

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE
COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**REVIEW OF THE EXERCISE OF THE
FUNCTIONS OF THE COMMISSIONER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 19 MARCH 2014**

Members

**Ms L.L. Baker (Chair)
Hon Robyn McSweeney (Deputy Chair)
Ms E. Evangel
Hon Sally Talbot**

Hearing commenced at 10.11 am

Ms JENNIFER JOY PERKINS

Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People, examined:

Ms CARON IRWIN

Executive Director, Commissioner for Children and Young People, examined:

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, I would like to thank you for your appearance before us today. The purpose of the hearing is to assist the committee in its review of the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. At this stage I will introduce myself. I have already done that; I am Lisa Baker, member for Maylands; the deputy chair, Hon Robyn McSweeney, member for the South West Region; Eleni Evangel, member for Perth; and Dr Sally Talbot, member for South West Region. The Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People is a joint committee of the Parliament of WA. This hearing is a formal proceeding of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. This is public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. Before we proceed to the questions we have today, I would like to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did you receive and read the information for witness sheet provided with the “Details of Witness” form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness today?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIR: Before we start, we were just going to ask questions as they arise, but I suppose the starting point for me—and I will kick us off—is after you, Jenni, have been doing the job—I hope you do not mind “Jenni”—for three months, is it?

Ms Perkins: Almost.

The CHAIR: It is almost three months. Can you tell us how you are settling in and how you are finding the role?

Ms Perkins: Thank you, Madam Chair. That is a question I feel really pleased to be able to answer in terms of, as you know, I commenced in the role as acting commissioner back in December 2013, and I will admit with some trepidation following the inaugural commissioner’s good work and solid base of work that the office has undertaken. But at the same time entering an office which has got such a strong foundation to build on has been an absolute delight in that context. And since that

time, in the 10 to 12 weeks that I have been there now, my priority has been to look at how I can build on the work that the office has been undertaking. I have met with over 61, I think 62, key stakeholders to date.

The CHAIR: You counted them all?

Ms Perkins: Well, my office has in terms of —

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Is that all?

The CHAIR: What have you been doing!

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: We expect at least 1 000!

Ms Perkins: And so I guess it has been very important for me in terms of being able to get an understanding of and helping me form where the priorities may be over the coming months in that role and understanding the basis of the work within which the office is well established.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure

Ms Perkins: So, that has been a very busy space for me. One of the important things for me is, I guess, to understand the basis of how the office has worked and to build on that framework. And so for me what has been really encouraging with the role is looking at the office to date, it has had a framework very much around looking at what is it that children and young people have to say with regard to various issues that the office may address and what the evidence base is in that context, and I think that has been a really strong framework established over time, that I am very keen to be able to continue. So, some of the work that we are undertaking to date very much reflects that model. I have been busy going out meeting with a number of stakeholders and looking at those agendas that we might look at into the future. The core work of the office has been very much focused on work that was in train around the wellbeing monitoring framework that I would be happy to brief members in terms of where we are up to in that regard; work around youth health, which has been a major body of work that has been almost ready to complete and I will be releasing information around that; and the work that has been done around planning for the next thinker-in-residence, which also I will be happy to brief the committee on.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, thanks.

Ms Perkins: So, all in all, it has been a very busy time. And the other thing I will be happy to talk and brief further the committee around is looking at what will be the strategic directions focus over the coming 12 months in that role. And I have developed those, which I will be happy to share with the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jenni, that will be fantastic. Would somebody else like to take up the questions or do you just want me to keep banging on? All right. I shall ask the next question then. It is pretty much leading on from what you said, Jenni. It is good that you have settled in, you have got a great team there, so you are very lucky to go into such a secure and cohesive organisation that has such a good track record, not the least Caron's responsibility to get that there, but it is good that you have been able to transition to the role. And we are really looking forward to hearing from you about some of those initial three issues that you raised about the health report and the other things. Then perhaps you might want to move onto the future after that, but maybe just deal with what you are doing on your plate at the moment.

Ms Perkins: Okay. As I outlined, there are three, I guess, major projects that is the body of ongoing work for the office that virtually everyone in the office is currently engaged in. One would be the wellbeing monitoring framework that committee members no doubt will be familiar with. The first edition of that framework was tabled in Parliament back in 2012, and we are now working on the second edition. That sort of comprises the three main components, and so I guess the primary component of that is the publication around the state of the wellbeing of children and young people. And that basically pulls together in a fairly robust framework of around about eight outcome areas

that look at what is the available data on those measures which can provide an understanding of how our children, or Western Australian children and young people, are faring. Importantly, the selection of those data are based on looking at the data that needs to be comparable to WA and Australian counterparts, but also have that capacity to look between our Aboriginal children and young people and the broader population. So, it is a very robust process. I must admit, being involved now in appreciating the extent of work that the office undertakes and the detail that is involved, it is very much based on working very closely with major departments who are the primary source of a lot of those data. There is a reference group that involves other departments and a range of other research university agencies to help inform and shape and ensure that those data are the relevant measures and the data are well tested. And we have just about got to the stage now where we will be putting the final touches in putting that back to the data custodians to ensure that we have now got that picture.

The CHAIR: Do you just want to run us through again with the eight outcome areas, or perhaps Caron can do that? It is up to you, but just to remind us.

Ms Perkins: Certainly. Let me just find those. I think I have got those that are outlined. We have got 33 key measures, which are categorised under eight domains. My apologies that I do not have the precise details of the eight domains.

[10.20 am]

The CHAIR: That is all right; just give us an example around them.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: They used to know them!

Ms Perkins: I mean, I guess broadly it is around health —

The CHAIR: Caron, do you know something?

Ms Irwin: The major domain is health, indicators of children's health and wellbeing; then there is material wellbeing, which looks at things like overcrowding, family income; risk behaviours to do with corrective services, alcohol use, smoking; subjective wellbeing, which is children's view of the world; environment, looking at environmental measures, both the built environment and air and water quality. I will have to provide the other three.

The CHAIR: That is five. That is all right, if you can think of them. But I remember some of those as being quite unusual and that in Australia we do not see that much reporting around those kinds of categories. So I remember the themes of those unusual titles—it is great. And did you want to continue, Jenni, with the other three?

Ms Perkins: Yes. So that is almost near completion. And the importance, I guess, for me is sort of coming into the role and appreciating, as I said, the amount of work and thought that goes into bringing those data together and ensuring that the data custodians—because it is not our data; it is data that is available elsewhere—also endorse what those data are. So, there is a lot of work that goes into that. And the reference group, for the committee's information, includes key government agencies but also the Auditor General, the Ombudsman, ABS and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. So it has had a lot of careful thought put into it and that is just about complete. The companion report to that, which I think is also equally helpful—I know in my previous role as director general of Communities I found that extremely helpful—is the “Building Blocks” report. That effectively brings together in a fairly well consolidated space a range of examples of best practice programs that operate across those eight domains. We are commissioning a second edition of that, and I think we have identified around about 24 to 28 examples across Australia and WA where there is best practice or promising programs. And the intent of that is really going back to the framework that the Commissioner for Children and Young People has worked around in looking at drawing together what is the evidence and what is the information that will help inform and shape good outcomes for children and young people.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Just on that, the programs, the other day I was listening to one of the media outlets and they said that the ParentLink program was shutting down.

Ms Perkins: Yes.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: They said the government was shutting that down and I was actually horrified about that because, as you and I both know from our previous roles, ParentLink was a very good program. I was just wondering if there is anything that the children commissioner's office could do in that space, or check on it that it actually has closed.

Ms Perkins: Okay; I had not seen that reference. Certainly you would be familiar in looking at some of the earlier work the office has done around both talking to young people, which highlighted the importance of family environment and parents, and the discussions we have had around the importance of being able to get access to good quality information, and there is definitely a growing demand. In fact in that context, if I go back to the thinker-in-residence program that the office has convened, Dr Michael Unger, who is coming back out later in May, was out last October, I think it was, in Children's Week. I am giving this as an illustration, as the great demand and interest is there from parents in looking at supports and what works. The sessions that were convened with Dr Unger in that time were all oversubscribed, which to me is a strong indication that there is a really big demand and hunger for parents to get access to that sort of information.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I am just bringing it to your attention so that you can know.

Ms Perkins: I certainly appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Yes, I would second that. I would be right behind that. I have heard that from two different sources that ParentLink has gone, which is pretty catastrophic in fact for some agencies.

Ms Perkins: Okay.

The CHAIR: So it would be really interesting if you could let us know what you find out on that. I am sure we are allowed to ask that question under our remit. So it would be great if you could let us know what you find out about that and if there is anything you think you can do around that.

Ms Perkins: I can certainly undertake to follow that up. And going back to the "Building Blocks" report in its second edition, which I have just been looking at there and the proof on that, clearly there are a number of programs in there that are looked at from a parenting perspective which have been highly commended.

The CHAIR: Yes. Jenni, one of the things that I am really interested in with the eight areas and all those indicators in these great reports is how do you track deliverables? You have put your report out and you said as the director general in your area that you welcome that and use parts of it. So, does the commissioner actually look at six months down the line and 12 months down the line and say that this is what people have done, this is what agencies have done, this is how things have shifted because of the report or because of aspects of the report? Do you intend to collect that data or have you collected it?

Ms Perkins: It is an interesting point. Keep in mind that the actual report, the "State of Western Australia's Children and Young People", is the report that has these data, and it is trend data, so it is drawing on what is available now. In some cases we will have five-year trend data, and in some cases—keep in mind that the last edition was 2012 and so this is two years later—there is not necessarily in all those indicators a lot of change. I am saying this, not having yet the opportunity to review all of those indicators. Clearly there are some areas where there has been significant improvement, and so they are some of the good stories to tell.

The CHAIR: Are you saying this is a part of the report?

Ms Perkins: This is the report.

The CHAIR: Okay, so you have made a quantitative assessment.

Ms Perkins: There are three components, and the pre-eminent report, which is the report across those 33 indicators that looks at how are we tracking now and what has happened over the last five years or so —

The CHAIR: So you are looking back and comparing with the way things were.

Ms Perkins: Yes, very much.

The CHAIR: I did not understand that.

Ms Perkins: So they are indicators. I guess what the report does is it is not really providing therefore a policy analysis of what the implications of this are. The intent behind the original framework was that this is collecting these data together in a centralised way, which provides the opportunities for policymakers in government and non-government to have an understanding and look at and help inform how they might shape some of the responses. So, that is the broad intent of those data. Now, what happened with the first report is that those data over the last couple of years helped to inform the commissioner's work in terms of developing some policy briefs and ideas linking back to what stories the data would tell. So, my expectation would be that after I have tabled that report, the final report, to Parliament, that that would then help shape and inform some of the subsequent work that the office may engage in, be it from a policy point of view or working alongside other government agencies, utilising those data as a way of saying that this is what the picture has told, where might be some of the longer term responses.

The CHAIR: I will hand over to Eleni but I just want to pursue this one a little bit more. One of the things that I think we would be really interested in is: what actually are the changes? What actually is happening as a result of the work of the commissioner? I think that is actually our job.

Ms Perkins: Yes.

The CHAIR: So there is a gap that from what you are saying—correct me if I am wrong—it seems to me we could do a bit more work around not just that this is the way things were two years ago and this is what we are measuring now on those same indicators, therefore the difference is that and that. And you are saying to me that you are doing an analysis of the difference, not just that this is the way things were, end of report; now a new report, this is the way things are.

Ms Perkins: No. It will give data around this is what it was in 2005 and whatever.

The CHAIR: So it has gone up.

Ms Perkins: And it will give that sense in a very public way that this is how children and young people are tracking on these indicators.

The CHAIR: So the question for me then is: who is tracking what is changing in government in terms of the delivery of policy or the development of policy from the good work that you are doing and what is happening out there? You told me Communities did some work based on this, and I know that there is lots of good work being done in Education and the like. The committee knows about that.

Ms Perkins: Yes.

[10.30 am]

The CHAIR: I am just wondering where that repository of information is, so that we as a committee can say to Parliament, "And this is all the great stuff that has come as a result of the work of the commissioner; this is how it has influenced government policy; this is how it is delivering on these agendas". Is that clear?

Ms E. EVANGEL: That is exactly what I was going to say as well too. I think that we are seeing lots of really great research over the years, and some great papers have come through, discussion papers, and a lot of attention has been drawn to all the different issues that are out there for young people. And that is really marvellous, that is great, but where to next? How do we translate that into

very clear strategies that are going to be attaining those objectives and outcomes that we want to see, which is some change?

Ms Perkins: I agree and I think sort of fundamentally that the strength of what the Commissioner for Children and Young People can do in that space, going back to the strength in a number of those agendas that the commissioner has now to do, is bring to the fore what are the views of children and young people in that space. And just sort of anecdotally to a certain extent, and this is my impression having now been in the role, is in one way you think that must be a natural thing and that programs are being designed on the basis of reflecting or talking with children and young people, but I have been surprised in my time to appreciate that that is still not necessarily the case. A couple of examples would be where the office has provided submissions to broader inquiries in certain agendas and when we have raised and suggested to those inquiries that maybe it would be constructive or helpful to actually as part of your inquiry talk to children and young people. What I have been surprised about is that people have come back and said that is a good idea. So, I guess it is a roundabout way of answering your question, but it seems —

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Can you give us some examples of those in the last couple of years?

Ms Perkins: I guess two I can think of. There was a recent inquiry around looking at the role of grandparents looking after grandchildren. So part of our submission to that current inquiry would be to suggest that a really important part of that would be to talk to children and young people. And so we have had feedback saying that that has been taken up and identified how they can link, and I guess the office can play a role in actually helping making those connections. I just sort of raised that as an example of seeing the different lens, an important lens, that the commissioner's office brings to that fore of really looking at and ensuring that. Can I give another example? Taking that broader is the very good work that has been done recently through the Department of Education in responding to looking at complaints processes in relation to the Country High School Hostels Authority's work. And so that would be an example of where that work that they have done was in consultation with children and young people, and I think that that really largely comes also from the work that the commissioner's office has done in terms of actually having that lens and emphasising that that is really part of when you are designing or developing programs.

Ms E. EVANGEL: I just want to make a comment. I like the report that we had last week that highlighted parenting. I really do like that emphasis on parenting. I think that if we were to invest more in parenting and educating parents as to how to parent properly, that is the cure to probably 95 per cent of the issues that relate to young people. So, I would really like to see a focus on parenting from zero to 18. I mean, when you think about it, for from zero to five, there is a lot of support out there, but for those critical years, which are the teenage years, parents are left alone in most cases or often feel like they are left alone to deal with these really sort of unbeknown issues that are just so far beyond what we are able to deal with. So, I would like to see a project outcome of some sort whereby there is that kind of information available to parents. Perhaps if we can get in there and prevent all of these issues with children, rather than being reactive and trying to find a cure once it has actually happened. That is just a point that I wanted to make.

Ms Perkins: Yes, I understand.

The CHAIR: You might want to talk about Michael Ungar a bit and Stuart Shanker's work, then.

Ms Perkins: The thinker-in-residence program—as committee members may be aware—in my meetings with the stakeholders to date, I have certainly consistently got really positive feedback about the work that the commissioner has done in bringing those people to the fore. What I think is really encouraging with both those initiatives is that that has actually led to two thinkers to date, including Stuart Shanker, who has just recently been brought back again by WACOSS and a number of non-government organisations. As I was saying earlier, there is this real hunger for that information both across parents—very much so—and people who are working in the area, so they are both common needs. It is interesting the work that Stuart Shanker has done and that whole focus

on self-regulation, which is very much about the issues and concerns across all ages, so it is not just around the focus on the early years; it is looking at what is happening in the older age groups. I did not have the opportunity to listen to Dr Ungar last year when he came out, but I am very much looking forward to the opportunity when he comes out in May to appreciate his work in that space around regulation. Work, particularly with vulnerable young people, is in a similar vein extremely relevant to both parents, in some of the work that he has done, and the work that we are doing in linking in with key professionals. I concur that that work and that program has helped to generate a whole lot of interest and support across both those domains.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Parenting is very important. When I was the minister, we had the parent centre. Me mentioning Parent Link closing or shutting down is very alarming because that was volunteers; it did not cost much. It was a program that ran well. Volunteers would go into the homes and they would sit down with the mums and the bubs and just generally be somebody who the mother could talk to and play with the baby the right way. So, it really is up to the minister.

Getting back to the question of what you do with all this information, you mentioned the grandparent program and the money that we are giving. As a minister, I signed off on that. That was something that I was very passionate about; grandparents who are bringing up their grandchildren need that extra support. But if you have not got a minister who does have that social conscience, who does not have that understanding, then you can do all the research in the world, nobody will pick it up. To answer your question, the department heads can do all the work that they want to and put it in front of the minister, but if the minister says, “No, I don’t want that. That research doesn’t mean anything to me”, the department head has to go back and devise another way to perhaps get it around, saying to the minister, “Well, actually this is what we need.”

The CHAIR: They should be paying attention.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Paying attention, yes.

Ms Perkins: I agree with you, and going back to, therefore, what can the commissioner do and what is the role of the commissioner, it is interesting that you are referring to a program that is very much based on that peer support and that mentoring role. One of the things that came to my mind when I was reviewing the draft of the “Building Blocks” report, which does seek to bring together—it is not a comprehensive list of all evidence-based programs that have been evaluated as working well, but it is attempting to provide a broad reach. So, what came through to me is that a characteristic of many of those programs was around that peer-to-peer model, which was operating in a range of domains. I guess that is helping build the evidence base to support that: if you are looking at programs, a strength of those is where you are actually working in that peer support way.

The CHAIR: Jenni, when Michael is here in May, I think it would be a really good idea to sit down with him and just get him to download some stuff for our committee so that we can —

Ms Perkins: Yes, and my understanding, Madam Chair, is that you might be having a luncheon with Dr Ungar, which is fantastic. I have also arranged for him to meet with a number of other ministers; they have taken up the opportunity to meet with him. I guess that is a way of ensuring that people who are making those decisions have got the opportunity to be fully across the sorts of ideas that he has to offer. I do not think he will have a minute to breathe in the two weeks that he is with us.

The CHAIR: This program is very exciting. It is very exciting having the input of these professionals and Robyn has told us many times how Stuart Shanker is fantastically well-received here on these issues of self-regulation. You have already talked about the response from parents and the hunger and the thirst. That is what is motivating Eleni too. I think this is an area that you really can hold your hand on your heart and say, “We’ve done really well in that.”

[10.40 am]

Ms Perkins: I think it has been a really impressive model. First, that is reflected in terms of the very careful thought in the selection of the individuals themselves who have now been our thinkers in residence. Second, it is a really strong partnership model, so it has not been the commissioner going out there totally on their own. It has a very close partnership across both government agencies that sponsored it—and Rio Tinto is also part of that sponsorship—and non-government organisations, and that I think is also a strength, so the message is getting out far and wide in that context.

Ms E. EVANGEL: I think a successful example of improving parenting skills is the government campaign with alcohol and how they are getting the message out there, educating parents, “Refrain; don’t give your kids alcohol until they are 18 because it’s going to do this and it’s going to do that. It’s going to prohibit their development—all these things.” It is prevention. It is teaching parents the right way of doing things, because it is really easy to get caught in the whole trap of, “I want to be a cool parent, I want to be a friend or I want to be liked.” At the end of the day, you are a parent, so you have got to do what is right for your children. A lot of parents, for one reason or another, just do not really know what is the right thing to do because there are so many pathways that you can choose. These are the kinds of things that I would like to see a lot more of.

Ms Perkins: Certainly, the commissioner’s office has very much supported the importance of getting that sort of information out to parents.

The CHAIR: Jenni, I know we have done two of the three things that you are working on, have we not?

Ms Perkins: That is true; yes.

The CHAIR: But there is one more, and then we should move on to future priorities.

Ms Perkins: All right. Moving on, the other body of work that is near completion, which was commenced last year, is around a project on youth health. I am not sure whether the committee has previously been briefed on that. I think that emerged from an appreciation that increasingly—looking both internationally and at some good national examples—an understanding that the period of adolescence is really important. Some people have expressed it more as like, “It’s your last chance to intervene and help shape some of those healthy behaviours.” A softer reading I had of some commentary was more like it is the second chance. In terms of drawing on the fact of the importance of investing in the early years, your second major chance to influence those long-term behaviours is in that period of adolescence. So, the commissioner commenced a project last year which is around looking at consultations with youth in that 12 to 18 age group in terms of their experience accessing health services and their thoughts about how they think that could be improved so that they were in more youth-friendly environments. It also entailed a literature review of the evidence around what are some of the models in terms of looking at how youth health services are best delivered. That translated, I think, to over a thousand young people participating and putting forward their comments in that space. Part of the consultations that I have been involved in, in my time, has actually then been very detailed; talking with some of the key players working in this field around how best now to take some of that information and those thoughts forward. I am just close to finalising the summary of what will come out of that. I guess, broadly, that really highlights that, overall, the majority of young people are travelling relatively well in that health space, but there is a growing interest in seeing that there are ways that services can be better organised to provide a more youth-friendly environment that helps support young people actually being keen to access these services. So, that has been quite a big body of work that is close to completion. It has actually received a lot of support in our discussions to date across people within the health domain. It certainly generated a lot of interest. I anticipate that post that, we will probably do some work for the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, which is interested in looking at taking some of those ideas forward.

The CHAIR: When do you think that might be out for us to look at?

Ms Perkins: Very soon. Also, you will be familiar with the commissioner's "Speaking Out" publications, which are focused on what young people themselves have said. There will be a "Speaking Out" publication on looking at the voices of young people. I will pull forward the policy brief, so I anticipate that will be finalised within the month. That has been a big body of work as well for the office.

The CHAIR: We will look forward to getting that and to being able to put some comments through to Parliament once we have got it. I should just mention that we have three documents that we will be putting to Parliament shortly just as a response to the work that you have done in the last two reports and your annual report, so they will be coming up shortly, but you will read them. They are not revolutionary, but they might be in some respects. You will get to read them soon. Did you want to touch on what you see the next 12 months holding, Jenni?

Ms Perkins: Certainly, as I said, the priority has been to build on and complete the work that the office has been working on. There are two areas in particular that I am keen to focus on, and from my discussions with stakeholders, there has been broad support for that direction. One of those areas is around Aboriginal children and young people. Going back to what I was saying, the strong model that the office has worked on has been listening to the voices of children and young people and looking at the evidence base. I think the previous commissioner indicated to you that she had listened to or consulted over 6 000 children and young people over the last six years. All those consultations have always ensured that they have had a broad reach of representation of children and young people. What I would like to hear more directly is specifically the voice of Aboriginal children and young people to, more broadly, bring to the fore their voices. My observation would be that we do not necessarily always hear directly their voices. At the moment, I am talking with a number of people as to how best the commissioner can undertake that sort of discussion. For me, I am very much wanting to hear what their dreams and aspirations are in that space. That is one priority at work.

The CHAIR: Can I put my two bob's worth in there. The rest of the committee might want to as well. I have mentioned this before in consultations, but when you are looking at a vulnerable group, one of the areas that gets ignored a bit or just forgotten about is the GLBTI community within that vulnerable area. I am very familiar with some gay Aboriginal kids who have really, really struggled and remain struggling. I would hate to think that your consultation did not have a tentacle that enabled you to talk with that group specifically.

Ms Perkins: Yes, I understand that.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I have a view that kids are kids. You do not interview them because of their sexual preference; you interview them because you interview kids.

The CHAIR: You do.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Kids are kids. They think they are a kid first, probably. You just get a group of kids and interview them and if that is what they come out with, that is fair enough and you document it, and rightly so.

The CHAIR: I understand what you are saying, Robyn. We probably have to differ on that.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Yes, probably.

The CHAIR: I do think there is a very vulnerable group that gets ignored. When I speak to them at Durham Road and places like that, where they are already in a fragile situation, it kind of hits me cold that nobody has spoken to these kids about how it is for them. I am sure you will do the right thing.

Ms Perkins: We are currently looking at the best way for where and how to have those discussions. We are certainly very keen. The work of the office to date has been looking at how existing groups and people have got the direct contact for young people in that context. I also hope that it is an

opportunity to get a better appreciation and understanding of some of the young leaders who are emerging in this space. I am forming this as being a priority. We are doing that work at the moment to work out the best way to undertake that.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Maybe another way is to do the interviews with the Aboriginal children. Another piece of research you could undertake would be to look at vulnerable children and the group that Lisa has mentioned—I will say the wrong word if I say it —

The CHAIR: We know what you mean.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: — that group and children in care and another group of vulnerable children. Children with disability are a group of vulnerable children. You could do that research with the Aboriginal children in tandem with the vulnerable children to give them a voice as well.

Ms Perkins: As the committee would be aware, and I have identified this as a priority area, I am very much mindful that the act provides me with the oversight of the wellbeing of all children and young people, with a particular priority on Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable. I guess that is where I am seeing that, in my role, I really do want to be able to hear that voice and put that forward.

[10.50 am]

The CHAIR: Good. Sorry to interrupt you. Did you want to tell us about the second bit?

Ms Perkins: The second area has been appreciating some of the thinking and the work that is being done around the recommendations that came out of the Blaxell inquiry.

The CHAIR: Of course; we were going to ask you about this.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: She has come armed!

Ms Perkins: As part of looking at that space, I have been looking at what is happening in the national area around my fellow commissioners for children and young people, keeping in mind that across other states, we all have slightly different legislative provisions and therefore there are naturally some different roles that emerge. One of the things that I was particularly interested in is that the national body put forward last year some national principles that they supported to help to support child-safe organisations. Committee members may be familiar with these principles. In looking at those principles, my interest was to look at what role and what additional support the Commissioner for Children and Young People in WA might do in a WA sense in more broadly promoting those principles and maybe working alongside government and non-government organisations here around getting that broader understanding of that context of child-safe organisations. I think another area that might translate to helping further develop those principles is looking at developing information for parents in that space around what to look for in terms of the sorts of services and programs that children participate in. I think it builds on the work that the office has already done to date around the importance of having child-friendly complaints mechanisms, for example. It has been a very important component for organisations. Supporting the participation of children and having that environment where children and young people feel comfortable to raise issues and concerns are a very important part of establishing a child-safe environment. It has been interesting for me in the discussions I have had. When I have talked about it, generally there has been a real interest, particularly amongst organisations, to do some of that work jointly very much in that space of appreciating and looking at the sort of culture that organisations want to establish in that space and very much appreciating that it is broader than ensuring that you just have a working with children check and therefore you are done and that is all you really need to do. That is a body of work that we are starting to scope now. I hope to have further conversations in that space to look at how we progress that.

The CHAIR: I wanted to pick up on two things. I was lucky enough to have a chat with personnel from the George Jones Child Advocacy Centre with Basil and the crowd out there. When Natalie

first came back from the fellowship with the information on what child advocacy centres were all about and how they work—I was with WACOSS in those days—I just thought it was the most fantastic model. I just had a conversation so I can line up and say this is fact but I am hearing that they have not been able to engage with police to get this model going very effectively. Local police are great; the Armadale crowd is helping. I know you are familiar with the model so I will not go into it any detail. I am sure most of the committee would be. The cost efficiencies within police mean that they are refusing to take kids out there for interviews. They are still being interviewed in East Perth. There are big gaps in what could be a fantastic service, which is fully funded by the charity itself. There is no government funding. A bit of space is being rented by the centre, and that is going well. I am a bit dismayed that this great model, which is so intrinsically part of international good practise—it is not child protection really; it is dealing with child abuse, so it is the down side of it—is not being picked up or run with at the moment. It would be very interesting to have a closer look at why that has occurred and perhaps help to encourage all the parties to come together a bit. It is not a matter of dollars and cents when it comes to the abuse of children. Is there anything you could do in that respect to look at that model and find out where the gaps are? I am not trying to load you up with additional work.

There is another thing that the committee was really interested in finding out about. When Michelle was here previously—Caron, you probably remember this—we talked about the review, the Blaxell recommendations and all that stuff. Michelle said that you have put a submission in; that is fine. We have had the Public Service Commission hearing briefing us on the review. One of the things that would be extremely helpful for this committee is to have the commissioner's views on how you would pick up the Blaxell recommendations. I am not asking you to reveal anything that is secret. This committee would simply like to know what you have found out in your deliberations and your research over the last 12 months and how that might effectively be incorporated into your work. I will tell you why. We are not going anywhere to look at that information; we are just sitting here waiting to hear what would work, and I am not comfortable with that. I think this committee seriously needs to get a handle on how you might do this job in the future and the best group to give us that as far as I can see is your office.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I am smiling because Jenni is probably sitting there wondering what she is going to say.

Ms Perkins: In the 10 weeks or so that I have been involved, that is one of the things that I have been —

The CHAIR: Sure, and you have a whole office doing it.

Ms Perkins: Yes, but we are busily working on other projects. I have certainly given very close consideration to both understanding better the recommendations that came out of the Blaxell inquiry and looking at them in the context of what would work best. Clearly, in that space, I am starting to form my own views. Some of that has been around getting a better appreciation of some of the models that operate elsewhere, both nationally and internationally.

We are trying to take the approach of what principles would underpin how we might do that. Some of that sits within what the inquiry looked at. This is not about duplicating what works elsewhere; this is about making sure that whichever means we use is a child-friendly lens and we need to develop a system in response that is simple, easily understood and does not build complexity. We are looking at the principles around disclosure of child abuse and trying to minimise the number of times that young people tell that story. We need to understand how we approach that. Clearly, this is not about the office taking on an investigative role in terms of hearing those complaints and investigating them. When we look at that principle, it relates to the importance of not duplicating where those powers currently exist. It would be about how we help link people better into those sorts of mechanisms and maybe look at whether there is a need to have some kind of support or support advocacy to help those people who are most vulnerable to make those connections. I am not

sure whether that is giving you a concrete enough example. I guess I am being mindful of the importance in that context around trying to balance what it would mean for the resources of the office to do that.

Really quickly, the other thing that I am aware of that is helping inform me is that we know that —
[11.00 am]

The CHAIR: Jenni, excuse me. Sally needs to excuse herself.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yes, I am so sorry. It is very, very interesting but I have another commitment at 11.00 am.

Ms Perkins: The other work that we are aware of is that research shows that by nature children will not necessarily make a complaint, so it is about trying to work out what sort of outreach we would need to have, particularly with those very vulnerable young people, and get an understanding of where they are so people make that connection that, yes, that might be a place that you could go and raise an issue.

The CHAIR: That is really helpful. I have been talking with Lucy about whether she can support the committee by doing a desktop study into international models et cetera. Why bother when you guys have already done this work, and I really seriously do not want her tied up repeating what you have already done. If you can at the very least give us what you feel comfortable giving us in terms of reports, information and discussion papers about how other people do it, how other jurisdictions work.

Ms Perkins: I am very happy to share that with the committee. I have a wonderful table setting out the various options that other similar commissions do.

The CHAIR: That would be great, and any supporting documents that you might have collected; maybe someone from Russia sent you a really cool model. Can you get a package for us?

Ms Perkins: Yes.

The CHAIR: That would be most welcome. That is all I needed to ask.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I am very happy that Jenni is the acting children's commissioner because Jenni has a social work background. When I was minister, Jenni was the director general of Communities, which has a broad view of working with community. We set up the Redress administration scheme, which caused me some heartache, and caused Jenni some heartache along the way. You understand abuse and abused children, abused adults and adults who have been abused as children. I think that you are in a place in which you can do some very good work on behalf of the government for the community out there. I like what you said about the Blaxell inquiry and how you are going to bring that into the children's commissioner role because that is exactly how I would do it. You do not need to recreate anything else; you just need to take the referrals, really. We all know that it is very hard for a child to come forward anyway. They just do not. It is another friendly option.

The CHAIR: Thank you both very much. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days of the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you both so much for coming.

Hearing concluded at 11.04 am
