

41ST PARLIAMENT



Joint Standing Committee on the
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Report 11

PRIORITIES FOR FURTHER WORK FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

Summary report of the work of the JSCCCYP of the 41st Parliament

Presented by Mrs R.M.J. Clarke, MLA and Hon N. Thomson, MLC

November 2024

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**Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner
for Children and Young People**

**Priorities for further work for
children and young people:**

Summary report of the work of the JSCCYP of the 41st Parliament

Report No. 11

Presented by

Mrs R.M.J. Clarke, MLA

Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council on

14 November 2024

Chair's Foreword

I am proud to present this report to the Parliament, which summarises the work of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People over the 41st Parliament. The report highlights the areas where the Committee considers there is still work to be done, and reiterates the recommendations from our research that should be addressed by government. Additionally, we hope that this report will provide a useful overview for the incoming JSCCCYP of the 42nd Parliament.

With three regional members and a member representing the North Metropolitan Region, the Committee is well acquainted with the challenges faced by vulnerable children and their families. We chose to focus our research on those groups of children who are the most vulnerable within our community. Our inquiries therefore examined: the importance of an advocate for Aboriginal children and young people; the need to address food insecurity for children affected by poverty; and the needs of refugee and humanitarian migrant children impacted by trauma.

In my electorate, I see the significant impact that poverty and food insecurity have upon children and their schooling. I also see the enormous efforts made by individuals to address these problems. School staff go to great lengths to provide breakfast programs, food hampers, shopping assistance and other programs to help children have access to good food. Yet they often do so without systematic and comprehensive support. With the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, these challenges are getting harder to address.

Children who are hungry, and consistently hungry, can't learn effectively. That is why I support the idea of a coordinated and government-supported school lunch program. This report calls for a pilot of such a program to be established, with a focus on low socio-economic metropolitan, regional and remote schools.

This report also calls for greater focus within government on the needs of children. Two of the Committee's reports have called for the appointment of a Minister for Children and Young People, and this report reiterates this call. The issues that impact on children and young people sometime struggle for air in the crowded policy space.

I would like to see the appointment of a Minister who would have responsibility and accountability for the breadth of policy implementation of children's issues. This should include a Child Wellbeing Strategy, and improving outcomes for refugee and humanitarian migrant children and young people.

I'd like to acknowledge the previous Commissioner for Children and Young People, Colin Pettit, who was the incumbent when this Committee began its term in 2021. Mr Pettit was a staunch advocate for the wellbeing of children and young people in WA, and we thank him for his efforts.

I also thank the current Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, who commenced in the role in January 2022. I thank Commissioner McGowan-Jones for her passionate advocacy for children and young people, and her efforts to highlight the needs and voices of children and young people. Her work is vital to ensuring that the issues impacting on children and young people are brought before government and policy-makers. It is also vital that the voices of children and young people are heard. We thank the Commissioner for her dedication to the role.

On a personal note, I would like to say that I have found the work of this Committee to be fulfilling, and it has been a privilege to undertake this role. I'd like to thank my fellow Committee members for their contributions over the course of the Parliament: Deputy Chair Hon. Neil Thomson MLC, Rebecca Stephens MLA and Hon. Ayor Makur Chuot MLC. Thank you also to all the research staff who have supported this Committee over the past four years: Dr Sarah Palmer, Naomi Sherrington and Lucy Roberts as Principal Research Officers, and Carmen Cummings and Jovita Hogan as Research Officers.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Clarke', with a long, sweeping underline.

MRS R.M.J. CLARKE, MLA
CHAIR

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Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of the work conducted by the JSCCCYP during the 41st Parliament. It identifies priority areas where work remains to be done, based on the findings of the Committee's investigative work. The report makes recommendations to the government on these areas of outstanding work. Additionally, the Committee hopes that this report will be an informative guide for the JSCCCYP of the 42nd Parliament when it commences in 2025.

A Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

The first area of outstanding work identified in this report is the Committee's recommendation for the creation of a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (CACYP) in Western Australia. The Committee's Report 3 tabled in 2021 reviewed the 20-year history of the proposal, and again recommended the creation of such a position.

Every other state in Australia now has a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (or equivalent), with the exception of Tasmania, which is currently progressing a bill which would include the creation of a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People position.

Additionally, a National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People has recently been established. Once Tasmania's CACYP is established, WA will be the only state in Australia without an independent advocate for Aboriginal children and young people.

The Committee understands that two submissions for additional funding from the Commissioner for such a position in WA have been refused, and that the Commissioner has been advised that any proposal for a new role dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people must be funded from within the Commissioner's current resources.

The Committee continues to believe that the creation of at least a Deputy Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People is of vital importance, and recommends again that the Commissioner be given additional and adequate funding in order to create such a role.

A pilot school lunch program to address food insecurity for children affected by poverty

The Committee's Report 6 *Hungry for Change* found that approximately 17 per cent of children in WA live with food insecurity, and that insufficient food in childhood can have short term and long term physical, mental and social impacts and can impede the ability to learn.

The report explored a range of approaches to addressing food insecurity for children, and found that a school lunch program was the best option for ensuring children can access quality food, as well as improved educational outcomes. The report called for the implementation of a pilot school lunch program to target food insecurity for children affected by poverty.

The Committee is firmly of the view that a formalised, government-supported school lunch program is needed for Western Australia. This report therefore reiterates the Committee's recommendation to the Government to establish a pilot school lunch program targeting a selection of low socio-economic metropolitan, regional and remote schools.

Enhanced support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia

The Committee's Report 9 *Pathways to Thriving* addressed the needs of children and young people from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds who have been exposed to trauma associated with migration. The report examined the supports available to children and young people in these situations. Themes that emerged from the research included:

- the absence of adequate data and research on refugee and humanitarian children and young people living in Western Australia, paired with the belief by experts that almost all such children have experienced trauma.
- that exposure to trauma can have a profound impact upon children's physical and mental health which can continue to adulthood. Yet this impact is not a certainty, as appropriate supports can enable such children to thrive.
- an inability to access appropriate supports at the relevant time can compound the effect of trauma and negatively impact on life outcomes. Timely intervention is therefore crucial for preventing negative outcomes.
- Western Australia lacks adequate and dedicated support services for refugee and humanitarian children and young people. This is partly due to the mistaken belief that children are resilient and can easily adapt, and that addressing parents' needs will flow on to address children's needs.

The Committee awaits the Government Response to this report with interest, and takes this opportunity to recommend that the Government positively engages with the findings and recommendations of *Pathways to Thriving* to improve settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia.

A Minister for Children and Youth

This report returns again to the issue of policy responsibility for children's issues within government. The Committee's sense is that issues relating to children need greater emphasis within government. Currently, policy responsibility for issues relevant to children and young people is spread across multiple ministerial portfolios and government agencies, including Youth, Child Protection, Early Childhood Education, Education, Aboriginal Affairs, Health and Housing. Policy responsibility is fragmented, leading to a degree of incoherence and invisibility. The Committee feels there is a clear need for a Minister to be tasked with the implementation and oversight of policy in relation to children and young people, and recommends that the Government appoints a Minister for Children and Youth.

A Child Wellbeing Strategy

This report also returns to the issue of a Child Wellbeing Strategy for Western Australia. Such a strategy would set out a whole-of-government shared understanding of what is important for child and youth wellbeing, as well as reinforce other efforts to ensure policy coherence. It would also clarify the role of government and non-government actors in this space. Advocates for such an approach have called for a strategy for many years, which is sometimes referred to as a 'Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy', acknowledging that the family is central to the wellbeing of the child.

This report details the chequered history of the proposal, which has received government support at various times. However, work on the strategy appears to have stalled. The Committee remains of the opinion that the government of Western Australia should prioritise the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy, to address the long-term needs of children and young people, and their families in this state.

Additionally, the Committee recommends that any such strategy should include a particular focus on the needs of regional, remote and very remote children in WA.

Greater support for the co-location of support services with schools

Finally, this report reflects the Committee's support for efforts to co-locate wellbeing and support services with schools, whether this be under the Child and Parent Centres model; the Multicultural Community Centres; or through other 'full-service schools' initiatives. The Committee agrees on the importance of making schools the community hubs that allow families and children to access the support they need. This report therefore makes several recommendations for greater support for these initiatives.

To conclude, the Committee of the 41st Parliament chose to focus its attention on some of the most vulnerable groups of children within the WA community, and the mechanisms that could be used to improve their situation. While each of the Committee's investigative reports addressed different issues and found different solutions to the specific problems at hand, there was a common theme which ran throughout our investigations. This theme was the extent to which children's issues are overlooked or overshadowed within the structures of government, and that the needs of vulnerable children need more attention.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is an advocate for children and young people, and works to make their voices heard. But it is clear to the Committee that there is also a need for a Minister to have overarching policy responsibility for the policies that impact upon children in this state. A child wellbeing strategy would also be an excellent tool for coordinating efforts and ensuring greater coherence across policy areas.

The Committee hopes that the priorities and issues outlined in this report and the recommendations to government will help to guide the thinking of those responsible for developing policy. We are of course aware that the approaching end of the Parliament means that there will not be time for a government response to these recommendations. However, we hope that this report will give some guidance to the incoming JSCCCYP of the 42nd Parliament, as it takes over this important role in 2025.

Ministerial Response

In accordance with Standing Order 277(1) of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People directs that the Premier, Treasurer and Attorney General report to the Assembly as to the action, if any, proposed to be taken by the Government with respect to the recommendations of the Committee.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Page 4

That the Commissioner for Children and Young People be provided with additional funding to enable the creation of a Deputy Commissioner dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people, with sufficient staffing and an adequate travel budget to support this function.

Recommendation 2

Page 6

That the Government of Western Australia establishes a pilot school lunch program targeting a selection of low socio-economic metropolitan, regional and remote schools.

Recommendation 3

Page 8

That the Government of Western Australia positively engage with the recommendations of *Pathways to Thriving* to improve settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia.

Recommendation 4

Page 9

That the Government of Western Australia appoints a Minister for Children and Youth.

Recommendation 5

Page 12

That the Government of Western Australia prioritises the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy to address the long-term needs of children and young people, and their families, in Western Australia.

Recommendation 6

Page 13

That a child wellbeing strategy should include a particular focus on the needs of regional and remote children and young people in WA. Further investigation into the disadvantages of children and young people in remote and very remote locations across Western Australia should be prioritised.

Recommendation 7

Page 15

That the Government of Western Australia extends funding to the Multicultural Community Centres on the basis of a 5-year contract, and consider co-locating two new Multicultural Community Centres with the two new Intensive English Centres.

Recommendation 8

Page 15

That the Government of Western Australia expands the program of Child and Parent Centres to enable greater geographical reach.

Recommendation 9**Page 15**

That the Government of Western Australia expands other 'full-service school' initiatives to improve the provision of support services on school sites.

Priorities for further work

Over the course of this Parliament, the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People (JSCCCYP) has engaged with a range of issues that relate to the needs and priorities for children and young people in Western Australia. The Committee has tabled three reports which made recommendations for policy implementation and structural improvements. The three reports were:

Report 3, *The Merits of Appointing a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People*, tabled November 2021.

Report 6, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, tabled June 2023.

Report 9, *Pathways to Thriving: Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*, tabled August 2024.

Each of these reports made important findings and recommendations that, in the Committee's view, remain outstanding as this Parliament draws to a close. The Committee would therefore like to return to this previous research and highlight the areas where the Committee considers that work remains to be done. Accordingly, this report outlines these areas and other policy priorities that have emerged over the course of the Committee's work during the 41st Parliament.

The need for a Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people in WA

One of the first issues that the Committee examined when it commenced work in 2021 was the suggestion for a Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people (CACYP) in WA. This issue was brought to the Committee's attention by the then Commissioner, Mr Colin Pettit, who had advocated for such a role throughout his tenure as Commissioner.

The Committee undertook research into the origin of the proposal, discovering that it had first been proposed 20 years earlier, by the Gordon Inquiry in 2002.¹ The Gordon Inquiry had also recommended the establishment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, which occurred 6 years later in 2008.

The Committee's research involved consultations with other states which already had a CACYP (or similar role such as Children's Guardians), in order to better understand how the role has been of benefit, and how it could work in Western Australia. At the time of the report, there were the equivalents of a CACYP in Victoria (commenced 2013), Queensland (commenced 2015), South Australia (commenced 2018), and New South Wales (commenced 2021). Since the report, a National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

1 The 'Gordon Inquiry' is the short title for the Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities. The report of the Gordon Inquiry is available [here](#).

Children and Young People has been established (in September 2024). Recruitment for a Commissioner is currently underway, with the new national commissioner expected to commence in the role in January 2025.²

Additionally, Tasmania is currently conducting consultations on the draft *Commission for Children and Young People Bill 2024*. This bill proposes the creation of a Commission for Children and Young People with three Commissioners: a Commissioner for Children and Young People; a Child Advocate; and a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.³ If the bill is passed into legislation, Tasmania will also have a CACYP. This means that every state except Western Australia will have enacted a CACYP, as will the federal jurisdiction.

The Committee's 2021 report details the history of the proposal in Western Australia; the Committee's research and consultations; and the reasoning behind the Committee's decision to recommend to government that such a position should be created. The first recommendation of that report was that:

A separate statutory position dedicated to the advocacy of Aboriginal children and young people be created to work alongside the Commissioner for Children and Young People.⁴

Further recommendations of the report addressed the powers and functions of the position; the need for the person appointed to be an Aboriginal person; the need for consultation with the Aboriginal community; and the requirement for such a position to be funded appropriately.

The Attorney General provided the government's response to the Committee's report in March 2022.⁵ The initial response advised the Committee that the Government would:

continue to engage with key stakeholders about whether to establish a distinct Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People as part of the continuing response to the Commitment. The Government is not in a position to respond to the recommendations contained in Report No. 3 until this engagement has been completed.⁶

2 Australian Government, Department of Social Services, *National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People*, 21 October 2024, accessed 30 October 2024, <[National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People | Department of Social Services, Australian Government](#)>.

3 Tasmanian Government, Department of Justice, *Fact Sheet – The different Commissioners, Commission for Children and Young People Bill 2024 – Consultation Draft*, 19 September 2024. [Commission for Children and Young People Bill 2024](#)

4 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The Merits of Appointing a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People*, November 2021, p. 16.

5 Hon John Quigley MLA, Attorney General, Letter, 16 March 2022, available [here](#).

6 Hon John Quigley MLA, Attorney General, Letter, 16 March 2022, p. 1. The 'Commitment' refers to the *Commitment to Youth Wellbeing*.

The Committee subsequently followed-up with the Attorney General regarding this engagement process. In August 2022, the Attorney General advised that the engagement process had been completed, and that the Government had:

concluded that enhanced oversight of outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people may be achieved under the existing statutory framework, and will be the subject of further work between the Government and the current CCYP.⁷

While the Committee remains of the view that the best course of action would be to create an independent Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people through statutory change, a senior position created within the current framework may be a more timely approach. However, it is crucial that such a position be sufficiently senior. The Committee is of the opinion that it should be a Deputy (or Assistant) Commissioner.

In August 2022, the Attorney General advised the Committee that the:

CCYP has advised Government that she is reviewing the structure and resourcing of her office with a view to enhancing its capacity to respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. The Government will give careful consideration to any funding submission from the CCYP designed to achieve this outcome.⁸

The Committee understands that the Commissioner has submitted two funding proposals since this commitment from the Attorney General that the Government would 'give careful consideration to any funding submission from the CCYP' designed to enhance its capacity to respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. In both cases, the funding proposal has been refused.

The Committee understands that the Commissioner has been told as part of those refusals that any proposal for a new role dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people must be funded by restructuring the CCYP's organisation and using internal funds.

The Commissioner's office is already a very small team, with a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) of 17. The Committee understands that the Commissioner's office has received no significant additional funding since she commenced in the role, and the FTE allocation has not changed since 2020–21.

A Deputy Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people must be a senior role. It would require a degree of administrative support and a significant travel budget, to enable travel to regional and remote communities in Western Australia. To suggest that this scale of funding could be found within what is already a small budget is not realistic.

The Committee is disappointed that what was presented to the Committee as almost a positive commitment to fund a Deputy Commissioner position has now withered to the

7 Hon John Quigley MLA, Attorney General, Letter, 31 August 2022, p. 1.

8 Hon John Quigley MLA, Attorney General, Letter, 31 August 2022, pp 1-2.

point where the Commissioner is expected to cannibalise sections of her organisation in order to fund it internally.

All of the reasoning elucidated in the Committee's report no. 3 as to why such a position should be created remains valid, in the Committee's view. The needs of Aboriginal children and young people in Western Australia are significant, and have not reduced since the report was published. But there are also many other groups of vulnerable children in Western Australia, including those in poverty, those with disability, CaLD groups and many others. There is clearly a need for increased capacity within the Commissioner's office to adequately address the needs of all vulnerable groups of children and young people in WA. A Deputy Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People who would take responsibility for this group would free up the Commissioner's capacity to focus on the needs of other vulnerable groups, thereby benefitting all children in Western Australia.

The Committee is strongly of the view that the Commissioner's office should be funded for the creation of a Deputy Commissioner dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal children, with sufficient staffing and an adequate travel budget to support this function.

Recommendation 1

That the Commissioner for Children and Young People be provided with additional funding to enable the creation of a Deputy Commissioner dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people, with sufficient staffing and an adequate travel budget to support this function.

Report 6: *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty.*

The Committee's *Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty* was announced in both Houses of the Parliament on 7 April 2022. The inquiry was completed in June 2023 with the tabling of the report *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*.⁹ The government's response to the report was tabled on 10 October 2023.¹⁰

The report found that approximately 17 per cent of children in WA live with food insecurity. Insufficient food in childhood can have short term and long term physical, mental and social impacts and can impede the ability to learn. Family income, where a child lives, belonging to a disadvantaged community and difficult home circumstances can make it challenging for children and young people to access good food. Also, simply being a child is a barrier, since

9 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, 22 June 2023.

10 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. [Government response](#)

children rely on adults for everyday necessities, and are generally unable to directly access food relief on their own.

The inquiry investigated the effectiveness of two established approaches to addressing food insecurity – food relief and food literacy programs – before turning its attention to the merits of a school lunch program.

The inquiry found that food relief is not easily accessed by children, and even adults encounter barriers such as eligibility difficulties and shame in reaching out to charities. The report found that food relief was largely uncoordinated across the state and was not adequately or sustainably funded to meet the ever-increasing demand. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis since mid-2023 means levels of demand are unlikely to have reduced.

The report found that while the School Breakfast Program was (and still is) highly valued by schools across the state, Foodbank WA was finding it difficult to meet demand and cover costs. Food relief was found to be an important but insufficient response to childhood food insecurity.

The inquiry investigated government-supported school lunch programs as another mechanism for supporting access to good food for children living with poverty and food insecurity. While school lunch programs are well-established in other countries, they have not historically been part of the Australian schooling experience. School canteens have been common in Australia, however these are facing significant challenges: many school canteens are struggling to cover costs, and are having to increase prices which makes them inaccessible for those students living with poverty. The inquiry heard of multiple canteens that have closed, or been forced to reduce the number of days on which they operate.

The fact remains that children who come to school hungry and without an adequate lunch cannot learn effectively. They are also more difficult for teachers to manage. The inquiry was told that many schools have been providing food from their own funds, often at the expense of other educational resources or programs. We also heard of individual school staff using their own money to buy lunch for children.

The Department of Education told the Committee that it was unable to quantify how much schools spend on providing food for their students, and that it ‘would impose a significant and unreasonable administrative burden on schools to identify the funds used to provide free food.’¹¹ The Committee considers this to be an inadequate response from the Department. The Committee continues to believe that the Department of Education should know how much of the funding intended for the education of students is being spent on meeting their basic need for food. A simple email survey inviting Principals to give some indication of how much they spend on food would not be ‘an unreasonable administrative burden.’

11 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. See response to recommendation 4. [Government response](#).

While the efforts of schools and staff to meet the needs of students are laudable, they are necessarily piecemeal and fragmented, and rely upon the goodwill of individuals within the school system. An engaged Principal moving on to another school can mean the collapse of a school's food support programs. An inability to find sufficient volunteers can imperil not just lunch support programs but also a school's breakfast program.

With almost one in five children facing food insecurity in Western Australia, the current response is inadequate. The Committee is firmly of the view that a formalised, government-supported school lunch program is needed for Western Australia. The Committee's report *Hungry for Change* therefore made recommendation 8 that:

The Department of Education takes the lead in establishing a pilot school lunch program targeting a selection of low socio-economic metropolitan, regional and remote schools.¹²

This was, perhaps, the key recommendation of the 24 recommendations made in the report. The Government's response to the report was received on 10 October 2023. The Committee was disappointed to see that this recommendation was 'Not supported', on the grounds that 'The Department of Education considers that such a pilot would be both workforce and cost prohibitive.'¹³ The response goes on to state that:

The establishment of a pilot school lunch program in WA would be reliant on a range of factors, including the allocation of sufficient resourcing and funding...¹⁴

The Committee is of course aware that such a proposal would need significant funding, and that there are many factors and challenges that would need to be considered and resolved as part of the process of setting up such a pilot. Many of these were discussed at length within the Committee's report (see Chapter 5 of *Hungry for Change*).

However, the Committee considers that big problems require big solutions. The Committee continues to believe that a school lunch program is desperately needed in Western Australia. Given the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and the needs of Western Australian children, the Committee reiterates its recommendation from *Hungry for Change*:

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Western Australia establishes a pilot school lunch program targeting a selection of low socio-economic metropolitan, regional and remote schools.

12 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, 22 June 2023, p. 113.

13 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. [Government response](#).

14 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. [Government response](#).

Report 9: *Pathways to Thriving: Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*

The *Inquiry into support for children and young people who have been directly or indirectly exposed to trauma associated with migration to Australia due to humanitarian crises* commenced on 30 November 2023. The inquiry was completed in August 2024 with the tabling of the inquiry report *Pathways to Thriving: Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*.¹⁵ The Government response to this report is due on 15 November 2024, meaning that the Committee has not yet seen the response to the report's recommendations.

Nonetheless, the Committee would like to highlight several themes which became apparent over the course of the inquiry, and which were detailed in the final report. The inquiry was important and the Committee hopes that the Government response will engage meaningfully with the findings and recommendations made in the report.

The inquiry focused on children who have arrived in Western Australia as refugees, humanitarian entrants, or who are asylum seekers. Children from these backgrounds who have achieved citizenship, or who were born here but whose families are from these backgrounds were also included within the scope of the inquiry.

The inquiry sought to understand the system of supports available to children and young people from humanitarian backgrounds who live in WA and who have suffered migration-related trauma. Some of the key themes the inquiry identified included:

- the absence of adequate data and research on refugee and humanitarian children and young people living in Western Australia, paired with the belief by experts that almost all such children have experienced trauma.
- that exposure to trauma can have a profound impact upon children's physical and mental health which can continue until adulthood. Yet this impact is not a certainty, as appropriate supports can enable such children to thrive.
- an inability to access appropriate supports at the relevant time can compound the effect of trauma and negatively impact on life outcomes. Timely intervention is therefore crucial for preventing negative outcomes.
- Western Australia lacks adequate and dedicated support services for refugee and humanitarian children and young people. This is partly due to the mistaken belief that children are resilient and can easily adapt, and that addressing parents' needs will flow on to address children's needs.

In addition, community members told the Committee of their concerns around issues such as their children's ability to succeed at school; the successful transition to employment; a

¹⁵ Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Pathways to Thriving: Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*, 15 August 2024.

lack of mental health awareness and support; the burden children carry acting as interpreters for their families; and the need for culturally appropriate supports.

The report's recommendations addressed these issues raised by the community, as well as areas of government policy and structure, such as:

- the need for a broad audit of settlement services in WA, focussing on the needs and services provided to children and young people.
- the need for greater funding support to the Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS) for the provision of tailored support for children.
- Increasing the capacity of the Refugee Health Service to enable regional outreach and improved surge capability.
- a review of the implementation of the Language Services Policy.
- the creation of a settlement coordination taskforce comprised of government, not-for-profit and community organisations, tasked with improving settlement outcomes for children.

The Committee awaits the government's response to the report, which is due on 15 November 2024. The Committee hopes that the Government will view its response as an opportunity to assist the particular group of vulnerable children to thrive in their new lives here in Western Australia.

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Western Australia positively engage with the recommendations of *Pathways to Thriving* to improve settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia.

A Minister for Children and Youth

The research carried out by the Committee for its inquiries and other activities over the course of the Parliament has informed the Committee's view that there needs to be a greater emphasis within government on the needs of children and young people in our community. While the Commissioner for Children and Young People is an important advocate for their needs and opinions, she has no power to implement policy, nor responsibility for policy failures. Her role is primarily to act as an advocate for children and young people, and to promote and monitor their wellbeing.

Both of the Committee's inquiries undertaken during this parliament have discovered the same problem of fragmentation of responsibility leading to policy incoherence. The *Hungry for Change* report found that there 'appear(ed) to be a level of policy incoherence and invisibility in relation to many of the issues that impact children', especially in relation to mitigating the impact of food insecurity.¹⁶ The *Pathways to Thriving* report also found 'a lack of clarity and fragmentation of ministerial and departmental responsibility with regard to

¹⁶ Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, 22 June 2023, p. 158.

outcomes for humanitarian children and youth.’¹⁷ The Committee is of the opinion that a Minister should be appointed with responsibility for overseeing all aspects of children’s wellbeing and the policies that impact them.

Currently, policy responsibility for the issues relevant to children and young people is spread across multiple ministerial portfolios and government agencies, including but not limited to Youth, Child Protection, Early Childhood Education, Education, Aboriginal Affairs, Health and Housing. This fragmentation runs the risk of gaps in coverage, duplication, and potential policy incoherence. There is a clear need for a Minister to be tasked with the implementation and oversight of policy in relation to children and young people.

Recommendation 4

That the Government of Western Australia appoints a Minister for Children and Youth.

A Child Wellbeing Strategy

One policy area that should be given to a Minister for Children and Youth to oversee is that of a Child Wellbeing Strategy. As detailed in *Hungry for Change*, there have been calls for such a strategy to be developed and implemented in WA for many years. The previous and current Commissioners for Children and Young People, the Valuing Children Initiative and Centrecare have all called for such an initiative.¹⁸

A Child Wellbeing Strategy would be a whole-of government strategy that would set out a shared understanding of what is important for child and youth wellbeing, reinforce other efforts to ensure policy coherence, and clarify the role of government and non-government actors in this space. The proposal has sometimes been referred to as a ‘Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy’, acknowledging that the family is central to the wellbeing of the child.

The previous Commissioner for Children and Young People said in the *Missing Out Matters* report of 2021:

My key recommendation [to address child poverty] is to establish a state-wide Child Wellbeing Strategy that requires government to set meaningful targets and measure and report on how they are improving the wellbeing of children and young people. We need to reassess which of the many policies and services we have in place across our state are reaching the children in most need, at the right time and making meaningful changes in their life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Pathways to Thriving: Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*, 15 August 2024, p. 101.

¹⁸ Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, 22 June 2023, p. 141.

¹⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, *Missing Out Matters: Child Poverty in WA*, Perth, October 2021, p. 23.

The Western Australian Council for Social Services (WACOSS) has also been advocating for such a strategy since at least 2018, and described the benefits of a strategy as follows:

The intent of a WA Child Wellbeing Strategy is to enable a more coordinated and effective approach across portfolios to policy, programs, services and support provided to children and families in WA. The use of evidence-based wellbeing measurement frameworks allows us to collectively understand the impact of programs and services to drive a more effective approach to investing in systems that deliver the best outcomes through the life-course. This supports effective investment in child development activities, prevention and early intervention to reduce harm and the cost of tertiary systems for those with developmental delay or at risk of poverty, child protection and juvenile justice systems.²⁰

The proposal for a Child Wellbeing Strategy has had a long history, and has had government support at various times. In 2019, the then CCYP Colin Pettit published the report *Improving the Odds for WA's Vulnerable Children*. The first recommendation of the report was addressed to the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) as follows:

Recommendation 1: Establish a whole-of-government Child Wellbeing Strategy for WA

The Department of Premier and Cabinet, on behalf of the government, should lead the development of this strategy to set whole-of-government targets to improve wellbeing outcomes among children and young people. Targets should be long term, extend beyond election cycles and span individual agency responsibilities.

Development of the strategy should be a widely consultative process...The strategy should include a resourced implementation framework with clear outcomes and timelines. Progress on the outcomes should be measured through robust data and regularly reported on.

The strategy should prioritise and strengthen investment in targeted, early intervention for children, young people and families who are vulnerable. This will require models of engagement that identify children and families who experience multiple forms of adversity and are at highest risk of poor outcomes, and provision of support that builds family and local community capacity to provide a nurturing environment for children and young people.²¹

This recommendation was accepted in principle by DPC in 2019. DPC advised the Committee in March 2023 that leading the development of the strategy had been passed to the Department of Communities.²²

According to DPC, the strategy became a priority for the Supporting Communities Forum (SCF), which was a partnership between government and the community sector supporting

20 Chris Twomey, Leader Policy and Research, WACOSS, Letter, 5 April 2023, pp. 1–2.

21 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, *Improving the Odds for WA's Vulnerable Children*, Perth, recommendation 1, p. 28.

22 Fiona Hunt, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2023, p. 2.

the implementation of the Supporting Communities policy and its commitments to increase the effectiveness of funding to Western Australians in need.²³

In March 2023, the DPC advised the Committee that the SCF and its work was part of the suite of activities that was paused due to the pandemic.

In 2021, SCF reconvened, and the child wellbeing strategy did not appear as a priority for the Supporting Communities Forum, so we understand that, to date, there has been no further work from that forum on that.²⁴

However, WACOSS gave the Committee a different perspective of the progress made on the strategy, advising that SCF members ‘were told that a wellbeing strategy was no longer a Ministerial priority, there was concern that there were already too many other strategies in progress, and we may return to the issue in due time.’²⁵

In late 2022, the Commissioner for Children and Young People emphasised the importance of this initiative to the Committee, advising that:

the child and family wellbeing strategy has been developed – well, a proposal has been developed and there is more work to be done on it as a strategy, rather than just a think-tank paper, by the children’s policy advisory committee at WACOSS. It makes enormous sense and there is in-principle agreement in DPC that this makes enormous sense whilst we do have a surplus. This is about a parallel funding regime for 10 to 15 years - one generation.²⁶

The Committee commented in *Hungry for Change* that:

There appears to be some confusion regarding which government agency is responsible for developing the child wellbeing strategy and what its future is likely to be. Certainly, work on the strategy appears to have stalled.²⁷

The Committee made the finding in *Hungry for Change* that ‘A child wellbeing strategy would be a valuable tool for improving the implementation of government policy aimed at the wellbeing of children and young people in WA.’²⁸ The Committee then made that recommendation that ‘the WA Government prioritise the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy in Western Australia.’²⁹

23 Department of the Premier and Cabinet, *The Supporting Communities Forum 2021–30 June 2023*, 17 April 2023, accessed 9 May 2023, <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments-of-the-premier-and-cabinet>

24 Fiona Hunt, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2023, p. 2.

25 Chris Twomey, Leader, Policy and Research, WACOSS, letter, 5 April 2023, p. 2.

26 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2022, p. 6.

27 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, June 2023, p. 143.

28 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, June 2023, p. 144.

29 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, June 2023, p. 144.

The Government response to the Committee’s report did not particularly engage with the recommendation relating to a child wellbeing strategy. It simply ‘noted’ the recommendation, and stated that:

Several reports and submissions over the past five years have recommended the development of child wellbeing strategy. Existing strategies and programs encompass child wellbeing as an outcome and government agencies deliver programs and services that support children in their early years, aimed at improving developmental and educational outcomes.³⁰

The Government response then listed as examples the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Child and Parent Centres commissioned by the Department of Education, and the Early Years Partnerships, coordinated by the Department of Communities.³¹

At a recent hearing, the Commissioner told the Committee that:

What we are doing is parcelling a child into various pieces. What we need to do is have a much more holistic approach...you will recall that the previous commissioner and myself have been saying for a significant time...that we need a comprehensive, integrated child and family wellbeing strategy where we put the child at the centre and we bring the people to the table that are required rather than saying to the child, “Send your left leg to hospital and send your right leg to justice and send your head to the mental health supports and your right arm better go into corrections” or whatever. So there is a real requirement for us to think outside of silos. Again, this comes back to putting the family and the child at the centre.³²

The Committee agrees with the Commissioner, and remains of the opinion that the government of Western Australia should prioritise the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy, to address the long-term needs of children and young people, and their families, in this state.

Recommendation 5

That the Government of Western Australia prioritises the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy to address the long-term needs of children and young people, and their families, in Western Australia.

Around 155,000 of the state’s 644,468 children and young people (approximately one quarter) live in regional and remote areas.³³ The Committee’s investigative travel

30 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. [Government response](#).

31 Government of Western Australia, *Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People – Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty: Government response*, 10 October 2023. [Government response](#).

32 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 October 2024, p. 9.

33 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Profile of Children and Young People in WA 2024*, Perth, 2024, pp. 4–5.

throughout this Parliament have taken us to many locations ranging from the Great Southern to Newman and as far east as Warburton. Additionally, three of the four members of the Committee represent regional and remote electorates. We are well aware of the additional challenges and disadvantages faced by children and young people who live in these areas. The Committee would like to see a particular focus on the needs of these children in a child wellbeing strategy, which could bring a more dedicated approach to addressing the inequities faced by children in regional and remote locations.

Children and young people who live remotely, are objectively much more disadvantaged due to their remoteness and this is no more obvious than in the statistics on engagement with education. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) notes that in 2023 60.6 per cent of all children in Year 1-10 in Western Australia attended school (all schools category) 90 per cent or more of the time, whereas for remote students that statistic is 47.5 per cent and for very remote students that statistic is 27.3 per cent. These data also demonstrate Indigenous children face particular challenges with the Attendance Level for the Year 1-10 category in very remote schools only being 10.5 per cent.³⁴

Recommendation 6

That a child wellbeing strategy should include a particular focus on the needs of regional and remote children and young people in WA. Further investigation into the disadvantages of children and young people in remote and very remote locations across Western Australia should be prioritised.

Co-location of support services with schools

Throughout the course of this Parliament, the Committee has been told of benefits of locating support services on school campuses. This occurs under a range of different mechanisms, and has been repeatedly recommended to the Committee as a way to facilitate better outcomes for children and their families.

During the *Hungry for Change* inquiry, the Committee visited the Child and Parent Centre at the Mount Lockyer Primary School in Albany. The Centre provides a range of programs for families with children up to eight years of age. The services available include a Child Health Clinic, allied health services such as a dietician, speech therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy, as well as school readiness programs. The Committee's visit enabled us to see first-hand how these centres encourage and enable families to access supports for children that may otherwise be out of reach.

There are currently 22 Child and Parent Centres throughout Western Australia, with nine of these in regional locations.³⁵ The Committee would like to see this program expanded.

The *Pathways to Thriving* inquiry informed the Committee of the similar role provided by the Multicultural Community Centres (MCCs). The MCCs aim to support humanitarian families by

³⁴ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Student Attendance*, accessed 12 November 2024, <[Student attendance](#)>.

³⁵ Kununurra, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, South Hedland, Roebourne, Rangeway, Carey Park, Collie Valley, Mount Lockyer.

addressing settlement and transition issues in addition to their emotional, social and physical needs. The MCCs employ refugee health nurses, social workers, and multicultural community liaison workers. Nurses provide services including the development of family health plans, GP referrals and mental health education. Social workers provide counselling and therapeutic intervention for students, and liaison workers support people with the general settlement issues that arise with respect to housing, health, education and employment.³⁶

MCCs are located at Thornlie Primary School and Koondoola Primary School, and provide outreach to Parkwood and Nollamara Primary Schools. Community members told the Committee of how the ‘MCCs are very good at referring children and families on to other support services,’ and that the MCCs need support from the Department of Education to do further outreach to other schools.³⁷ It was clear to the Committee how crucial these centres are in providing support to parents, and to the children. The Committee recommended in *Pathways to Thriving* that the Government should extend funding for the current MCCs on the basis of a 5-year contract, and consider expanding the MCC program to include 2 new MCCs with the new Intensive English Centres.³⁸

The Committee is also aware of other, less formalised mechanisms that enable the delivery of support services through collaboration with schools. Programs that enable wellbeing support to be delivered, such as GPs visiting schools, are useful models that could be further explored. The Committee asked the Commissioner for her opinion on co-locating services on school sites, sometimes referred to as ‘full-service schools’:

A number of successive governments have invested in the child and parent centres, and that...was about early intervention, getting families comfortable with being on school premises, having those supports, allied health supports in particular...it is absolutely critical that we have full-service schools, in my view, whether that is a child and parent centre on site or it is another model, but we know that the child and parent centres work well...it is not just about full-service schools; it is about a hub for children and families, so making the school the centre of a community, particularly in regional and remote areas, but equally as important in the metro area...So making the school the hub of the community again so that maternal child and family health nurses are attending and can see the other kids in a family, the younger ones, if they are there. The allied health supports, the mental health supports – social workers and youth works are just as invaluable as psychs for our kids in the school space for mental health supports...I think it is an absolutely fabulous idea and should be a high priority.³⁹

36 Koondoola Primary School, *Multicultural Community Centre*, accessed 12 July 2024, [Multicultural Community Centre – KOONDOOLA PRIMARY SCHOOL](#).

37 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Pathways to Thriving; Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*, 15 August 2024, p. 35.

38 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Pathways to Thriving; Enhancing support for humanitarian children and young people in Western Australia*, 15 August 2024, Recommendation 6, p. 37.

39 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 October 2024, p. 5.

Based on the Committee's investigations during this Parliament, the Committee is in full agreement on the importance of bringing support services to vulnerable children on school sites, rather than expecting them to access services elsewhere. The Committee would like to see the co-location of support services with schools expanded further into the regions, to improve access for regional students.

The Committee reiterates its recommendation from *Pathways to Thriving* that the Government should expand the commitment to Multicultural Community Centres. The Committee would also like to see further commitment made to expand mechanisms such as the Child and Parent Centres and other 'full-service school' initiatives.

Responsibility for these centres and initiatives could also be consolidated within the portfolio of a Minister for Children and Youth, to ensure better coordination.

Recommendation 7

That the Government of Western Australia extends funding to the Multicultural Community Centres on the basis of a 5-year contract, and consider co-locating two new Multicultural Community Centres with the two new Intensive English Centres.

Recommendation 8

That the Government of Western Australia expands the program of Child and Parent Centres to enable greater geographical reach.

Recommendation 9

That the Government of Western Australia expands other 'full-service school' initiatives to improve the provision of support services on school sites.

Concluding thoughts as the 41st Parliament ends

The Committee of the 41st Parliament chose to focus its attention on some of the most vulnerable groups of children within the WA community, and the mechanisms that could be used to improve their situation. Our first investigative report looked at the need for a dedicated advocate for Aboriginal children and young people in Western Australia. Our second investigative report looked at children living with food insecurity and poverty. Our third investigative report focused on children from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds, and their settlement experiences here in WA.

While each report addressed different issues and found different solutions to the specific problems at hand, there was a common theme which ran throughout our investigations. This theme was the extent to which children's issues are overlooked or overshadowed within the structures of government, and that the needs of vulnerable children need more attention.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is an advocate for children and young people, and works to make their voices heard. But it is clear to the Committee that there is also a need for a Minister to have overarching policy responsibility for the policies that impact upon children in this state. A child wellbeing strategy would also be an excellent tool for coordinating efforts and ensuring greater coherence across policy areas.

The Committee hopes that the priorities and issues outlined in this report and the recommendations to government will help to guide the thinking of those responsible for developing policy. We are of course aware that the approaching end of the Parliament means that there will not be time for a government response to these recommendations. However, we hope that this report will give some guidance to the incoming JSCCCYP of the 42nd Parliament, as it takes over this important role in 2025.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Clarke', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

MRS R.M.J. CLARKE, MLA
CHAIR

Appendix One

Committee's functions and powers

The following was agreed by concurrence between the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council on 26 May 2021, establishing the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People:

1. Pursuant to section 51 of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006, a Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People be appointed by the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council.
2. The Joint Standing Committee shall comprise 2 members appointed by the Legislative Assembly and 2 members appointed by the Legislative Council.
3. It is the function of the Joint Standing Committee to —
 - i. monitor, review and report to Parliament on the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People;
 - ii. examine Annual and other Reports of the Commissioner; and
 - iii. consult regularly with the Commissioner.
4. A report of the Joint Standing Committee will be presented to the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council by members of the Joint Standing Committee nominated by it for that purpose.
5. The Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly relating to Standing and Select Committees will be followed as far as they can be applied.

Appendix Two

Acronym list

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
ASeTTS	Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors
CACYP	Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People
CaLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CCYP	Commissioner for Children and Young People
DPC	Department of the Premier and Cabinet
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GP	General Practitioner
JSCCCYP	Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People
MCC	Multicultural Community Centre
SCF	Supporting Communities Forum
WACOSS	Western Australian Council for Social Services



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