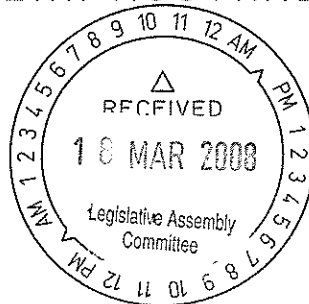


# Commissioner for Children and Young People

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Reference: 2008/38

Dr Brian Gordon  
Principal Research Officer  
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee  
Legislative Assembly  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Dr Gordon

### **Inquiry into Collaborative Approaches in Government**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. I am pleased to provide comments in relation to my role as Western Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

I was appointed as the State's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act). Under this Act, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and to promote their participation in the making of decisions that affect their lives. In carrying out my functions, I am required to give special regard to the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

I am concerned to ensure that children and young people are considered in the context of this inquiry because of the significant impact that government processes have on their lives. One of my primary goals as Commissioner is to encourage collaboration between the various sectors on particular issues relevant to children and young people.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on  should you wish to discuss this submission in more detail.

I look forward to receiving further information on the progress of this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Scott  
COMMISSIONER

13 March 2008



## ***“Collaboration IS rocket science!”***

Julie McCrossin, Disability and Justice Conference, 2007

Julie McCrossin threw this statement into the audience of the Disability and Justice Conference in Perth, November 2007, and kick-started a discussion about its merit. For the rest of the day, conversations bubbled up around whether collaboration – as a relatively simple concept – has become unnecessarily complicated or, conversely, whether collaboration – with its inherent complexities – has become over simplified and therefore ineffectual. Of course, no consensus was reached but what did become apparent was that collaboration in government is recognised as being critical but it is not happening enough and where it is happening, it is not always effective.

“Collaborative government”, “joined-up government”, and “whole-of-government” are widely used terms that describe varied approaches. In their crudest form, they all mean “more than one agency working on one outcome” and, because in most cases any one outcome generally requires many inputs, this working style is necessary in most instances.

Citizens and communities do not present with neat, isolated problems that can easily be classified and remedied. Our issues are complex and convoluted, they reside in the ‘grey area’, are often hard to define, difficult to prioritise, and they link to and overlap with other issues.

For children and young people, a clear example of this overlap occurs in education processes. This was discussed by Gary Banks, Chairman of the Productivity Commission in his address to the OECD World Forum:

*Educational performance is shaped by a range of influences from the earliest years of life. Many Indigenous children have chronic ear infections when they first start school, which physically limit their capacity for learning. Domestic violence or substance abuse at home will clearly have a major bearing on a child's school attendance and performance... This illustrates that poor educational performance, and all that flows from that, cannot be wholly laid at the door of education authorities. Responsibility for doing better needs to cross portfolios...<sup>1</sup>*

Given this reality, it is no surprise that the traditional government structures consistently struggle to meet community needs. Our Ministers and departments are established with definable boundaries, specific budgets for specific issues, and judgments on their performance are made by assessing improvements in their particular, clear-cut area of responsibility.

The challenge is to find a way for government's specificity to cater more appropriately to citizens' and communities' complexities. This is true for all citizens and communities, but particularly so for children and young people given their vulnerability and the difficulties they face in advocating for themselves or lobbying established authorities.

As it is an impossibility for communities to compartmentalise their issues to fit government structures, the only functional approach is for effective collaboration in government to dissolve departmental boundaries and allow for services to be delivered in a coordinated way.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Banks, Chairman, Productivity Commission, address to the Second OECD World Forum on “Statistics, Knowledge and Policy”, *Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies*, Istanbul, Turkey, 27-30 June 2007.

### **Case study**

In recognition of the fact that there are many factors which influence children's development and learning, a new model of Early Childhood Centres has been proposed which will provide access to single integrated service comprising a number of dimensions. That is, the Centres will be a service 'hub' where children, parents, families and communities can access, in one location, the following services:

- programs to support and promote effective parenting;
- supported playgroups;
- child development programs;
- child care (including occasional care, crèche, long day care, out of school hours care);
- kindergarten – year 3;
- family learning and life-skills support; and
- universal child and maternal health.

The Centres will bundle education services with health services, financial services, family and domestic violence services and bring specialist therapy, alcohol, drug and mental health services to the same table. This enables the child and his/her supporters to access government services in a coordinated and seamless way.

This is an exciting and positive model; one that not only accepts that young children have diverse needs, but also caters for those needs and recognises the importance of supporting parents and communities in their key role in the child's development. This is a demonstration of how collaboration might work most effectively in service delivery: across portfolios and in partnership with the community.

One aspect of policy/program delivery that has repeatedly been a barrier to effective collaboration across government is funding. As described above, the silo structure of government departments has meant historically that funding has also been ring-fenced by departmental responsibility. That is, the education department receives x amount for education, the health department receives y amount for health etc. This is a particularly rigid structure that promotes single-agency focus, with each individual department setting and justifying its own priorities. This exacerbates the difficulties in working collaboratively for several reasons:

- 1) Each department has key performance indicators (KPIs) in its particular area against which it is measured. Budget is sought specifically to meet those KPIs and departments are, understandably, reluctant to contribute precious funding away from these KPI areas to those that could be perceived as another department's work area.
- 2) A department may feel threatened if it perceives another department has received funding for a work area it believes is its responsibility. This risk keeps departments territorial and defensive about their budget and their 'turf'.
- 3) If several departments do embark on a collaborative project, and manage to obtain joint funding, these departments take shared responsibility for the project. Although this can be very positive, it can also dilute the 'ownership' of the project and mean that the project does not get the benefit of one department strongly leading it, prioritising it, defending it, and advocating for its expansion.
- 4) While all agencies are committed and participating, a collaborative project can be a strong and invaluable asset to the community. As each individual department's

contribution to that project is only one element, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the individual parts. Unfortunately, there is a risk with this; taken out of the broader context, each department can regard its own individual contribution as marginal and changes in departmental priorities may result in a withdrawal of support. The removal of a small part may appear minor, but can have significant impact on the project as a whole. Taking the Early Childhood Centre as a hypothetical example, the Department of Health's contribution may only appear small - "two health nurses", for example - and the cessation of funding for the two health nurses in itself may not seem significant. However, the Centre loses one of its major assets, a central function, and becomes much weaker as a consequence. This is one of the difficulties with the existing funding structure as, unfortunately, a department's priorities to manage its individual budget will always override an individual project's priorities.

It is posited that a modified approach to budget applications and funding provision should be considered. If the Department of Treasury and Finance was to prioritise combined budget bids and give them preferential status, for example, departments might be encouraged to work together more regularly and effectively in order to secure funding for projects that cross agency boundaries. Requiring that departments provide combined reports/updates on collaborative projects to Ministers might be a way of strengthening cross-government ownership issues.

This point leads to the critical issue of leadership in collaboration. In any assessment of successful collaborative projects—government or otherwise—a consistent theme is the presence of strong leadership. Even though by definition collaboration is a team effort, without a strong figure to provide direction and champion for success, a project is likely to become static or fail. A particularly stark example of the consequence of absent leadership was given recently by the Western Australian Coroner, Alastair Hope, in his report on the inquest into 22 deaths in the Kimberley:

*...it appears that Aboriginal welfare, particularly in the Kimberley, constitutes a disaster but no-one is in charge of the disaster response... There will always be areas of need which do not clearly fall within the domain of any particular department and others that could fall within the core functions of a number of departments. Unless there is a leader who can dictate how these areas of need will be addressed and funded, there will continue to be ongoing negotiations between departments as to which department is to provide the required service and particularly which department's budget is to be used to fund that service. Such negotiations are inevitably time consuming and costly.<sup>2</sup>*

The Coroner's report describes an extreme case of collapse in collaboration and leadership, but consequences of more subtle leadership deficits can be found throughout the State. Strong leadership for across-government collaborative programs needs to come from senior levels within government—ideally, a strong champion at Director General level with consistent Ministerial backing.

### **Case study**

A good example of strong leadership was evident throughout the Cross-border Justice Project. In this project, the Attorney General was an advocate for the project and promoted support among his peers, both State and Federal, at Ministerial level. This was coupled with constant support from the Directors General of all agencies involved, and this high-level leadership and promotion fostered a spirit of goodwill and motivation at officer level, which led to the successful completion of the complex legislative revisions.

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<sup>2</sup> Western Australian Coroner, Alastair Hope, Report into the deaths of 22 Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, 2008, pp23-27.

This is not to say that successful collaboration cannot occur without senior support, it can. There are numerous impressive examples of community groups and government officers forging together to make improvements in areas of identified need. However, without high-level support these successful collaborations often do not get expanded, rolled-out, promoted, and they do not get the accolades they deserve. The sustainability of these projects then becomes precarious because they are relying so heavily on the enthusiasm and commitment of individuals.

A report produced in 2004 by the Commonwealth's Management Advisory Committee advocated the need for a public service culture that:

*...supports, models, understands and aspires to whole of government solutions. Collegiality at the most senior levels of the service is a key part of this culture. Portfolio secretaries and agency heads will be responsible for driving cooperative behaviours and monitoring the success of whole of government approaches... They will be required to ensure that their staff understand that their role on interdepartmental committees or task forces is not to defend territory but to seek solutions...*<sup>3</sup>

This collegiality at senior levels is key. In order to encourage collaborative efforts across portfolios, it is suggested that Directors General should have an element of their performance agreements associated with demonstrating outcomes achieved as a consequence of collaboration. This would help to mitigate many of the problems raised above to do with protecting territories, ring-fencing budgets, and placing the concerns of individual departments above those of effective collaborative programs.

Of course, rewarding best practice and positive results is also an excellent way to encourage more steps in the right direction. The "Better Services" category of the Premier's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management has a specific criterion relating to the demonstration of "effective consultation, collaboration or joined-up services".<sup>4</sup> However, in recognition of the difficulties in achieving effective collaboration and how rarely it occurs on a sustainable basis, there is a strong case for making this criterion in itself an award category. An annual award for "Excellence in Collaboration" would demonstrate to the public service, and the broader community, that making government program and service delivery more accessible is of primary concern.

The importance of high-level leadership in the development of successful collaboration cannot be overstated, and nor can the importance of citizen participation.

Enabling citizens to help shape policy and service delivery is clearly beneficial. It aligns provision more closely with what is needed and secures better use of resources. This can sometimes be done with little demand on the citizen (e.g. surveys). However, deeper public engagement through debate and discussion can also promote better understanding of complex issues, the process of decision making in public affairs and it may build relationships that otherwise would not have been made. In other words, it helps build the civic skills that allow people to participate more fully in the decisions that matter to them, to take more responsibility for and interest in public affairs and services, and to understand that personal preferences do not always fit in with the best decision in the wider interest. For citizens, the experience of well-conducted participative activities can be very rewarding and can motivate those who had not previously had these experiences to continue their involvement.

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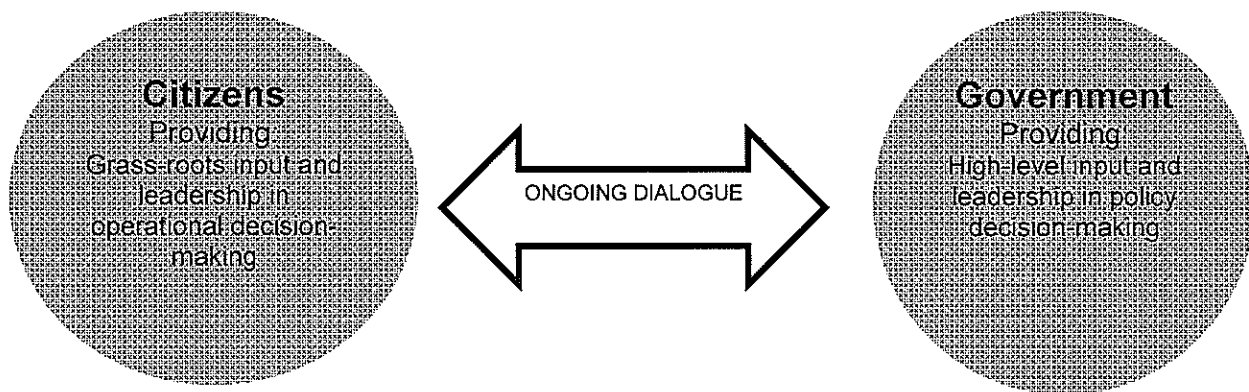
<sup>3</sup> *Connecting Government: Whole of government responses to Australia's priority challenges*, Management Advisory Committee, Commonwealth Government, 2004, p3.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.premiersawards.dpc.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=categories>

On a more pragmatic level, engagement with the citizens who will be using a particular service is just simply good business practice. It helps to ensure that the final product meets the needs of the people who will be using it.

*...there has been a realisation that governments do not have the resources, expertise or influence to solve all issues... This does not mean that state government has no role, but rather an adjustment in thinking about how outcomes can be achieved is required. Increasingly, government is more involved in 'steering' than 'rowing'. This means its emphasis is on setting the overall direction through policy and planning, engaging with stakeholders and citizens and in partnering with others to deliver programs and services.*

This basic point is made to iterate how critical it is that high-level policy is not left alone to decide all aspects of a project—input from those at the grass-roots level is just as, if not more, important in guiding effective collaborative approaches and building effective services. A partnership approach, such as the one shown in the diagram below, that fosters ongoing dialogue, should be sought between Government and citizens.



In my role as Commissioner I will be endeavouring to give a voice to children and young people, to help them participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and I will be encouraging other government agencies to do the same. Article 12(1) and (2) of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* tries to embed the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes but it is of concern to me that the levels of non-participation among children and young people remain high, especially because of the enormous positive contribution they can make.

*[A] group that is often overlooked when agencies are embarking on a community participation program are children and young people. Children can, and do, provide unique insights into complex issues that challenge policy makers and this advice can improve the uptake of both child-centred policy and programs.*<sup>5</sup>

If children and young people are unable to participate in decision-making (and democratic) processes, they run the risk of becoming socially excluded and it becomes more difficult to reflect their views and needs satisfactorily.

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<sup>5</sup> Office of Citizens and Civics, *Working Together: Involving Community and Stakeholders in Decision-Making*, Consulting Citizens Series, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia, p6

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p30.

## **Case study**

### ***No more violence – we're breaking the silence.***

This campaign was Western Australia's first public awareness campaign specifically targeted towards young people affected by family or dating violence. It was initiated by the Family and Domestic Violence Unit in partnership with the Office of Children and Youth, and was developed in consultation with numerous government agencies, and family and domestic violence, sexual abuse and child protection experts, and children and young people.

As the campaign's target audience was young people affected by or worried about family, domestic or dating violence, young people were involved in the project from the outset and consulted on all aspects of the information kits – including content, design and distribution. The inclusion of young people in this process ensured that the campaign was engaging, funky, vibrant and appealed to young audiences.

The kits that were produced have been hugely popular: a reprint was required and many schools and community groups have used the resources as a basis for developing programs for children and young people at risk. This project won a StateWest Achievement Award in 2006.

This project demonstrates that when children and young people are involved in collaborative efforts the positive outcomes can be extraordinary.

## **Conclusion**

Even if collaboration *is* rocket science, we know enough about what works and what doesn't work for us all to be rocket scientists. As I have outlined in this submission, achieving effective collaboration in government would be assisted by:

- Dissolving the boundaries that exist between traditional government functions to enable coordinated delivery of services;
- Encouraging innovative and joint budget applications and giving them preferential status to prevent barriers to collaboration that are thrown up by funding issues;
- Requiring departments to provide combined reports/updates on collaborative projects to strengthen cross-government ownership issues;
- Promoting strong leadership at senior levels by incorporating 'demonstrating outcomes achieved as a consequence of collaboration' in Directors General's performance agreements;
- Rewarding best practice in collaboration by government agencies by awarding an annual Premier's Award for "Excellence in Collaboration";
- Encouraging governments to engage with citizens to help shape policy and service delivery; and
- Ensuring specifically that children and young people (and other socially excluded groups) are invited and encouraged to become involved in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.