

Division 42: Commissioner for Children and Young People, \$3 133 000 —

Mr I.C. Blayney, Chairman.

Mrs L.M. Harvey, Minister for Police representing the Attorney General.

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

Ms P. Heath, Acting Director, Policy and Research.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: The member for Maylands.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to “Appropriations, Expenses and Cash Assets” under division 42, in part 9 of the budget papers. I am pleased to see that no reductions have been made to the budget. Unless I am misguided and reading the papers wrongly, it looks as though the government has maintained the budget for the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People; is that correct?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Indeed, that is correct.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am particularly interested in the future works plan for the agency. I would really like to know whether I can get a bit more information on things such as the Aboriginal engagement concept and how the government might be seeking to progress that in the coming months, because it is clearly a very important issue.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I will ask the commissioner to respond.

[5.10 pm]

Mr C. Pettit: In terms of the Aboriginal engagement process, my office has just appointed an Aboriginal engagement officer, and he will commence in a week and a half. We are also putting together an Aboriginal advisory council made up of very senior Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal children and young people. That is yet to be formed, but four of its members will be from our ambassadors, including June Oscar, who has just been awarded the Desmond Tutu award, as the member knows. That is the first stage. The second stage will involve people from my office talking to a range of communities about how we can engage with them to find out how the relationship of family on children and vice versa has an impact in making a stronger community right around Western Australia.

Ms L.L. BAKER: The minister will remember that the Blaxell recommendations were handed down some years ago. The commissioner, Peter Blaxell, recommended that the Commissioner for Children and Young People should be a one-stop shop to report child abuse. A subsequent review by the Public Sector Commission of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act stated it was something that was still open. I think the Premier committed to it. There has been a lot of debate and discussion about what that role might be. I am really interested to know whether the minister thinks that the new role that the commissioner’s office might play in the future, or whatever new role emerges, would be sufficiently well funded under the current budget. The commissioner’s office has done a lot of work around this, but how will that be funded?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I am aware of that discussion around a one-stop shop with respect to child abuse. Ultimately, it is a criminal offence and police need to be the first port of call. That is really the position that I believe the government is taking on that. In the area of child sexual abuse, certainly work can be done around protective behaviours and building resilience and those sorts of matters. I will get the commissioner to elaborate because some work certainly is being done on that.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I particularly want to know about funding.

Mr C. Pettit: My office has just released a program called Child Safe Organisations WA. That work was done in collaboration with a range of government agencies and not-for-profits. Those resources are available on the website and are free of charge. The aim is preventive work more than anything else. That is the first step. In terms of the question around the Blaxell report and recommendation 2, we have relied on where the government would sit with that. The Premier has been very clear in saying that when the outcome of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is handed down, the government will have a position on where it goes from that point.

Ms L.L. BAKER: To be clear about any additional funding on any expansion of the role, does the minister think at this point that would wait until the end of the royal commission? Preparatory work or ongoing changes would not be able to be funded unless they are out of the current budget—is that the position?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: With respect to new projects that might emerge as a result of the royal commission’s findings into institutionalised child sexual abuse, the government has not done any work in pre-empting what

those recommendations might be. If those recommendations required the work of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, obviously that would be a consideration at that point. At present the commissioner has a range of initiatives around child sexual abuse resilience. A lot of work is going into the rights of children. At present, no additional funding is flowing out of that. The government will consider its options once the royal commission hands down its findings and recommendations.

Ms L.L. BAKER: That is great. I have a comment to make and then a question. I heard the minister say there may be outcomes that the state needs to look at. I am sure the government will agree that there is potentially no more important a priority than preventing the sexual and physical abuse of children. If the commissioner's office was in a position to look at a new role and some additional costings, would the government accept—I am not saying it would agree with it—a recommendation from the commissioner about what was required and a submission for funding to go with that? I am asking whether the government would accept it, not whether it would fund it.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: This government, and certainly governments generally in Western Australia, have been very proactive in taking up the recommendations and findings of royal commissions. I cannot imagine the government would have a different approach to the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. If an additional program needed to be implemented and that required funding, I am sure the government would consider that on its merits at the time.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I have a further question related to the dot points on page 488. The future work of the strategic plan is mentioned, and then it states —

The capacity to engage well in learning and achieve positive outcomes in education is central to the wellbeing of children and young people.

I could not agree more. One issue I have raised with previous commissioners has been educational planning for children with high and complex needs, particularly children with a disability; for instance the children enrolled at Durham Road School in my electorate. There is a growing need for services in education. Students need some place to go—at the moment students at that school are crammed to the rooftops. Would the commissioner consider looking specifically at the cohort of children with very high and complex physical and intellectual needs, with a view to trying to include educational planning for what they will need in the future?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I will ask the commissioner to respond.

Mr C. Pettit: The education project that is described in the budget is one for all children in Western Australia, including those with disability. It will be the largest research project of its kind in Western Australia. We are very keen to look at all groups, including children with disability, children from Aboriginal backgrounds and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They will be captured in the first run. Following information gained from that, we will look at further projects in specific areas. I have no doubt that one of them will be children with disability.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I, too, refer to page 488. The second paragraph refers to the number of children and young people in the youth justice system. I want to know what the Commissioner for Children and Young People suggests, if anything, about a reduction in the incarceration rate of Aboriginal children.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I will ask the commissioner to elaborate on his involvement in youth justice, particularly with Indigenous children.

Mr C. Pettit: This is a really important issue. Fifty-two per cent of incarcerated children are Aboriginal. We need to ensure that changes. Sorry, that is out-of-home care—it is even more in youth justice. These two projects are really important, particularly around youth justice. In partnership with the Department of Corrective Services, my office is working with children and asking them some fairly bold questions about what got them into trouble and how we can keep them out of trouble, using the services that they receive. The commission hopes to hand down that report within the next three months and work with Corrective Services about how to improve opportunities through the courts—the whole process, including communities.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Did the commissioner say that a report will be published on this area within the next three months?

[5.20 pm]

Mr C. Pettit: We are hoping to finish our program within the next three months and the information will be provided to relevant agencies as we go.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Will this information be tabled in a consolidated form in Parliament or be publicly available? As the minister will appreciate, community organisations are also concerned about this very issue.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: We have not yet determined how far that will go in terms of a public report. Obviously, we have commitments to young children about their confidentiality. But with the findings from them, we are working with Corrective Services and others to see whether we can help improve the opportunity for young people to stay out of incarceration.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Is it intended that we will be at least informed that the findings and recommendations have been delivered to government? Short of the next estimates committee, how will members of the community know that this has come to a conclusion and they can start to look around? A lot of organisations are very concerned about this issue.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: My understanding is that it is the practice of the commissioner generally to publish these reports. Commissioner, can you elaborate?

Mr C. Pettit: We publish in a range of ways—tabling in Parliament if it is a significant report, as was the mental health report last year. We publish also on our website and we provide information and evidence to a range of organisations as well as future policy options.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I have directed most of my questions towards the Indigenous incarceration rate but the adviser averted to out-of-home care as well. Can the commissioner expand on that because I think he cut himself off to direct it to the question?

Mr C. Pettit: These two projects are running in parallel. We are finding a lot of commonality between the two. As I said before, 52 per cent of children in out-of-home care are Aboriginal. We are trying to discover, not just for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, how children perceive the service they receive, how they can be supported better by government services and others and how we can make it better for children not to be in those positions and how we can support the families.

Mr P. ABETZ: The third paragraph down on page 488 refers to the Thinker in Residence program. Has that got underway? Can the minister shed some light on exactly where that is going?

Mr C. Pettit: Yes, it has. We have just signed Associate Professor Jane Burns from the University of Melbourne. She also runs a child research centre. She is a world leader in this space along with a number of local people such as Professor Donna Cross. We have engaged them in a slightly different Thinker in Residence process this year. We will run it over a spaced approach so there will be one week of the residence in October. They will work with a range of agencies, some not-for-profits and some philanthropic groups. They will co-design the return week, which will be in March next year, so that they get more benefit from it. There will be opportunity for parents and others to be involved. We were also hoping to get the eSafety Commissioner involved in that. Unfortunately, the eSafety Commissioner has just been appointed elsewhere and we are waiting for the appointment now of the national eSafety Commissioner. Part of the reason for that was to bring that person to Perth but also to talk to politicians in particular and other policymakers about what they find around e-safety, in particular for children.

Mr P. ABETZ: It sounds like an exciting development.

Mr C. Pettit: It is.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I think it was the headmistress of a large prominent private girls' school, who very recently raised the issue in a public address of the non-consensual transmission of sexual images, colloquially called sexting, and the impact that is having on young people. I believe there was a report by the Australian Senate two or three months ago on the same subject. Has the commissioner formed a policy on how to help deal with the issue, if I can use the colloquial language, of sexting? In his opinion does this require legislation? The Senate proposed that there should be legislative response as well. Has the commissioner given any thought to this?

Mr C. Pettit: Yes; we have given quite a deal of thought to it. Part of the reason for Jane Burns coming across is to look at those particular issues and at supporting parents and others. We are doing some work around the report the member mentioned and seeing where it would fit within the WA context.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Can the commissioner expand on the Thinker in Residence program?

Mr C. Pettit: As I said, Jane Burns is the Thinker in Residence. We have asked Jane to come across because, as I said, we tabled a report around mental health in December last year. One of the issues around mental health was the role of parents and parenting. We have had a lot of feedback from parents, both formally and informally, about not having an understanding of the e-world, so we felt it was the right time to bring Jane across to talk about the role that online plays in not only a negative way but also a positive way and how that supports parents and, therefore, address things like a relationship to mental health and a relationship to the wellbeing of children.

Mr P. PAPALIA: If the commissioner has already been asked this, please excuse me and tell me that. I refer to the second dot point on page 488 about young people in out-of-home care. Beyond noting that it is a significant issue impacting on the commissioner and the state, has the commissioner planned or executed any studies to

determine what is driving the incredibly steep increase in the number of young people in out-of-home care in Western Australia in recent times?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: We have discussed out-of-home care but that gives the question a different nuance. Do you have something further to add, commissioner?

Mr C. Pettit: In partnership with the Department for Child Protection and Family Support we have embarked on a process of engaging almost 100 children in out-of-home care to discuss their beliefs and understanding of what is happening to them in that process, how we can improve it and how the system itself can be improved. That has been a very strong collaboration with Child Protection and Family Support. We are hoping to have the information back with the department within the next few months so that we can look at what processes are around that will support children in a much better way perhaps than currently is the case.

Mr P. PAPALIA: The commissioner's response is essentially surveying the children impacted by the steep increase. Beyond that is there any academic or other study to determine what might be driving the number of children going into out-of-home care?

Mr C. Pettit: Certainly, Child Protection will have more information on that than we do. However, my colleagues, nationally, are looking at this issue and, collectively, those reports are now starting to filter through. We are monitoring state by state and we are looking at how our report will impact on that and what we can find from that. If there is an obvious thing we need to do, that is the work we will do with Child Protection around policy improvement.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Has the commissioner considered seeking assistance through additional capacity from relevant academic institutions such as universities in the state that might have people willing and ready to do research on the commissioner's behalf with a focus more on trying to determine exactly what is driving this growth in Western Australia, beyond the rest of the states. I think the sheer number in Western Australia is significant regardless of what is happening anywhere else?

Mr C. Pettit: Yes; in all the projects that we do, we engage researchers, particularly the Telethon Kids Institute, universities and others, to do a literature review for us to find out what are the issues from an academic point of view that we can find within not only this state but across the nation in particular, so that we can reference that and develop our projects from there. We have done that with most of our projects and we engage fairly closely with the universities and, as I said, Telethon Kids Institute and others to make sure that we are right on top of the latest research.

The appropriation was recommended.

[5.30 pm]