing this in with *The Adoption Amendment Act*, and the other one would be changing the revocation from 14 to 21 days.

But again on the consultation side of things, we're continuously working with all of our stakeholders, all of our partners, and certainly with the First Nations community. Myself and a lot of my officials were able to attend a pipe and feast ceremony up in Flying Dust to be able to talk with the First Nations community, with the elders, and with the staff of our First Nations agencies, our partners, to be able to better understand how this process is working and how we can improve on it.

[17:30]

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you very much. We've reached the appointed time we agreed to end this. Mr. Wotherspoon, do you have any wrap-up comments that you would like to make?

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Obviously the file's incredibly important. I don't have to stress that to anyone in this room or anyone working within this ministry. So simply thank you to all the officials, all the partners on this front, and thanks for the time here today. So I don't have any further questions at this point.

The Chair: — Mr. Minister, do you have any wrap-up comments?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just briefly, Mr. Chair. I thank Mr. Wotherspoon for the questions. I thank my officials, and all the work that's happened certainly prior to my arrival within Social Services and that will continue to happen into the future. And we want to make sure that we've got this right, and we'll continue to work with our stakeholders and our partners. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Wotherspoon, Mr. Minister, and your officials. We will now proceed with the votes. There are 56 clauses.

The Child and Family Services Act, short title, clause 1, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

[Clause 1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 2 to 56 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts the following: *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017*.

I will now ask a member to move that we report Bill No. 86, *The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 2017* without amendment.

Hon. Ms. Wilson: — I so move.

The Chair: — Ms. Wilson. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Okay. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment, please. Mr. Fiaz. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned to the call of the Chair. Thank you, Mr. Minister, and officials.

[The committee adjourned at 17:37.]