

**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, 10 SEPTEMBER 2014**

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 10.22 am

Ms JENNI PERKINS

Commissioner for Children and Young People, examined:

Ms CARON IRWIN

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

The DEPUTY CHAIR: The Chair has just popped out for a moment so I will read this opening statement. 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 this 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 would like to introduce myself, Hon Robyn McSweeney. On my right sits the Chair, Lisa Baker, the member for Maylands who will arrive in a minute. On my left is Eleni Evangel, the member for Perth; and Hon Sally Talbot, a member for South West Region, as am I. The Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People is a joint committee of the Parliament of Western Australia. 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 a 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 for you today, I would like to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the Details of Witness form?

The Witnesses: Yes, we have.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

[Ms L.L. Baker took the chair.]

The CHAIR: Hello to both of you. Thank you both for coming. It has been a while since we have caught up so the purpose of the catch up is to find out how things have been going and what you have been up to. I know, and my committee knows too because we have received the wellbeing framework report, and of course I came to the briefing—thank you so much, it was a fantastic opportunity. We would like to get a bit of information from you about that occasion and about the contents and what you found. I think that would be a good place to start. I would also like to really talk to you about your recent trip to the Fitzroy and what issues came up as a result of that. The committee, the member for Perth and others have been very interested in the issues around

FASD and the work of the Liliwan project and how close the results are to coming out on that. We would also like to chat to you about the review and any initial thoughts that you have about the review, and that is about it. We might ask you to start talking about the wellbeing monitoring framework, because that was kind of chronologically the first bit.

Ms Perkins: I am happy to talk about that and thanks for the opportunity to come to meet with you and, certainly, I would like to report back on some of the other projects that we have been doing over that time, and you have covered more in that context. First I will talk about the wellbeing monitoring framework. Members received a copy and I hope that has been bedtime reading for you. In tabling that report, being a second edition—as I outlined when I met with the committee previously—it is a big body of the work that the office undertakes. It is made possible by the close cooperation that we have across a range of agencies in particular, who inform the steering group that oversees the development of those indicators. In general, all that data is already in the public domain and it is something that agencies themselves hold that they very methodically and carefully sign off on in order for us to incorporate in that report. The strength of the wellbeing monitoring framework is that it brings together in one place a collection of data that is already primarily really available. Our initial intent in pulling that framework together is that that becomes an effective resource for Parliament, for government, for policy makers and non-government services in terms of having a better handle on where some of the needs and the trends are. The companion document or the building blocks document has also been around where some of the solutions might rest. That is our intent and why we then run the seminars. Each time we have done them—Madam Chair you attended one of those—they have always been fully subscribed and, when we evaluate them, positively received. The seminars help people to understand how they can best use that data. For us that has been a really successful model. The work my office is doing at the moment with regard to the information is to start looking at preparing policy briefs around particular priority areas. We are just commencing that.

The first brief that we are preparing is around looking at the data with regard to Aboriginal children and young people, particularly around health and education. Again, the intent of the work we do in that space is more to try to condense what is a very large report and collection of data into more bite-sized bits of information and a sense of where some of the policy issues might be so that that is readily available for us to then start working along with other stakeholders to help them look at that information. That is a start. Some of the other areas that we are initially prioritising involve looking at some of the data around obesity. We had a very interesting meeting recently with Healthway and getting across some of the research and data within that space with regard to obesity and children. One of the priority policy briefs we are looking at pulls together the data from the wellbeing monitoring framework. That is just an example of where we are taking some of those steps. The flipside of it is that it is also good to see where WA children and young people are actually doing well. I think that is the other utility of that data. That is the body of the work that we are looking at—the policy briefs we anticipate over the next 12 months. It will be 10 to 12 briefs that we will pull together over that time. The process that we will use in pulling that together will then, hopefully, generate some seminars and discussions around those briefs to help look at some of the issues in more detail.

[10.30 am]

The CHAIR: With the policy briefs, if I can just go back. That is very helpful, thank you, Jenni. You said you are starting with the Aboriginal children, and the focus of the seminar was very clearly around the findings of that which showed some pretty poor indicators. Whilst everybody is saying, “Don’t panic”, they were pretty poor indicators, which is no-one’s fault; it is just the way things are. With the policy brief that you are putting together on that one—I think I would understand how that one would work—what are the other ones that you think might come after that?

Ms Perkins: I was just looking and refreshing myself. We are just working on these and I guess trying to both look at the data to see what is the priority but also linking it to other work that might be done. As I said, looking at Aboriginal children and young people specifically around health and then looking at education. We are looking at one around obesity. There are a number of indicators there that look at both physical activity and also look at the impact of obesity. That is actually quite a growing concern. There is another policy brief identified around the indicator around what we called “loved and safe, the indicators around domestic violence and child protection, and seeing that we would like to maybe look at pulling that together, tying in some of the mental health and resilience. So that will be a focus for us later this year. Youth justice in that space will be another one. Members will be across the data in there which really, you know, highlights the growing concerns in that space. Housing will come through as being a priority area. That is our initial scoping. I guess as time goes on, we will grab there. What we did last time, when we put the first edition out, we did a similar approach. I think that translated, from memory, into around about 12 or so policy briefs that we worked on really over the two years post the release of that first edition. I guess, at the same time, when I am going out and talking with a number of government and non-government providers that is giving me an indication of where some of our priorities might be focused in terms of where they are identifying some of those needs.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I found it really valuable looking at the indicators, to look at the information in a more strategic way. Because we are now down the road a bit, to start to look at what is changing and what is not changing. I think that I spoke to you briefly when I was at seminar about some experience that I have recently had. I have a copy of my report from my travels that I will give you. One of the questions that I was exploring was that the big issues in other countries, in other developed countries anyway, have been around child protection issues and historical abuse cases that have been in the media and continue to be in the media there. I mentioned that the UK has 200 cases listed for hearing that involve a range of people. The most recent ones that we have seen have been very public figures from the entertainment areas: Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris, and now we see Cliff Richard is being investigated as well. There is clearly a huge and growing concern in those places around what happened 25 years ago. My questions are: How do we actually know that it is any different for children now in terms of having those conversations? How do we know that they are being heard any differently or any better? And how do we know that those sorts of instances will not just be repeated now, and in 20 years’ time there will be another upheaval and we will be reporting on famous people who have misbehaved in a criminal sense? That is something I was really keen to ask you about, Jenni, if you have had a chance to think about that in any detail?

Ms Perkins: I am, sort of, conscious and, I guess, what is coming through the royal commission is maybe starting to give us some insight around that. The comment I would make is that clearly what is coming forward is not just historical examples but more recent examples. That is what prompted the work—one of the priority areas I flagged with committee last time—that we were just ready to commence, and that we have now commenced, around looking at child-safe, child-friendly organisations. So my interest in identifying that as a priority in this space was partly linked around what was coming through the royal commission in the public domain, but also building on the work that the office had previously done with regard to work around a child bringing their complaints and working with organisations to look at how they developed better systems in order to be able to both have an environment where children and young people are comfortable and supported to come forward around any examples of abuse. In that same time, the Australian Children’s Commissioners and Guardians had provided to the royal commission a range of principles that they saw would underpin child-safe organisations. I have identified with the office that there was an opportunity, and that it was really a priority for us to look at working across government and non-government organisations in WA to look at getting a better understanding of what a child-safe organisation might be. We have started that project; we have a steering group across government and non-government and there has been a lot of support for the work that the commission and my office is

doing in that regard. We have surveyed over 100 local organisations, ranging from sporting groups through to culture and the arts groups, through to more welfare-based organisations to get a better understanding of what they have already got in place in order to look at what a child-safe environment framework might be. We have also as a part of that survey, sought from them what they saw would be helpful in order for them to have a stronger framework around child safe. I guess the outcomes from that was very much around a wide degree of support for looking at bringing together some of that information in a more readily-accessed way. That has been really positive. We are just commencing now a survey of children and young people. We are working with 13 organisations across the state who are involved directly with a broad range of children and young people across age groups to get a better understanding from children and young people about what is a safe organisation in terms of their understanding and what would help in that space. I not quite sure that that directly answers your questions, but I think through that work my anticipation is that we will get a better understanding of some of those factors. I am happy through the Commissioner for Children and Young People to be helping to facilitate some of that discussion across organisations who are starting to share some of their experiences and approaches.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that was very helpful. Forgive me if I am sounding ignorant in this area, I am just trying to kind of explore to get to the bottom of it. How do we know that children will be listened to any differently by parents or family members when they disclose information? Some of the work that you do on your Thinker in Residence program is really effective in attracting parents to have a discussion about really hard issues. I was wondering if there was any capacity in your Thinker in Residence program to source someone who is doing the best work in the world at the moment on looking closely at the issue of that relationship between parents and children. I do not even know where to start doing it, but you guys are the experts. Robyn might have something to add. Is there anything at that more personal level within families that the commissioner's office has a role to contribute?

[10.40 am]

Ms Perkins: Madam Chair, I have a quick comment around the Thinker in Residence program. We are in the process of further identifying who would be a good person to be in that space. I will certainly take on board whether that could be a priority area, and give some consideration as to who might be there in that space.

Last week I was at the National Protective Behaviours Conference, where there were a number of discussions and presentations around some of the very good work that is being done in terms of looking at educating children in particular around protective behaviours, but in that context, recognising very much so that that discussion is a discussion to be had with parents too, in terms of helping parents get a better understanding and greater awareness of how they might have those discussions, so I would concur with you that it is a high priority area. At this stage, I think one of the challenges is to answer the question you are asking. I am aware that one of the earlier reports from the royal commission highlights that it can be an average of 22 years before people may come forward in disclosing abuse as a child. I guess the question is: what can we do in order to actually provide a better environment so that it does not occur in the first place and/or, if it does occur, that there is a more receptive environment for them?

The CHAIR: Very succinctly put—far more succinctly than I was able to describe it! That is exactly what I am interested in.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: In my experience, there are three ages where they come forward: one is when they are 16, another is when they have their first child, and one is when they are about 40. But for some it is their deepest, darkest secret, and to tell somebody is so very hard, so when you are looking at a child's viewpoint, it is so very hard for them. The simplest method—and it is not implemented anywhere in Australia to a large degree—is the cut-out of five fingers. Two have to be the parents: “Who do you feel safe with?” One is mummy, one is daddy. The other three, the

child choses. You put it on the fridge, and every six months you change that because it might be daddy who is not the safest; it might be dad's best friend who is not the safest who is written on it. Every six months you must change it and ask them, "Who do you feel safe with?" It is so simple and effective and it is just not used.

Ms Perkins: It is an important role that parents have in that space, so in the work that we are doing around looking at child-safe organisations, we are very conscious that some of that work that hopefully will come through will be to help parents have a better understanding of what they want to be looking for in terms of what their children and young people are involved in.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Before we leave the question the Chair asked about the work you are doing to survey child-safe organisations, I am constantly pulled back to the title of the royal commission, which is the "Institutional Responses", and I am just wondering, listening to you describe what you are doing, whether you can be confident that the organisations that are now being exposed as not having been child safe in the last couple of decades since we made the not unreasonable assumption that most organisations had got themselves at least to that basic point of safety—given that what you have described relies mainly on self-reporting, how can you be confident that there are not still those Salvation Army—YMCA, I think, was one of them—big, national organisations who had major flaws in their child protection policies—how can you be sure that they are not still sliding under the radar because they are self-reporting?

Ms Perkins: Some of the discussions that we have been having, and looking at the sorts of materials that we may then pull together to help develop that, I guess it is taking that three-pronged approach around how you might describe a child-safe organisation. One aspect of that is that you really want to ensure that you create an environment where abuse does not occur; second, you want to have an environment where, if abuse has occurred, children and young people have the confidence and support to come forward; and the third arm is around looking at, if people do come forward, raising concerns that there is an appropriate response and people are heard. That is just that framework. In that context, we are very conscious that people are coming forward to us and clearly understanding that this is not just about having the right policies or the right guidelines; it is about how does that translate to the overall culture of the whole organisation, and in that context is about how boards are engaged and have that understanding through to what is happening on the ground. I guess those are the sorts of discussions that we are having. Down the track, I think how that translates to what environments might exist or appetites are around, does that translate to the need for formal auditing independently, or does it translate to self-checks? I guess at this stage I am not seeing that. The commissioner's office is in that dialogue space having that role. We are really, at the moment, just trying to work out that there is a common understanding and people at least identify what they can do to ensure that three-pronged approach.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: So this is really an area that is evolving in a contemporary sense.

Ms Perkins: I think so, and fairly nationally. It is also evolving from people identifying—it is interesting, some of the earlier discussions we have had in testing some of the consultations with children and young people. Some of the discussions we have had were with 10-year-olds, who have said, "Oh, yes. That's one of those organisations that people need to have a working with children check." We have been interested in understanding (a), that there is that knowledge and understanding within that age group, and (b), I guess, in appreciating that is not a sure-fire—you know, there are many other aspects that we want to look at.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yes, because when you hear some of that evidence, it is obvious that people who had jobs as managers of this area of engagement with children, if they had shown the same degree of incompetence as a plumber or electrician, they would be dead because they would have killed themselves at work. It is such a massive failure of the system. As you say, I think the key is the cultural change, is it not?

Ms Perkins: Yes, and that is at times less tangible. We are very aware that it is not just a matter of having the right policy, and —

Hon SALLY TALBOT: How do you devise policy to drive cultural change?

Ms Perkins: I think that is one of the things we need to have that discussion around really, and a lot of that is around leadership and awareness, and really ensuring that this is not just, “Yep, we’ve got the policy in place, end of story”; it is about how do you regularly revisit that and get a better understanding? My strong sense is that a lot of this rests upon looking at how effectively you are engaging children and young people and how much they are able to participate in what is happening in the organisation. I think that is a really important safeguard.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Have you got any models of policymaking driving social change? Surely we do not need to reinvent the wheel.

Ms Perkins: No, and I would also certainly hasten to assure you that I see that a lot of the discussions we are having are not about us then going away and writing something completely new; it is also about identifying that there are some good resources that exist in multiple places, so I can see that ultimately what the result for us will be is that we have the opportunity to bring some of that together collectively so it is more simply accessed and there is an ongoing dialogue that is existing across the various organisations in that context.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Perhaps if I can just give an example to show how difficult it is. Paedophiles do not go around with horns on their head and they do not go around with it emblazoned on their chest. Parkerville is a very good organisation. There was a man found on the Parkerville board not so long ago who had charges. It is Basil Hannah’s organisation, and he would have been as horrified as anybody else when he found out. I am not sure of these charges, but the man certainly had a record and he was put off that board. Parkerville is looked upon as being absolutely beyond reproach; it has all the cultural changes, it has wonderful people there, yet this man was on its board, so it is very, very difficult. You can do everything you think you can to pick paedophiles out, but, unfortunately, they will get in.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: But that is a good example of the kind of cultural change where that person, once it was discovered, he was not allowed to continue. That is the horror that has been uncovered by the royal commission—that people have continued in jobs for decades when they are so incompetent in terms of their professional expertise.

[10.50 am]

Ms E. EVANGEL: Just looking at the environments in which these incidences occur, when you mentioned the times in one’s life where victims are most likely to report it, do we see much reporting when they live with children—like, when it is happening with little children? What is the rate of reporting when they are really little? That was the first point.

The second point was: looking, again at environment, are we seeing higher incidences of these horrendous acts occurring in an outside-of-the-home environment as compared to within the home environment, and then the comparison of reporting? Is it easier for a victim to report if something has actually occurred outside of the home environment as compared to the actual home environment?

Thirdly, I was also interested in—for example, when one goes to the doctor for a pap smear, usually there are two people in place when that is occurring. Have we got to a point where it is just not wise for children to be dealing one-on-one with adults? When you are dealing with a child—whether it is in a school environment or in an external activity environment, should children be left alone with just one adult? Should we be looking at—not to say that every adult is going to be doing something inappropriate, but I do not think that every doctor is going to be doing something inappropriate, but because incidences have occurred we have now got to that point where there are certain circumstances where you just need to have two adults rather than the one. Is that what we need to be

looking at, too, with children? It might sound a bit overboard, but at the same time, is it something that we should look at, because even one case of something happening is one case too many?

The CHAIR: Did you get the three?

Ms E. EVANGEL: Sorry, it was a lot.

The CHAIR: Well done.

Ms Perkins: I do not have the data in front of me to answer some of the questions that you have asked. My comment would be—I am sure you would be across this, and I am sure, Deputy Chair, you would have more knowledge than me —

Ms E. EVANGEL: I do not need you to give straight facts and figures, but just in general.

Ms Perkins: What is known is that the vast majority of abused children and young people would be from someone that they know; be that in a family environment. As the Chair was commenting earlier on, the prime focus really at the moment is around that institutionalised response. The work that I am doing is around child-safe organisations which, as I said, the reality is that that would not be where the vast amount of abuse would occur.

Your comment around them looking at what effectively you are describing is that—yes, increasingly a number of organisations are developing what they would see as being child-safe policies which are around looking at minimising or not having situations where a young person is in a one-on-one situation with a staff member; so that is not uncommon at the moment in terms of how a number of organisations, in short, build those safeguards through, which is both protecting all players in that context. I mean, education would be a really good example in terms of the guidelines they have put in place for the way teachers may work. They would look at minimising those situations.

Ms E. EVANGEL: Also with the reporting, do we see young people actually coming forward?

Ms Perkins: Through my office, we do not have that. We do know that the vast majority of issues that will come forward in the broader complaints area will invariably not be from children and young people themselves; it will be from significant others or adults who most often will bring forward those issues to formal complaint processes.

Ms E. EVANGEL: Of course.

Ms Perkins: In terms of identifying.

Ms E. EVANGEL: But are they making the initial complaint?

Ms Perkins: Yes, I am not in a position to comment in that regard. My suspicion—and I think the Deputy Chair would have some background around that—in understanding that they are at a young age.

The CHAIR: I was just thinking that we might, as a result of your question, engage with the mandatory reporting people and ask them to come in and have a chat to us about what they found through the years since we have had the mandatory reporting regime in place—what the results are. Thanks.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: That is right; it is rather ad hoc.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Before we leave the wellbeing monitoring framework, I think we sent you—did we send you the questions?

The CHAIR: No, because I think we wanted to keep on the hop today.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I do not know whether you noticed, but when I read the report, when I read the update, I picked out particularly your comments about the lack of stats on mental health, mental illness.

Ms Perkins: Yes, I did.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: You probably saw that I asked the minister and she said, “No, no, no. You’ve got it wrong.”

Ms Perkins: Can I respond to that? I guess in the context of that, really, is the comment that we had there was noting that overall, across it, there are not—and it is acknowledged—that there is not broad data available. There are data available with regard to what is reported or what is coming through the health system and those occasions when young people present; but in terms of having a broader measure around understanding in terms of mental health, that continues to be a challenge in that sense.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: What do we need to put in place as far as data capture goes, because I think that the minister’s answer looks to me as if, basically, should I give the distinction between patients in the public system, where that data is obviously different, than people in the private system. I felt you were saying something a little more complicated than that.

Ms Perkins: I think we are sort of identifying that there is broad information that suggests that one in five children may have a sort of mental health condition, a diagnosis, but I guess not all of those will end up presenting for actual support through a hospital system; so the health data is there.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: But school principals, for example, have a pretty canny idea about what percentage of their student population has got a mental illness.

Ms Perkins: And I guess that data is not necessarily recorded or noted.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I guess my question is: are you talking about collection across agencies or is it something that we could put a specific recommendation to the health department or the Mental Health Commission that they ought to be doing?

Ms Perkins: I am not sure. Caron, do you want to make a comment in terms of what went into here?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I do not want to waste time, but if there is somebody that you can recommend that we can talk to, if I can persuade my colleagues here that we ought to pursue it.

Ms Irwin: In the inquiry into mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, a recommendation was made that referenced the previous research undertaken by Professor Zubrick at the Telethon Kids Institute as a whole-of-population survey that analysed parents disclosing whether they thought their child had mental health—I do not want to say “illness”.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Issues.

Ms Irwin: Yes; issues—from birth up to 18 years, and the recommendation in the inquiry is to repeat that survey. That is one way you would get a comprehensive survey of the mental health of the population under 18.

The CHAIR: We might chance tack now, slightly. What do you think of the TAB—no, I am joking!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: You choked our clerk!

The CHAIR: I frightened her. Just to follow up on our reports, commissioner. The second report—delighted to see that you have made some indication that you are going to undertake a review of the implementation of the recommendations from the mental health and wellbeing review. I think our overall comment was, “Gee, wouldn’t it be nice if we could work out how effective the work has really been, and some really strong measures of that.” Could you just talk a little bit about how that is going?

Ms Perkins: That is right. Yes, Chair, we have commenced that. I guess, like you, I got into the role and I saw that it was timely to actually do a more detailed review of the implementation of

those recommendations, both looking at it in terms of identifying and acknowledging the progress that has been made across a number of those—identifying the current status, and potentially identifying where some of those recommendations may be no longer as contemporary and what the future might be, and at the same time, as part of that, as part of the methodology, give some determination as to how the inquiry itself, which is a pretty significant part of provision under the legislation for the Commissioner for Children and Young People, I guess, try to get some measure in terms of how effective the inquiry itself was in terms of bringing those issues forward. We have just commenced that. We have had one meeting of the reference group, which is broadly drawn from the previous expert reference group, that was a part of that, because we thought it was important to have a degree of continuity. We have some new members and we have got a three-way methodology that we are looking at as how we actually triangulate getting the information through; so it is quite an exciting if not rather complex methodology. We are just in the process now of pulling together requests for information that we will be forwarding through the various departments who have carriage of the actual recommendations, along with looking at doing some focus groups with that more tricky question: do people see that the inquiry itself was effective. My intent is that that is work that we will be doing over the next three months and we hope to be able to have that completed early next year in terms of being able to report back.

The CHAIR: That's very exciting. I think that answers what we had said was an area that could be a bit stronger in the commission itself; so that is really great. On report No 3, which was the sexualisation of children report, I am sure that you like us got a barrage of really cranky gamers on email saying, "You are trying to shut down our gaming capacity," which completely misses the fact that we actually haven't done a report; we were just reporting on your report—and you were not really doing any pure research, you were just reporting on other people's reports. So it was all a bit—I think they are a bit sensitive now in the gaming section. We were interested in hearing if you have had any feedback as a result of putting your report out—well, we put it on our site too, I think.

[11.00 am]

Ms Perkins: Not directly. I mean, the committee would be aware that the office has done previous work and work with the previous Department for Communities around raising awareness around these issues and information for parents in that space. Obviously, it continues to be an area of interest for people. It is one of the most frequently—not quite, but almost the most frequently—downloaded document that we have—not the report that we prepared, but the previous work that we have done continues to be an area where people go and get information. But in terms of a specific response, Chair, in terms of the report, probably not that I could report.

The CHAIR: Okay. We did receive, and this committee discussed at our last meeting, from *theguardian* in the UK information about a music video online age-rating pilot scheme in the UK, so I was just going to pass on some information to you that we thought you might be interested in having a look at. It is voluntary. It lasts for three months. If it is successful, the government hopes to call on digital service providers to link filters to the age ratings so that videos of certain content can be blocked. I think our committee would be really interested in what your comments are in relation to something like that. Should we be advocating to have something similar? We do not expect you to say anything now, so maybe just have a bit of a think about it.

Ms Perkins: Great; thanks. I think it was an area that was covered in the inquiry report that we prepared, and so it is an issue.

The CHAIR: Yes. I think we should move on to talk about your trip, if everybody is okay from my side of the round table on that one. Would you like to just free range over your Kimberley trip?

Ms Perkins: Thanks, I would like to. People would be aware that I had my first opportunity to actually go to the West Kimberley, and I thought that was really important. People may know, just as background, that there are over 10 000 children and young people within the West Kimberley, and 57 per cent of those children and young people are Aboriginal children, compared with

seven per cent across the whole state. So it is a very significant population and it was a very good opportunity for me to get a better understanding of some of the issues for those young people in that area. I went to Bidiyadanga. People may know that there is a community just south of Broome. I was told it is the largest single community of Aboriginal people across five language groups, so it was a very good opportunity to talk with them; and obviously Broome and across to Fitzroy Crossing, where I had the opportunity particularly to meet June Oscar, who is one of the ambassadors for children and young people.

In that, I guess a broad comment I would make was that wherever I went, I was constantly impressed with a high degree of personal commitment by the various staff and workers that I met. I was particularly impressed with a number of emerging Aboriginal young leaders, who are really taking in many of those communities quite a strong leadership role in looking at the development of more culturally responsive programs. And while it was clear that the capacity of many of those workers was really quite stretched in quite sort of challenging areas, there were also a lot of examples of really good, positive collaboration going on that was clearly to the benefit of children and young people. I digress slightly, knowing that a highlight for me was being welcomed by the years 4 and 5 student councillors from the primary school at part of the Fitzroy Valley District High School, and in particular one young boy who very proudly informed me and welcomed me to his country in explaining the importance of the Bunuba land that we were standing on. I just found that quite moving in terms of he was a fantastic example of a very strong and very proud young boy.

I had a round-table discussion with the high school students from the school at Fitzroy Valley, and they told me that they wanted more shops, particularly clothes and sporting shops—they sounded very much like my son and daughter in particular—less rubbish, more buses, more jobs for young people and adults, more activities and less children missing school, especially boys. So they were saying that in the context in high school, in particular, there were, I think, only about three boys in their high school gathering, and the rest of the students around the table were girls. I guess the comment I would make on what was most startling to me in all of the communities that I visited was that a strong focus virtually uppermost in everyone's discussion was around the concerns around school attendance and engagement or disengagement from school. That sort of whole education space would come through in any discussion, not necessarily discussions around education, as being one of the highest priorities for this generation of children and young people. From those discussions I certainly got an understanding that what people were drawing for me was that it is a complex agenda. People talked about a range of factors that they saw that were contributing to low attendance. You know, one factor was the impact on communities, the community events, or the impact of sorry business in terms of that; but that was not the only factor that was happening there. Many people emphasised the importance of parents being more engaged and supportive of education, but it was also highlighted that it is not just the challenge of getting children to school; it is actually also about what happens when they arrive. And if you are talking about children and young people who have been long-term disengaged, then there is a need for a range of supports and to work out how they get re-engaged.

It was just fascinating to have those discussions at all different levels, that that would be the one issue that would come through. And it was clear that this was therefore a space where it was a multifaceted response that was needed, which is that students, parents, community and the school really needed to all be in that space to see what was there. The flipside is that I met with a number of very well established programs that are clearly working very hard to positively engage young people. The committee would be familiar with the Clontarf boys academy, the Role Models and Leaders Australia Broome Girls Academy and Fitzroy Valley Girls Academy. They are all very positively engaging young people. I had the chance to visit the PCYC Broome Learning Centre, and that was a really inspiring example of a local collaborative program that was developed with the school, the police and the corrective services that were all putting funding and staff support towards a very, very vulnerable group of young people and demonstrating some really encouraging success

about re-engaging some of those young people and/or looking at alternative pathways for them towards employment, which was working really well.

Another highlight was visiting, again as an example in the school space, the Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School, which June Oscar invited me to visit, which is just outside Fitzroy Valley. That is a very creative partnership between the local Bunuba community and Wesley College in Melbourne around a residential school for a number of Aboriginal people who were quite disengaged from education before they got there; and also with Wesley students from Melbourne coming up for term time. It has a very impressive, very flexible approach, almost like “whatever it took” to re-engage those young people, which translates to the whole school uplifting from Yiramalay and spending the term down in Melbourne as part of that; and they were starting to deliver and receive some really amazing outcomes.

The CHAIR: Does anybody do that here?

Ms E. EVANGEL: We should; I was thinking that too.

Ms Perkins: Certainly, it was clearly a very interesting model and sort of working, by all reports, very well. So it was very inspiring, particularly talking with the staff there.

On the more concerning side, in each of the communities it was concerning to hear examples of where the basic needs for some children, such as safe housing and food, were not being met. There are a number of positive examples of a range of school-based breakfast programs and volunteer-based meals programs that were targeted to children from particularly vulnerable families. And I guess, to be frank, there was also a discussion about what some of the longer term strategies were to better support families in that space so that they could provide for their children. I note that the West Kimberley is a large area, so clearly I could not say that I had the opportunity to therefore meet and talk with everyone. A particular focus of my discussions while I was there was more around youth and, along with the discussions that came forward around education, the ongoing highlight was around where the opportunities and activities were for young people to be engaged in. I did have the opportunity at the invitation of June Oscar to visit the Baya Gawi children and family centre in Fitzroy Crossing and that is supporting a number of programs around children in that zero to three space, in particular.

[11.10 am]

Hon SALLY TALBOT: The one that is closing down?

Ms Perkins: I was going to say that it was, yes, against a backdrop of a degree of uncertainty around the centre’s long-term funding, and against that backdrop the staff are very proudly talking to me about the leaps and bounds—gains—that they had observed around, particularly the three-year-olds, reading and literacy and described to me how the children were voluntarily grabbing books to read themselves to sleep in the afternoon.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Why is it closing?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I suspect it is funding. It is part of Closing the Gap funding.

Ms Perkins: It is around Closing the Gap funding, so it is part of the five children and family centres that were completed in WA and I think 38 across the country. There is a degree of uncertainty at this stage in terms of the funding. One half of the centre, if people are familiar with the design of that, is linked around all these programs for children —

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: It is at that beautiful big centre, is it not?

Ms Perkins: Yes. The other half is around a safe place where there is a range of health-based providers now and parenting programs for parents. The day that I was there, they had an open fire, cooking kangaroo tails; the highlight for the families that were involved on that day.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I got one of those, I think?

Ms Perkins: In that space, a number of people highlighted funding challenges they faced. I guess this is the reality, in particular around managing funding that was often only short term and the implications that had for continuity of programs and continuity of staff and the frustration or lack of understanding at different times that they thought funding bodies had of appreciating the particular context of delivering services in those very remote areas—the impact of distance and what that means practically; for example, wear and tear on vehicles and how therefore you are talking about a very different context and the impact of the cost of food. For myself, I guess having had a long-term background involved in working and funding in the community sector, I will admit too that it is not until you actually get physically in that space that you then appreciate what some of those issues are and the importance of looking at how we develop that understanding.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I hope it does not close, because it is a beautiful centre.

Ms Perkins: I am preparing a more detailed report, as the office always puts forward a public report, but I wanted to share that with you to get the opportunity also to talk about one of the other areas of discussion, which was around the impact of foetal alcohol syndrome there. There is still concern around some of the challenges in looking at what supports are available to that cohort of young people now who have FASD, and the really positive work that is being done around looking at the prevention of that.

The CHAIR: There are two issues I would like to pick up on; the first is just a practical one. How is June and is she in Canada permanently or part time? What is the story at the moment?

Ms Perkins: I cannot comment with regard to the whereabouts of June Oscar!

The CHAIR: I just thought she might have said, you know!

Ms Perkins: It was certainly really good to be able to see on the ground the impact of the leadership that June Oscar has provided and the work and the vision—the work that she is doing. As an aside, I was blown away by the community garden that she established at the back of the women's resource centre there. There is an amazingly well-established garden that has students with disabilities from the school nearby who come and undertake work in the garden as part of developing skills for them, and the discussion with her staff around one of the priorities they are identifying now. They are starting to make positive moves around some of those indicators of Aboriginal children at birth, but identifying at 12 months that some of those indicators were reducing. I guess they are seeing the impact of diet and some of their vision around looking at how you can get more locally grown produce to help provide better food access.

The CHAIR: This is the second question: is there any discussion about the suicide rate, particularly within youth in the Kimberley, Jenni?

Ms Perkins: Not directly. While I was in Broome, I met the really impressive organisation around Alive and Kicking Goals, and talked with the board that were involved and some of the workers working in that program. They were in the process of launching a trial of what sounded like a really innovative app around helping support young people in the mental health space. Again, the discussions we had were around the work that they were doing in looking at more preventive work around building that cultural resilience. I was really interested in hearing that because I was very much aware of it, working with Dr Michael Ungar when he was across, and looking at those factors—what are the known key factors for resilience for young people—and the importance of the strength of that cultural identity being uppermost.

Ms E. EVANGEL: With reference to the education and rate of children not attending school, did they provide reasons? What are you thinking in terms of addressing that? Firstly, did they provide any reasons why they believe the attendance is lower, and what we can do?

Ms Perkins: What I took away was that there are multiple reasons and it is really complex. The immense part of it in some of the communities would be the impact of what might be happening in the community, which might translate to a range of reasons for community members

to be absent for some period of time, and so that is impacting. In fact, it was interesting—I did meet with the director general of Education yesterday and one of the comments that she made was that some of their data would suggest that when children are actually in the community at home, their attendance is quite high. The impact can be when they are out of the community for a range of community and cultural obligations. That is what impacts, but that is one factor. I guess, what I am sharing with the committee is more that it is clearly a strong focus at the moment, virtually in every community, and appreciating that it is not a simple response.

The CHAIR: I am going to suggest that we finish your responses on the Kimberley and spend the next 10 minutes getting some impressions from you about the Public Sector Commissioner's review. Let me get some responses from you, just preliminary responses, on the review and your thoughts about the implementation of the recommendations. Given that the commissioner's role is independent of government, it would be good to hear what your thoughts are about the review.

Ms Perkins: Thanks for that and it is obviously good to have the review out in the public space and I note that the Attorney General has provided an opportunity for public comment for three months at the same time. I guess, for me, there are a few points. It was good to see the level of support for the role of the commissioner and support for its independence. The majority of the recommendations there, certainly, address a number of the sort of administrative tidy up of the legislation, so that is really helpful for the office in terms of how we move forward. The recommendation about what role the commissioner may undertake with regard to education and outreach for children and young people around complaints around abuse and any further role with regard to taking complaints in this space: I guess, for me seeing the work that the office has previously done and is currently doing around the child safe work and the work we have done around the participation of children and young people in complaints guidelines, I think would see that that quite comfortably accommodates undertaking a slightly broader education and outreach role in that space. I am very conscious of and, I guess, one of the things I want to think more carefully about is the need to ensure whatever the commissioner does in that space that it is complementary of what is happening or supplements what is quite a significant body of work, I think, that already takes place, and that therefore we are not duplicating, because I think that that would not be an effective use of the resource that we have in the office.

I guess those are my initial thoughts. I note and I am pleased that the recommendations make it very clear, identifying that it is not appropriate for the commissioner to take on an investigative role in terms of complaints. I think that is a really important principle and very helpful for looking at that role. So, they are my initial comments in that space.

The CHAIR: I just have a couple of questions. From the independent office of the commissioner, are you happy for a two-year lead time to take that role forward?

[11.20 am]

Ms Perkins: In terms of the Attorney indicating that —

The CHAIR: Can we afford to wait two years before we have a good system for reporting?

Ms Perkins: I think against the backdrop that we must give recognition that there is a significant amount of work that has been done and is being done. The example I would give, say, going back to some of the earlier response from the Blaxell inquiry and the work that Education has been able to do with regard to looking at developing, and in consultation with children and young people, which is really a positive model in terms of how they can help address and better communicate and provide a much more supportive environment for children and young people who are currently involved in country hostels is a positive step forward.

I would hope that the priority work we are doing around looking at child safe organisations will use that as an opportunity to broaden that approach across other organisations. So, I guess, I am not uncomfortable about not launching into a space where there still, I think, needs to be careful

consideration and understanding of some of the progress that has been made since the original report by Blaxell. I want to sort of try to get better across myself what is coming from the royal commission in terms of what would be most helpful in that space.

The CHAIR: Can you tell us what “shortly” means in your view in terms of the appointment of the commissioner?

Ms Perkins: Look, I have got no inside knowledge in terms of what that might be. I am conscious that my original appointment was for 12 months to act in that role.

The CHAIR: Is that through until March, is it?

Ms Perkins: December.

The CHAIR: So, as of December we do not have a commissioner again.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: No, Jenni will just be reappointed until —

The CHAIR: The assumption is that Jenni will be reappointed.

Ms Perkins: There will be a commissioner in that space.

The CHAIR: As of December, we still do not have a permanent appointment, so it will be interesting to see what “shortly” means.

Thank you so much for coming in. If there is nothing you wanted to say —

Ms Perkins: Look, no, I appreciate that. I think we have managed to update you on most of the work. There is a good body of work behind. We have brought some reading for you around the “Position Statement on Youth Health” that we put out earlier on. That last time I met with you, we were just in the process of doing that. The thinker in residence report by Dr Michael Ungar—I think you will enjoy reading that.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be made available for correction of minor errors. Corrections must be returned within 10 days of the date of the letter attached to the transcript and if not returned, will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via corrections. The sense of your evidence cannot be altered. If you want to give additional information or elaborate on points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence.

Hearing concluded at 11.24 am
