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Shadow Minister for Planning; Lands & Heritage
Member for Mining & Pastoral

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Hon Peter Foster MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council Committee Office
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

By email: env@parliament.wa.gov.au.

Dear Mr Foster

Submission - Petition No. 047 – Crime and anti-social behaviour across the Kimberley

I tabled Petition No. 047 – Crime and anti-social behaviour across the Kimberley in the Legislative Council on 6 April 2022 and I am pleased to provide further information to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs (Committee) pursuant to the Legislative Council's Standing Orders.

I completely support the premise of the petition – that an urgent and co-ordinated whole of government approach is required to address the escalating and unprecedented levels of crime and anti-social behaviour occurring in the Kimberley – and many other parts of regional Western Australia.

Law and order is a key issue across the north, with the number of offences reaching record levels in December 2021 across a range of categories including dwelling burglary, serious family assault and serious non-family assault, according to WA Police Force Crime Data. Stealing from Motor Vehicle was the second highest in December 2021, with the record number of offences in September that year. Criminal damage offences peaked in January 2022.

Of deepest concern to local residents is that many of these crimes are being committed by juveniles, some less than 10 years old. Crime has become an institutionalised way of life for many, commencing with petty theft and rapidly escalating to burglary and motor vehicle theft. The victims of this crime range from individuals to businesses and organisations ranging from charities to Aboriginal Corporations. In most cases the damage caused to the buildings is far greater than the cash or goods stolen with the cost of insurance rising to the point of being unaffordable or unavailable due to risk.

Lawlessness is impacting on business viability with lost days through break-ins and costs not covered through insurance. It is also impacting on the logistics chain with heavy vehicle driver injury caused by rocks thrown by juveniles smashing windscreens and an increasing reluctance of drivers to travel in some locations due to risk.

There is now increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining staff for both private and government operations. This is having a direct impact on the capacity and cost to government for the delivery of services. Wyndham Hospital, for example, had to reduce operating hours and I have been informed that agency staff are now widely used to backfill positions across the Kimberley. From a health and safety perspective, the lack of staff and extreme hours are also of concern. One agency nurse I spoke to said she worked sixteen consecutive night shifts.



The hospitals are under enormous strain due to the level of hospital admissions due violence, and the lack of staff exacerbates this issue.

Most locals will tell you that motor vehicle theft for “joyriding” or even to get a lift home, has always been present in the Kimberley, however the trend now is for violent and malicious acts driven by Social Media challenges including stealing motor vehicles to target police cars. Older people are being beaten with metal bars for their car keys, some having multiple cars stolen and cars are routinely burnt to remove DNA evidence.

It was against this backdrop of dysfunction and lawlessness that I undertook a series of Community and Crime Forums in the Kimberley in February 2022. Over four hundred people across five towns came to share their experiences and identify the solutions they supported. The human toll is enormous. One essential worker said that she couldn’t sleep anymore after waking to find multiple youths around her bed.

The Forum series unpacked five immediate priorities, the first of which was immediate additional police in the towns to deal with the crisis and improve security.

The State Government responded with Operation Regional Shield. The Police carry a heavy load and should be congratulated on their incredible efforts in community outreach while balancing their duty to investigate and apprehend the perpetrators of these crimes. The police report that they are aware of the juveniles participating in anti-social and criminal behaviour, and their families, however the revolving door nature of the current approach to juvenile justice means many are released on bail with conditions such as a curfew, only to re-offend almost immediately.

Importantly, there is no appropriate facility in the Kimberley for these juveniles to go to ensuring the community is kept safe from their dangerous behaviour, making the threshold for any form of incarceration very high as the only option is Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre. This also means that there are also limited options for these young offenders to receive the intensive support and guidance they need whilst remaining on their own country and close to support networks. Programs such as Target 120 are important, however more needs to be done.

The second priority from the Forums was to get more government services to stay in town. The State Government appears to have introduced a FIFO response for Child Protection workers with an after-hours number to call that I have heard is not answered locally, if at all. Most of the issues occur at night, not during business hours.

The third priority was to fund safe houses. This is often misunderstood as being a place where children are forced to stay. Rather, the intent is for them to be able to go there to escape serious domestic violence at home. During the forums people reported that they could have half a dozen children sleeping in their homes overnight as an informal safe house and they are carrying the financial burden of feeding these children, who are often hungry. Government needs to step into this space with support at a range of levels.

The fourth priority was to get children back into school and into pathways to employment. Currently many young people are reported to be functionally illiterate, which severely limits opportunities.

The fifth was that parents needed to be accountable for their children, with a whole-of-family approach to resolving the complex issues.

The fear and frustration felt by many people across the north of our state is very real and needs to be acknowledged and addressed as a matter of priority with a whole of government response. To quote a senior Police Officer, “this is not an issue that we can arrest our way out of,” this issue needs commitment, investment and coordination if we are going to save this generation of young people and our regional communities.

Yours sincerely



Hon Neil Thomson MLC
Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region

