

**Division 9: Commissioner for Children and Young People, \$2 851 000 —**

Ms J.M. Freeman, Chair.

Mr J.R. Quigley, Attorney General.

Mr C. Pettit, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Mrs N. Hall, Director, Policy, Monitoring and Research.

Mr J. Lee, Principal Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. It is the intention of the Chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. Estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by Friday, 30 October 2020. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice through the online questions system.

**The CHAIR:** Member for Hillarys.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** Thank you, and welcome, commissioner. My first question is in reference to page 126, budget paper No 2, "Outcomes and Key Effectiveness Indicators". I note there that there has been a significant increase between the budgeted amount and the actual amount of participation of children and young people in the "Speaking Out Survey", and in surveying generally that the commissioner has done, and there has been better data capturing. How did that occur? What factors enabled the commissioner to access more opinions of more young people than was budgeted for?

**Mr J.R. QUIGLEY:** I will defer to the commissioner.

**Mr C. Pettit:** Thank you, minister, and thank you, member. Obviously, when we did the "Speaking Out Survey", we were trying to get as many voices of children and young people as we could across the state, so the program we devised was one where we travelled to a smaller numbers of schools but across the entire state, so that we could catch a larger number of children within each of those locations. That is why these numbers have grown.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** Does the commissioner use a combination of online and face-to-face consultations, and does he have a preference for which of the two is, firstly, more appropriate and, just as equally important, as useful in gathering data and information?

**Mr C. Pettit:** No, I do not have a preference; in fact, it depends on the type of question we are asking and also, more often, on the children and young people themselves. What we try to do is find a way that will capture their voice the best we possibly can. We use a range of techniques from face to face to using technology to also going directly online. All three have their appropriateness in terms of the data that we collect. We find that this group of children that we now have coming through our schools and so forth are more adaptive to technology, so we are able to explore the technology far greater than we have, perhaps even five years ago.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I have a further question. We see an increase between the budget and the actual spend for 2019–20, but then the budget figure has decreased from last year. Can the minister or commissioner explain the process behind that?

**Mr J.R. QUIGLEY:** I defer to the commissioner.

**Mr C. Pettit:** Unfortunately, the nature of our job is that it changes year on year, depending on the number of consultations that we have. For example, we are planning next year, in the latter half of this financial year, to talk to nearly 10 000 young people, so that will change the nature of what we do in terms of reporting next year. It varies with the number of children we can get to and whether they respond. What we did three years ago was change these performance indicators to try to get a better representation of what we do as an organisation. These figures were based on historical data, and we made a point, through Treasury, that we would give it three years and then we would review each of them, and we would perhaps go through a process for the next budget to change them again. That has been agreed to, and that three-year period finishes at the end of this year, so we have planned in December to have a full review. That review involves our staffing to start with and historical data. Then we will involve both

the Office of the Auditor General and Treasury to make sure that we get some sort of reasonable data. The unfortunate thing is if we are going to do a survey like Speaking Out every three years, we will have a blip every three years when we go to far more children than we do in other years. It will always be up and down.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Has the commissioner found that the COVID situation has limited his ability to consult with young people and the like? How has the commissioner coped with that?

**Mr C. Pettit:** We were, like everyone, caught with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our usual practice was no longer necessarily as strong as it could have been, and that was face to face more than anything else. We have had to adapt like everyone else. What we found was that, initially, it was hard to get hold of young people through an online process because of safety concerns and all the other bits that come with it. But we have worked around that and we have started to devise methods by which we can reach out to children and young people fairly quickly through technology, as well as still do face-to-face contact. It has forced us to change. With COVID, in particular, we reached out to anyone who would like to respond to us, and around 800 young people responded to us almost immediately about how they were feeling with the COVID pandemic. We actually tracked their feelings and thoughts all the way through for about a three-month period and put out a document that is online and available if anyone wants to look at it.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Does the commissioner have a percentage that represents the regional and remote young people that he attempts to get to, or what is the actual percentage of regional and remote contacts compared with kids in the metropolitan area?

**Mr C. Pettit:** We definitely try to reach as many regional locations as possible, and we do that through personal visits more than anything else. We certainly oversubscribe because of that and the fewer numbers of children in the regions. At the moment, about 25 per cent of our total population of children under the age of 18 are outside the metropolitan area, and that is about the proportion that we get in any surveys that we do. When we structure surveys, which means making sure that they are representative, obviously we have to make sure that there is a direct proportion of children from the country as opposed to the city. We then also break that down to Aboriginality and other factors.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** My questions will relate to significant issues impacting the agency in the sense of paragraph 1.2, which states —

monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all Western Australian children and young people ...

And paragraph 1.3, which states, “prioritising the needs of children and young people”, and the more general relationship to government goals of consultation, research and promotion of the wellbeing of children and young people, as well as the “Speaking Out Survey”.

**The CHAIR:** Have you got the page number?

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** Yes; it is page 125. It is essentially the work that the agency does. What I would like to ask is: in that “Speaking Out Survey”, was there anything that stood out in relation to young people’s mental health and wellbeing, such as issues around suicide or thoughts of suicide? Perhaps, also, as the second part to that, what interrelationship does the commissioner have with the service delivery agencies in government when he makes findings? How does he advocate for it? What protocols does he have in place to communicate those findings to all those agencies, be it police, child protection and the like, in order for them to get an understanding of what is coming to the commissioner from young people?

[2.30 pm]

**Mr J.R. QUIGLEY:** I defer to the commissioner.

**Mr C. Pettit:** Thank you. We are still mining a wealth of data from the “Speaking Out Survey”. In February 2020, we put a report to Parliament, but it was a very high level report in terms of the findings. We are still mining that information, but four things stuck out. In answer to the member’s question, mental health was one of the four—it was one of the top of the four issues—that children and young people identified having an issue with.

In terms of the second part of the member’s question on suicide, we did not specifically ask that question, in part because we were restricted by the ethical approach we had to take. It is a question that a number of organisations, including the Department of Health, were keen to look at, and we are looking at how in the future we might uncover some of that information through children. In fact, we have two projects, in the Kimberley and the Pilbara, that when opened up fully, particularly in remote locations, will explore that very notion.

We communicate that information with agencies in a range of ways. Obviously, we provide a briefing to all the key agencies, and have done that to all the heads of significant agencies that children have told us there are problems with, and we have gone through all the data. We shared the report with them. Through mining the information, we have gathered four areas that we are really keen to progress. One area is mental health. We have produced—they came off the press only yesterday—four data insights that are more detailed. They will be released pretty soon to

the general public and also members of Parliament. One of the data insights is around mental health and it will have far greater fine-grained detail to assist agencies. We have worked with the Mental Health Commission and given it information. The commission has come into our office and used the data on a number of occasions. The agreement was that the data would be available to all agencies. The commission used the data in an attempt to form its youth strategy into the future based on what children and young people have said. We advocate in a range of ways, but the data speaks for itself, and we are keen to promote it as much as possible.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** I want to explore a couple of things in relation to the data. Is the data broken down by geographical subsets? If something stands out as being different—I hesitate to use the word “alarming”—or a deviation from the mean, if you like, in one particular geographic area, how quickly can that be communicated to other agencies?

**Mr C. Pettit:** In the first instance, the “Speaking Out Survey”—SOS 19, which was obviously done in 2019—was a proof of concept, so we only managed to contact nearly 5 000 young people. As part of the ethics process, there was a need for us not to break down the data. However, we learnt from SOS 19 that we would like to go back into the field and do it again, hopefully, pretty much post-COVID, in early 2021, assuming everything goes forward. We have already had full ethics approval from all agencies and within our own ethical approach. Within that structure, it has been recommended to us to do exactly as the member suggested—that is, have regional breakdowns. We are also now looking at how quickly we can manage that data. Because of the work we did with the pilot, we can translate that data a lot, a lot quicker than we did with the first one. We are hoping to have not only school-level data available to schools, but also regional data available more broadly within the space of the reporting project, which is around the end of June next year if all things go well.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** I accept that the 2019 survey was a proof of concept, but I think there is a realisation that having that finer based and more targeted data will lead to better outcomes, and that is where service delivery is going anyway more generally. The commissioner in his answer to the first part of my question mentioned that based on the preliminary or ongoing mining of the data he wants to do further work on mental health. Can the commissioner expand on the areas of mental health he wants to do more work on and whether he can do that within his existing budgetary framework or would need additional funds?

**Mr C. Pettit:** Obviously, any agency would love to have more funding, but we work with the cloth that we are given. Certainly, mental health has become a priority for us because that is what the voice of children has told us. We are looking at how we can expand on that, and we have just released three reports online around where mental health and wellbeing for children sits in schools and beyond that. We are working with all three education systems and the Mental Health Commission. We have also looked at the provision of mental health for very young children and the need for that to be a priority in the next 12 months or so, given the feedback we have.

In terms of the member’s direct question, the real focus at the moment is to make sure that people understand that mental health is a problem that young people are facing across the board and that it needs to be recognised in a way so that it can then be funded and the correct programs can be appointed. We really want to go back and check really carefully the SOS 19 data on the mental health of young girls, particularly older young girls, because they expressed a deep concern about how they are feeling in life at the moment. We are looking at two areas there—that is, mental health and how females are treated within the community.

**Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS:** Has the commission done any work around the availability of mental health support services for young people in a general sense and then broken down in a more regional sense? The corollary to that question is that if the commission has not done specific work on that, has anything come out of the “Speaking Out Survey” that raised questions or alarm bells about the availability more generally or regionally of that clearly needed assistance?

**Mr C. Pettit:** The short answer is, no, we did not get into the regions. As I said, SOS 19 did not allow us to do that. Obviously, as an agency we have been monitoring the mental health and wellbeing of children for some time. In fact, there were a series of reports from our predecessors in 2011 and 2015. We recently reviewed our 2015 report recommendations and sent a report to each of the agencies saying, “This is where we think it’s at.” We have had conversations about how they might improve from that point. A key issue is how we support children in regional locations in a way that perhaps has not been recognised as well as it could have been to this point. That is a conversation we are having with the Mental Health Commission and others to hopefully build into the youth plan next year.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to page 125 and line 2.1, which states —

monitoring the implementation of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and supporting agencies to embed the child safe principles within their organisations, including appropriate responses ...

Can the commissioner explain who the supporting agencies are and what form this takes?

**Mr C. Pettit:** The supporting agencies are all the agencies that have direct involvement predominantly with children—not only direct involvement, but all agencies that have some sort of involvement with children. From the time the royal commission started we worked alongside it until the day it concluded. We have led, on behalf of the state, the previous government and this government, the child safe organisation principles, helping agencies work through how they can change their culture. At the moment there is no mandatory obligation for that to happen, although in time it will happen because that is part of the recommendations. We are working towards helping each of those agencies change their practices to provide a safer environment based on the 10 child safe principles. In fact, the work we have done has just been recognised by the federal government, which asked us to do some work for it, which will also help the state. It was recognised in federal Parliament this morning by the Prime Minister.

[2.40 pm]

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** So the supporting agencies are those agencies that are involved with young people, like the Commissioner for Children and Young People. How much direct engagement does the commission have with these outside organisations that are part of the royal commission, if you like?

**Mr J.R. QUIGLEY:** I defer to the commissioner.

**Mr C. Pettit:** I will clarify: when I talk about agencies, I am talking about government and non-government agencies. The non-government agencies are at the forefront of this and are doing some amazing work. I just want to acknowledge that they have really jumped in and tried to make a significant difference around child safety. With regard to government agencies, we work with all of them. They acknowledge that they have to change some of their work practices, and many of them are actually putting different policies in place. They often come back to us to check and see whether they are, in fact, lining up with what we believe is the right way to go.

**The appropriation was recommended.**