

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

REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS EXERCISED BY THE COMMISSIONER

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
MONDAY, 10 AUGUST 2015**

SESSION TWO

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 10.45 am**Mr CRAIG COMRIE****Chief Executive Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, examined:**

The CHAIR: On behalf the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, I would like to thank you for your appearance today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in its review of the functions exercised by the commissioner, with particular reference to the recommendations contained in the recent review. I am the member for Maylands; with me is Hon Robyn McSweeney, member for South West Region and a former minister; and Hon Sally Talbot, member for South West Region. This hearing is a formal process of Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings of the house. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing, and Hansard will make a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

I have a few questions to ask you. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Comrie: I have.

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

Mr Comrie: I do.

The CHAIR: Did you receive the information for witnesses sheet provided?

Mr Comrie: I did.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions?

Mr Comrie: No.

The CHAIR: You are very aware of this review that was done, because you were a major contributor in it, on the steering committee for the review, and what came out of the review. I am really interested, I suppose, in what your thoughts are, in particular, if we start off with your strong recommendation about the one-stop shop complaints service, and the complaints mechanism that you supported, which was broad and contemplated the commissioner receiving all complaints and assessing them before essentially deciding what to do with them. Is that still the position that you hold?

Mr Comrie: I will give some context to that just before I answer that question. That submission that you are reading from is our submission to the Public Sector Commission’s review. Subsequent to that we sat on the review committee that the Public Sector Commission established. There were not-for-profits on that group, and academics as well as government departments. Obviously, there was quite a substantial deliberation and quite a lot of discussion around particularly the one-stop shop complaints process and I would say that, since then, I do have a different opinion, or YACWA has a different opinion, as to what the best approach is in that area. Our strong belief is that the best approach is to build the capacity of government departments to make sure that they are actually more accessible to young people, rather than having a sole role for the commissioner to follow up complaints. There are a lot of reasons for that, particularly around the need to make sure that when young people need to make a complaint that they can do it as quickly as possible. The reality is that, the commissioner’s office being in Subiaco, they only have

one outpost that is not necessarily an accessible place for young people. What we would want to see is, particularly for young people in regional Western Australia, that they can actually feel comfortable going to child protection or going to the health department or going to the education department to be able to do that.

The CHAIR: It is interesting that you changed your opinion about that. It has been a bit of a journey in the last 12 months around this. I suppose that is the essence of what this committee is trying to establish for ourselves, given models that are working around the world and other experience in other countries, long experience and great successes in other countries with different reporting mechanisms and different rules for different commissioners. We are trying to work out where we think the best value-adding for our commissioner is likely to be. Do you have a view on that now, that you would like to share?

[10.50 am]

Mr Comrie: I might just reiterate that the most important thing is that a young person can make a complaint as soon as they need to, and that they feel comfortable in doing so. That should always be the priority. I think that in order to do that, what we need to make sure of is that all services—government, not-for-profits, schools, or whatever—are accessible environments for young people to make complaints. I think that we could do a lot better in making sure that government departments in particular are prepared to be able to take young people's complaints. There is great work happening in that space. I know that the education department—Sharyn O'Neill sat on the public sector review committee—has been looking at that internally. The Department for Child Protection and Family Support has also been looking at that internally. I think that is the work that we should be focusing on supporting, and I think that the role for the commissioner in that space is actually to provide advice and support to these government departments in order to better make that process accessible to young people. As has been mentioned by quite a number of people, and it is mentioned in the review as well, the reality is that if we were to add any new functions to the commissioner's office it would require a new set of skills in her staff group. It would require extra resources, and I do not think that that is necessary if we can actually make the government departments better in their processes. It is a better investment of money.

The CHAIR: What about the journey through reporting?

Mr Comrie: How do you mean, sorry?

The CHAIR: Say a child, or even an adult, has had the courage to come forward and report to police or to DCP or to whomever, is there a role for the commissioner to make sure that that child's journey—because really what Blaxell was most concerned about is that reporting ends up by being the least of the person's problem. By the time they have finished the system, they are very traumatised, perhaps in some cases. He was most concerned about the lack of stability on the journey through. Who would you see providing that role then?

Mr Comrie: Look, I definitely think that the commissioner's office can play a role in providing ongoing support to a young person or an adult who is making a complaint. That is in particular at times where I think complaints processes do become frustrating for the person making the complaint. I think that there is role for the commissioner's office to be able to provide some of that support. But I think that that is symptomatic of the fact that our current complaints processes in a lot of government departments are not accessible in the first place. So if we can actually work on making them more effective, quicker and actually more supportive of the complainant, then we are going to have less of those problems than what we have had in the past. Does that make sense?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Comrie: By making the current processes easier for people to follow through on we are naturally going to make it easier for the complainant. I think in the end, if the complaints process goes through its whole process and that the complainant is still aggrieved or they still have

something further to follow through, there may be potentially a role for the commissioner's office to follow up that complaint from that point. However, once again, I think that would require some additional resources for the commissioner's office to make sure they can actually follow that through. I think there is also other oversight processes like the Ombudsman, and Judy Garsed, the Advocate for Children in Care.

The CHAIR: I was about to ask you about that.

Mr Comrie: So there are some processes that can actually kind of review complaint processes. It would be good to bolster those as well to be able to be better accessible to young people.

The CHAIR: You kind of hinted at my next question, which is: from YACWA's understanding of the current system, where are there gaps in the complaints and reporting process at the moment?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Can I just go one further than that?

The CHAIR: You may.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: In your role—it is to do with the chair's question—you must come across a lot of young people who do not report. I guess that dovetails into the chair's question. Why do they not report if you know they have been abused? What is it that comes up most?

The CHAIR: Great question.

Mr Comrie: So, I think there are lots of reasons why young people do not report, and I am probably not going to be able to name all of them —

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I understand that.

Mr Comrie: Obviously, you probably have a sense of it as well. I think, first and foremost in this context, young people are not encouraged to make complaints in the first place; they are encouraged to, kind of, be seen and not heard in a lot of processes. I think we need to be making sure that young people, regardless of the services they are accessing, understand that they are a consumer of that service and they have the right to complain. That is the role of everyone, whether it be people in the not-for-profit sector or people in government who are actually saying to young people, "If something happens to you, you have the right to complain; that is something you are allowed to do", and making sure that when they do make a complaint or make a claim, that they are supported in doing so. I think that something we experience quite a lot with the youth workers we work with is a lack of clarity in that when a young person does disclose something to a youth worker, the lack of clarity as to what the process is from that point. I think that that is another thing that a lot of work could be done on is increasing the worker's understanding of what will happen from the point that a young person makes a disclosure. It is particularly relevant for people in the non-government sector who are not technically under the mandatory reporting legislation—however, some of our grant agreements do require mandatory reporting—to bring some clarity as to what needs to be reported. We have actually just recently run training with a range of youth workers that we did in partnership with CPFS that is trying to build a better understanding of what should be reported when a young person discloses.

I think there is a second element in terms of other gaps in the system. I do not necessarily think it is a gap per se, but the complaints processes are generally arduous; they are generally very, very long, there are a lot of processes to them and a lot of young people will have to speak to numerous people in order to get their complaint heard. That could definitely be streamlined.

The CHAIR: Could I just interrupt you there? That is the argument for a one-stop shop that Blaxell put.

Mr Comrie: Yes, I am not sure that it is. Sorry to disagree.

The CHAIR: No, that is fine.

Mr Comrie: I think what we need is that if a young person is in the education system or they are in the health system or the child protection system, that is the system they are currently in contact with. They need a one-stop shop in that particular department that they can actually take a complaint to and have it followed through, and that that person becomes their go-to person in that department. Whereas in a lot of situations they will make a complaint to a particular person in a department, and then four or five folds later they are still dealing with the same complaint. I think that in terms of child protection or CPFS I would—I know this has potentially been raised by other organisations—suggest that actually some external oversight of CPFS in particular could be a useful tool. I think the advocate for children and young people is a very, very important role; however, when you really look at it, it is an internal position and it is not providing, necessarily, external oversight of child protection.

The CHAIR: Yes, I remember reading your arguments on that when we have discussed it in committee, Craig. You have been in YACWA for a while, so I take it back to the Katanning report when it happened 30 years ago but it continued through until quite recently really.

Mr Comrie: It did, yes.

The CHAIR: One of the questions I think is really interesting—I am not sure that we have any information about this—is how much better the system is now than it was before we had the Blaxell inquiry. I know there have been some amazing innovations and greater awareness and a whole bunch of stuff happening. I am just wondering whether you have any general observations, just in general from your history, what you think?

[11.00 am]

Mr Comrie: They will definitely be general observations. I think there are probably two key elements that have made Western Australia a, kind of, more open place to young people having the opportunity to make complaints. The first is the establishment of the commissioner's office in 2006, and actually at the time the commissioner, Michelle Scott, did focus on complaints and making the complaints processes more accessible. I think that has precipitated large government departments considering their own complaints processes, and I know that the commissioner's office has assisted with those processes. I do not do a lot of work in the education space, but I would suggest that actually that process is much better now. It is the same in child protection, and I think that that is a really positive thing and kind of dovetails with what I am suggesting is the best approach—actually focusing on making the current government departments more accessible.

I think the second is the royal commission into abuse in institutions. Whilst obviously that work is still going, it has provided a very, very strong national focus on child safety. Once again, it has kind of precipitated a larger understanding of the fact that we are all responsible for young people's safety, not just child protection and not just particular departments; we are all responsible for that. I think that the work that the royal commission has done in continuously consulting and encouraging particularly the not-for-profit sector to be more equipped and aware of those issues is really, really important.

The CHAIR: So your gut feeling is that it is better for those two reasons.

Mr Comrie: I would definitely say that it is better. I would still obviously suggest that there are young people out there that are not making complaints or are not going to take the opportunity to report. However, I think that the environment generally is better than what it was in Katanning.

The CHAIR: You mentioned the need for the independence of that office, but do you want to talk more about out-of-home care or your role in that?

Mr Comrie: There are probably better organisations to talk in detail about out-of-home care, and I know that Create Foundation has already appeared before you and I would suggest that I support their view on this area. They work very closely with young people in care and provide support to them and consult more regularly with that particular group. However, the reality is that a majority

of young people that are taken into care of any kind, whether it be child protection or juvenile justice or others, generally have experienced significant trauma already in their life, and that ranges widely. They are generally experiencing issues like mental health and homelessness at a much higher rate. Naturally, their likelihood of being aggrieved by processes is higher than the universal group of young people, so I do think that we need to focus more time on making sure that those young people feel that they have the opportunity to make a complaint. That is the only comment I have to make on that.

The CHAIR: A couple of questions occur to me. In arguing that the commissioner does not have that one-stop-shop role or whatever it is, I just wanted to draw your attention to some of the work this committee has been doing in examining other models about how this role is performed. In countries that have had far more experience in this than we have in some respects and have been around for a long time, there is a named person in legislation around this. The very clear assumption is that it does not matter how long your system has been working for and you have had a children's commissioner for longer than us, it still does not give the one point of contact that an individual is going to require on the journey through reporting child abuse. So what you are suggesting does not actually solve that problem that Blaxell referred to; that is, where is the single friend of a child that takes their case and unequivocally and with no bias accepts that child's view as truth and carries through with that child on the journey?

Mr Comrie: I see your point, but I would suggest that actually we all need to be that advocate rather than a single person. I think that in particular when looking at government departments, the young person needs to know that that government department is going to follow through on that complaint effectively. The end goal should be that all processes are accessible to those young people. I think that that is kind of where I am coming from; in the end, it is all our responsibility. It does raise for me something that kind of has made this whole process a little bit difficult in that there is not any legislation to consider. We have been through a process where obviously there have been deliberations of this committee—there has been the Public Sector Commission's review and there have been recommendations made from that obviously, and Blaxell's inquiry previously—but we are still sitting with the same piece of legislation that was entered into Parliament in 2006, and I know that that is part of your role. I think not necessarily a new piece of legislation, but actually seeing how some of the suggested models could work in terms of the legislative framework could actually be very useful to determine what the best approach is. The other thing is that my view—I am definitely not an expert on legislation—is that actually the legislation does not prohibit the commissioner from undertaking this work currently. The functions of the commissioner are wideranging and actually allow for special inquiries to be held.

The CHAIR: My next question was on special inquiries.

Mr Comrie: I actually think the function is there if it was needed and if it was required. I think that that is partly why you appoint independent commissioners under legislation, so that then they can use their discretion to use the functions of their role as necessary, when needed.

The CHAIR: Under what you have just described—can you just correct me if I am wrong?—under a special inquiry under part 5 of the act, are you suggesting that the commissioner would examine the capacity of the system to support a child or are you saying that the commissioner would establish that function herself using part 5 of the act?

Mr Comrie: I think it could be both. I think that there could be, for instance, a special inquiry into—sorry to use a particular department; maybe I should use a different one—how the health department is responding to a child's complaint or how accessible their process is in order for young people to make complaints in that context. The special inquiry function could definitely be used for that purpose. I think the other purpose it could be used for is that if a complaint was raised to the commissioner's office, or the commissioner's office became aware of that complaint and it did suggest a systemic issue—obviously, Katanning was a systemic issue—then actually a special

inquiry could be launched under the legislation. I think that whilst the commissioner's role is very detailed in terms of the functions, obviously there is some flexibility as to how those functions can be rolled out.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I think you are right about the systemic issue. If there was a systemic issue found, the children's commissioner could certainly set up an inquiry and look at that issue. But I think there are enough places for children to report to, or enough people for children to report to, if they want to. They feel safe at school. It is actually afterwards when all hell breaks loose. It sounds lovely and fluffy to have a support person come in, but that support person has to be highly trained. I would put it at a psychologist level, because you are dealing with such dysfunction—you are dealing with disbelief and you are dealing with horror. It is a family war zone, because if mum does not believe the child, the child has to go back home and there is the perpetrator, if it is within the family. If it is outside the family—if it is a family friend—it is different once again. But there are all these scenarios around child abuse, so I do not actually think it is the reporting of it. There are enough people that children feel safe with to report if they want to, if they choose to, but a child is very wise and they know that, once they report, things are never going to be the same again. That is probably what you find when I asked you before. In your position at YACWA, you would have found a lot of those kids who are probably dysfunctional because of what happened to them or did come out and were not believed. So I do not think it is people; I think it is the response to the child abuse that we need to look at.

[11.10 am]

Mr Comrie: Yes. I absolutely agree that people are savvy about what is going to happen from that point. I think that that is often because they do have good supports, particularly youth workers and social workers who are able to provide that information to them; however, not all young people get that information and some people are not necessarily aware of the full ramifications. I think that you are right as well, that we need to provide better support to young people at the end of the processes. I do not necessarily think that the best end is to then put the young person back through another process of review. It is actually better that they have support from services to make sure that young people are supported in the needs that they have. I think that, potentially, something that may come out of the royal commission is that we actually need to have support at all levels of the spectrum of the process for young people. It kind of does suggest that building the capacity of the not-for-profit sector to be able to support that young person at the end might actually be another solution to the issue.

The CHAIR: Change of subject: Do you want to tell us a bit about the YEP Project's child sexual abuse and manager reporting workshop that you ran with DCPFS? Did they fund you to do that? Did you fund it out of the YEP Project? How well was it attended? How did you work out there was a need for it?

Mr Comrie: Actually, the YEP Project is Kate's project.

The CHAIR: She should have been up the front!

Mr Comrie: The way that began, and I kind of already mentioned it today, is that there is a little bit of lack of clarity in the sector, particularly the youth sector, where obviously we have got most of our feedback from, as to what role youth workers play within the mandatory reporting framework. Obviously there are some named professions in the legislation, but in our branch agreements and in most branch agreements, there is a reference to a requirement for a mandatory report. It depends on which department is funding not-for-profit services as to how much of the focus is put on that particular clause within grant agreements. Obviously, child protection is very strong on that, and others are not so strong, which I think leads to a bit of the lack of clarity. Basically, as a result of that, the YEP Project, as you may know, is around building the capacity of youth workers in particular to support young people in non-educational settings around sexual health, so drop-in centres, youth homelessness services, drug and alcohol services and so on; so predominantly where

youth workers are the ones supporting young people. This has consistently come up. It has been a six-year project now. It has consistently come up as an area. As part of the project, we identify training areas and fill them. Basically, this one was obviously a key one. We contacted Child Protection, and Child Protection basically said they would be more than happy to do it. In terms of how it was funded, I believe that it was free training and it was provided by Child Protection on a free basis as well. Subsequent to that training, or just prior to it, I met with Emma White and we have had a further discussion about training that is provided through Child Protection's Learning and Development Centre in Leederville on where we can provide better links to the youth sector to that free training that is available.

The CHAIR: Is it funded out of YEP or DCP?

Mr Comrie: I suppose there was no cost to the process really at the time. The YEP Project is funded by Health under its sexual health and blood-borne virus program. That contract is actually just ending; we are not sure where it is at the moment. Health is the main funder.

The CHAIR: That is really what we were trying to get to: who was putting the money into developing this project? It is fabulous; well done you. You have talked a little bit about the YEP Project. Is there specific information about child abuse as an inherent component of that project?

Mr Comrie: At this stage there is not. This is probably the first time that we have had a foray into that particular element of youth workers' work. Most of the focus of the YEP Project is around building youth workers' capacities to have these conversations, because they are obviously not easy conversations, sometimes, to have with young people and very much on the young people's safety in terms of their sexual behaviour and safety around being able to negotiate consent in particular. We have not had a focus on child abuse; however, it has come up in previous trainings that we have done with the WA Association of Youth Workers. They have done training for us around ethics in sexual health and issues around, say, 15 and 17-year-olds having sex or whatever—different scenarios that we have worked through with youth workers, but nothing as finite as what you have suggested.

The CHAIR: Do you think there is a need in the sector for more funding to be made available to look at issues or programs around child abuse, particularly for the youth sector?

Mr Comrie: I would not necessarily say more funding—surprising for me to say—but I think there has been some great work done by the royal commission and also by the commissioner's office here around creating child-safe environments; and more focus on creating child-safe environments is naturally going to make those environments more responsive and more aware of child abuse as a concern. We would probably suggest that we need to wait and to see the recommendations of the royal commission as to whether or not they will make recommendations for additional funding in the space. There are organisations, however, like Anglicare that have actually already invested their own money into making their organisation more child safe—obviously child abuse is a key element of that—and we should be encouraging more organisations to take the lead, like Anglicare has, rather than just necessarily saying more funding is required.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Would you know how many youth workers there are around WA? Do you have a number?

Mr Comrie: I do not, actually. We have just started a conversation with WACOSS about mapping the number of youth workers.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I think youth workers are underrated. I have a youth worker in my family and she is just excellent with the young people. I think they are not utilised enough. I would like your opinion on that one.

Mr Comrie: I would 100 per cent agree with you that the youth work profession is undervalued. There are fantastic youth workers across the state and country doing amazing work with young people. I think the key difference in the profession of youth work is that young people are the

primary client. As opposed to other professions who might see young people in that larger microcosm, the number one priority for the youth worker is the young person, and that is particularly key. I think that we definitely could do with more youth workers in a lot of different settings. It probably provides me with an opportunity to say that I think we should look at making youth workers a specified calling for child protection, because at the moment they are not a profession that is a specified calling. I think the child protection system could benefit from having more youth workers in their child protection teams. That is not just child protection, however; youth workers still work in a lot of contexts. We are very lucky to kind of work with youth workers on a daily basis and they are really, really focused on the needs of young people, and at all times they are focused on a strength-based approach, so providing young people with the support they need to be able to take on life themselves and take on the issues that they have. I mean, it is particularly relevant in a complaints context because, really, what youth workers would be encouraging is to build the capacity of that young person to then take on that complaint themselves.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: They are support workers, are they not?

Mr Comrie: Yes.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: When it boils down to it, they are the support worker for the young person.

Mr Comrie: Yes.

[11.20 am]

Hon SALLY TALBOT: So youth workers are not subject to mandatory reporting?

Mr Comrie: They are not, no.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: There was a reason for that.

Mr Comrie: If they are an employee of Child Protection, I would understand that they are required; however, a youth worker in the not-for-profit sector is not, under legislation, required to report. However, I would suggest that youth workers would actually follow process based on a discussion with young people.

The CHAIR: Should they be?

Mr Comrie: I have actually spoken to Robyn about this previously. My view is that they should not—not my view; YACWA's view. Youth workers have a very important trusting relationship with young people and that is the key element of the relationship. I think to force youth workers to make reports on behalf of young people actually diminishes their capacity to build that trusting relationship.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Yes, it is the same with psychologists.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I just need to understand. You are saying they should not be subject to mandatory —

Mr Comrie: They should not be legislatively required to report. They should not be legislatively required because of that trusting relationship. However, they should be well trained and have their capacity built in order to make decisions and work with young people to make those decisions to report when it is required and when the young person seeks for that report to happen. Sorry, I do not have a particular example, but there might be an instance where a child is about to make a disclosure to a youth worker. Youth workers are very savvy in that process and may say to the young person, "I need to stop you there. I need to make you aware that if you go on to make a disclosure, this is the process that's followed. Are you comfortable with that?" If the young person says no, they might make the disclosure to the youth worker. The young person then is aware of what the process is moving forward. However, the legislation would require that if the youth worker

has a suspicion that the disclosure was about to be made, they would be required to take on that report. I think that that is dangerous to the trusting relationship that young people have.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Have you got any direct evidence that shows children do consider that when they are contemplating disclosure?

Mr Comrie: In terms of considering the follow-through?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: They might talk to a youth worker who is not obliged to report, as opposed to a GP or a teacher.

Mr Comrie: I do not have any solid evidence of it; however, I think there may be research into that area. I am happy to go out and provide anything on notice that I can find.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: If that is not too much trouble.

Mr Comrie: That is fine.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: There was research.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I would be very interested in that.

Mr Comrie: The reason why I think that there will be research is because I know that it happens. I know that young people will seek out people that they know; that there will not necessarily be that follow-through and actually just want to get it off their chest. Once again young people, particularly young people who have gone through trauma, are particularly savvy around processes. They will probably know that if they tell their teacher, their teacher will go on and make a report. I can definitely come back to you on that one.

The CHAIR: You may be interested to know that Donna Cross came in and talked us through 101 on cyberbullying. She made it very clear that kids reject some of the more common social media and find their own ways because they are suspicious whether that is a parent or somebody they might be speaking to who they might be disclosing more than they should do; from a suspicion, not from a healthy perspective.

I have two final, quick questions. In terms of the position that YACWA is taking around the journey of an individual through disclosure, reporting, prosecution, the legal system, and the outcome of all of that, it is your opinion that right now that is adequate; that everything in place is adequate?

Mr Comrie: No, absolutely not. I think my suggestion is that we need to be focusing on making sure the current processes are better at doing that. I definitely do not think they are adequate at the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I just wanted to get that clear.

The final thing is: is it okay to wait until the royal commission has finished its work, which in best case would be 2018, but realistically it may be more like 2020?

Mr Comrie: In terms of responding to complaints processes or —

The CHAIR: What you are saying about making sure that this system is as good as it can be.

Mr Comrie: We think, firstly, we are learning a lot from the royal commission over the time of the commission. Also I said wait until the recommendations—I think they are making suggestions around approaches across the process. I definitely do not think we should wait until 2018. However, I do want to acknowledge that there is already good work happening here in particular departments. We should be encouraging them to do that as quickly as they can. Critical to that is involving children and young people in reviewing that process as well. I would like to see an across-government mandate that all government departments are equipped to be able to deal with young people's complaints. When I say "across government", it should be the Department of Fisheries, it should be the department of whatever —

Hon SALLY TALBOT: We have had that discussion with the commissioner.

Mr Comrie: It should be every single department is equipped to take complaints because, realistically, young people, particularly those young people who have experienced trauma, will have multiple relationships with government departments. Maybe not with Fisheries, but they will have six or seven relationships with government departments—Housing, Child Protection, Health, Education and so on. We need to make sure that those departments are equipped to be able to respond. I think that that is where we need to put our focus. I think in the end, if that is not successful, that is when we need to look at doing something different or creating a new entity. I do not think that there is enough evidence to suggest at the moment we need to have a standalone; we actually need to be focusing on making government departments and not-for-profits more accessible to young people. I am sorry to repeat myself, but I think to some extent creating a single entity lets all of the other departments off. It kind of says, “You don’t need to do anything about your processes because we’ve got this new one” when actually would it not be better to make sure that our government bureaucracy is more accessible rather than providing that “out”?

The last thing I say about that is I think that it is important to differentiate as well, even though I have been using the language, about complaints and child abuse disclosures because I think they are two different things. We need to make sure that we are aware of the difference because actually a complaint might just be in the education system that a child feels that their teacher is not listening to them or they do not have the opportunity to speak up in their class. That is really important. Young people should be able, as consumers of the education system, to complain about that or follow a process to do that. Child abuse is obviously very, very important but is different to the other complaint that I suggested.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Craig. I think we are good. I will do the closing statement.

Thank you for your evidence today. Vanessa, our principal research officer, may write to you about additional materials. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. If you do not return it within 10 days, it will be deemed correct. New material cannot be added in your corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. If you want to provide additional information, go ahead with a supplementary submission when you return your transcript. Thank you so much, Craig, for coming in today.

Mr Comrie: No worries at all. Thank you very much for your time.

Hearing concluded at 11.28 am
