

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

Recommendation 1: The Department of Health considers investing in the number and capacity of frontline health workers, such as child health nurses, to support food literacy development for populations at risk of food insecurity.

Noted.

All WA front line health workers play a critical role in providing education and support to health consumers. Health literacy education and communication form part of health workers professional qualifications and ongoing professional training and development.

A review of health literacy education and communication qualifications together with current activities by WA front line health workers across the health system should be considered prior to investing in new initiatives and programs.

Recommendation 2: The WA Government works with Fair Food WA to support the food literacy of the food relief sector by implementing the Food Literacy Action Logic Model and developing state guidelines for healthy food relief.

Supported in principle.

The Department of Education provides support in principle for improving existing state and national guidelines and policy frameworks, however, it is recommended the issue be reviewed in a coordinated manner to inform a state government position.

WA schools make a positive contribution in supporting students to make healthy food choices and understanding good nutrition. This is embedded within the curriculum and promoted through Department of Education policy – a change to the curriculum would not be supported.

Recommendation 3: The Department of Education reviews government funding of the School Breakfast Program to ensure it covers the real costs of delivering the program – including a paid coordinator within registered schools – to meet demand and increase impact on an ongoing basis.

Supported.

In December 2022, the Department of Education undertook a review of the school breakfast program including seeking feedback from students, schools and the community to identify potential improvements to the program. The Department is currently examining the results of the review with a view to implementation.

Prior to considering the appointment of school-based coordinators, it would be beneficial to assess the outcomes of the Department of Education's review into the current school breakfast program.

Recommendation 4: The Department of Education identifies how many WA schools are using their own funds to provide free food for students. It should quantify total costs, measure impact, and identify the elements of successful programs in different contexts across the state.

Not supported.

Public schools operate with a one-line budget and are funded through the student-centred funding model (SCFM). The SCFM provides a per-student allocation with adjustments for a variety of circumstances including student Aboriginality, disability and social disadvantage, and a locality allocation for outer regional and remote areas to help schools meet the complexities unique to their context.

Decisions regarding the use of this funding are made at a school level, and as a result it would impose a significant and unreasonable administrative burden on schools to identify the funds used to provide free food.

WA schools also have the flexibility to liaise directly with Foodbank WA and to coordinate supplementary access to food products. To meet demand, schools may also access other programs such as Eat Up Australia, OzHarvest and SecondBite.

Given the number of variables, and that the program is responsive to the context of each school, it is not possible to quantify costs or measure the impact of programs in different contexts across the state.

Recommendation 5: The Minister for Education uses the renewal of the National School Reform Agreement to put a school lunch program on the national reform agenda.

Noted.

The current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) and associated bilateral agreement were due to expire on 31 December 2023. In December 2022 Education Ministers agreed to extend the current NSRA for 12 months, subject to agreement from First Ministers and Treasurers, and also agreed to a new review of Australia's education system that will inform the next NSRA.

The national review and process for extending the current NSRA and bilateral agreements are currently underway.

The merits of school lunch provisions being included in the national school reform agenda and/or the state's NSRA bilateral agreement may be considered by the State Government when negotiating the new multilateral and bilateral agreements. These negotiations will likely commence after the national review has concluded.

Any funding reduction to core education priorities to implement this recommendation will not be supported.

Recommendation 6: Provision of a school lunch – particularly for disadvantaged students – be included as an action in Western Australia’s bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth on quality schools reform.

Noted.

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) (2019 – 2023), is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to lift student outcomes across Australian schools.

In December 2022, Education Ministers agreed to establish an Expert Panel to review and inform the next NSRA. It was also agreed by Education Ministers to extend the NSRA for 12 months (to December 2024). The review and process to extend the NSRA and bilateral agreements are currently underway.

Under the NSRA, WA has a Bilateral Agreement (BA), that sets out specific actions to improve student outcomes. The BA identifies activities that support particular student cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in regional, rural and remote areas, students with disability and students from a low-SES background.

The Expert Panel is expected to deliver its final report to the Education Ministers by 31 October 2023. It is anticipated this report will inform the next NSRA and bilateral agreements.

The State Government will consider the merits of the provision of school lunches being included in the WA’s BA at the time of negotiation.

Recommendation 7: The Department of Education investigates the potential for grant funding from the National Indigenous Australians Agency to provide a lunch program for schools in Western Australia’s remote communities, similar to the School Nutrition Projects the agency provides in the Northern Territory.

Not supported.

The Perth office of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) advised the Department of Education that the NIAA no longer funds stand-alone lunch, breakfast or nutrition programs in schools.

The Northern Territory program is a historical program and is not available elsewhere.

NIAA does fund some remote school attendance programs that include a range of attendance strategies, of which nutrition may be a small component. These programs are community driven and NIAA funds Indigenous organisations to deliver the program, not schools.

Recommendation 8: 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.

Not supported.

The Department of Education considers that such a pilot would be both workforce and cost prohibitive. 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 to enable:

- the provision and transportation of food to metropolitan, regional and remote schools in Western Australia
- purchase and installation of equipment required by schools to store food and prepare meals
- FTE allocation to support the role of a dedicated project manager and coordinators at every pilot school
- Long-term evaluation of the program

Recommendation 9: The State Government should apply a whole-of-government approach in considering a school lunch program model and take into account:

- **How a model based on means-testing would identify eligibility and avoid stigmatising eligible students in government and non-government schools**
- **How corporate funds could supplement state funding**
- **The need for flexible delivery models according to location**
- **The need for appropriately trained paid staff**
- **Ways to ensure food quality is maintained**
- **Strategies to encourage student uptake**
- **Cultural preferences and dietary needs**
- **A direction to school food providers to procure a proportion of fresh food from local primary producers**
- **The potential for schools to act as a hub for community food relief and food security programs.**

Noted.

The WA Government has recently provided additional support for people experiencing disadvantage through Lotterywest grants:

- In June 2023, \$927,080 a grant to Anglicare to provide crisis and emergency relief to 10,000 Western Australians experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship, homelessness, family and domestic violence or unemployment.
- In August 2023, \$2 million to St Vincent de Paul Society to support families experiencing financial hardship.

Recommendation 10: The Minister for Early Childhood Education recommends that the next review of the National Quality Framework includes a review of the National Quality Standard, with particular regard to the adequacy of the elements related to food provision.

Noted.

The implementation of the National Quality Standard (NQS) in WA operates differently from the national model and advocating for increasing the prescriptive nature of the regulations and standards around food provision would be complex to support in implementation.

Quality Areas 2 and 6 provide existing levers to promote healthy eating and create partnerships around inclusion and wellbeing. How these are interpreted through existing verification and audit processes across the Department of Education could be reviewed and supported at a system level to better guide schools in improving food security issues. This action in schools could be supported now.

Recommendation 11: The State Government monitors the outcomes from the Early Years Partnership and ensures that understanding of the nutritional needs of the 0 to 4 years age group benefits communities beyond those in the partnership program.

Supported.

The State Government, through the Departments of Communities, Education and Health, supports the Early Years Partnership (EYP) with the Minderoo Foundation, the Telethon Kids Institute (as the research and evidence partner) and 4 communities in very remote, remote, regional and metropolitan locations.

The State Government supports the current actions in each of the 4 EYP communities where food security action has been identified.

The Department of Communities has taken an implementation science approach to measuring the impact of the EYP at a local level, with the Telethon Kids Institute, as the research and evidence partner for EYP, intending to use linked data sets to measure impact over time.

Recommendation 12: The Department of Health should support food insecure pregnant women to receive the nutritional support they require to deliver a healthy birthweight baby.

Noted.

Health Service Providers across the WA health system provide advice, educational resources, and support to pregnant women while delivering antenatal and other health services, including monitoring maternal wellbeing, nutrition and other lifestyle behaviours, foetal growth and development.

Pregnant women accessing health services requiring food relief are referred to appropriate support services for assistance.

Recommendation 13: Relevant State Government agencies and representatives support the investigation of food hubs as a way to address food supply and distribution issues in remote and regional areas, in accordance with Food Community Project research and recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities.

Noted

The WA Government notes the recommendation to investigate food hubs as a way to address food supply and distribution issues in remote and regional areas. Many remote Aboriginal communities (particularly very remote communities) will continue to experience supply and distribution issues due to the remoteness and challenges in accessibility of their locations.

Recommendation 14: Local government authorities and State Government departments ensure that they are represented on any Food Policy Councils that are initiated in regional areas.

Noted.

Local governments are largely independent and autonomous organisations, with an elected council that is responsible for setting policies and making decisions. However, recognising the importance of food security for children and young people affected by poverty, the State Government would encourage local governments to work with a Food Policy Council should one be established in their area.

Recommendation 15: The Department of Health investigates funding a program to train community peer educators to deliver healthy eating and nutrition messages in their own communities.

Not supported.

Public health nutritionists, dietitians, Aboriginal health workers, primary care practitioners, and other suitably qualified health professionals are best placed to deliver nutrition messages in the community.

However, community peer educators play an important role, particularly for Aboriginal, migrant and refugee communities where the value of capacity building and cultural sensitivity within communities is recognised. To ensure the right messaging, opportunities for trained professionals to work and link with community educators should be maximised where possible.

The Department of Health funds several evidence-based statewide programs to support food literacy in adults, children, and young people that prioritise best practice, value for money, effectiveness, and reach.

Recommendation 16: The WA Government places children’s rights at the core of policies and strategies to address poverty and food insecurity.

Noted.

The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People plays an important role in advocating and promoting children’s rights. The State Government is also committed to upholding the rights of all WA people. It recognises the need to consider children’s rights in the development of legislation and policy.

The WA Government recognises the needs of children living in poverty and the multifaceted impact that poverty has on them, their families and their communities which includes access to adequate and nutritious food.

The WA Government has put in place a range of strategies to support children and families experiencing poverty and financial hardship, including:

- Financial Counselling (confidential, free, and independent financial advice and advocacy);
- The Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS) assists utility customers who are in financial hardship and are unable to pay their utility bills; and
- Establishment of the Community Energy program providing free electricity between 9:00 m and 3:00 pm to Synergy customers who are experiencing ongoing financial hardship.

The WA Government has recently provided additional support through Lotterywest grants:

- In June 2023, a \$927,080 grant to Anglicare to provide crisis and emergency relief to 10,000 Western Australians experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship, homelessness, family and domestic violence or unemployment.
- In August 2023, a \$2 million to St Vincent de Paul Society to support families experiencing financial hardship.

Recommendation 17: The WA Government places children’s rights at the core of policies and strategies to address poverty and food insecurity.

Noted.

The WA Government recognises the need to consider children’s rights in the development of legislation and policy.

The WA Government recognises it is critical government agencies consider the potential impact on children and young people on all proposals being forwarded to Government via Cabinet. This is achieved by ensuring that appropriate research, analysis and consultation is undertaken at all points in the development of these proposals.

One way in which the WA Government consults with young people in the development of policy and program proposals, is through the Minister for Youth’s Ministerial Youth Advisory Council (MYAC). MYAC was established by the Minister for Youth in 2017 as a non-statutory advisory body to provide advice and investigate matters referred to them by the Minister.

Recommendation 18: The WA Government considers adopting a human rights charter to help ensure better respect for children's rights.

Noted.

There are a number of WA laws in place to protect people from discrimination, such as the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*. There is also legislation in place to support the promotion of human rights.

There are also a range of Commonwealth Government legislation in place recognising and protecting human rights including the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. The Australian Human Rights Commission also includes a National Children's Commissioner who works to protect and advocate for the rights of children and young people.

The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People also plays an important role in the promotion of children's rights, including advocating for children and young people, monitoring and reviewing legislation, policies and practices affecting the well-being of children and young people. The performance of the Commissioner's work is to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The WA Government also notes the Inquiry into Australia's Human Rights Framework is due to report by March 2024. The WA Government will consider the findings from this inquiry.

Recommendation 19: The WA Government prioritises the development and implementation of a child wellbeing strategy in Western Australia.

Noted.

Several reports and submissions over the past five years have recommended the development of a 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. Some examples include:

- the National agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly Target 4, which aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all 5 domains of the Australian Early Development Census;
- Child and Parent Centres, commissioned by the Department of Education; and
- Early Years Partnerships, coordinated by the Department of Communities.

Recommendation 20: The Department of Health identifies resources to scope a suitable survey methodology for regularly capturing the views and experiences of children and young people in regard to food insecurity. This could be in conjunction with bodies with existing expertise and/or survey instruments, such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Curtin University and the Telethon Kids Institute.

Not supported.

The Department of Health (DOH) welcomes collaboration and input from other agencies and experts in the design of population surveys that meet its strategic objectives.

However, the Report does not articulate how the collection of data directly from children would assist in addressing food insecurity in WA. The purpose of collecting food insecurity data directly from children would also need to be balanced against the complexities of surveying children directly.

Considerable additional resources would be required for the DOH to set up a new survey method for collecting data directly from children. Existing population health surveys such as the WA Health and Wellbeing Surveillance System (HWSS) are not suitable to collect this information, nor do they have ethics approval for collection of data directly from children. The DOH currently measures food insecurity at the household level through the HWSS.

Recommendation 21: The Department of Health considers how it can provide in-kind, resourcing or financial support for the development and maintenance of the Food Stress Index and Food Atlas.

Not supported.

The Department of Health (DOH) welcomes collaboration and input from other agencies and experts in the design of surveys and resources that meet its strategic objectives.

However, the DOH prioritises data information needs that are necessary to inform service delivery, policy, and planning. Significant additional resources and funding would be required to implement this recommendation.

Further clarity is required around how the Food Stress Index or the Food Atlas would assist the DOH in meeting its priority objectives.

Recommendation 22: The Minister for Planning requests that the WA Planning Commission develops a new (or amends existing) state planning policy that ensures the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Noted.

The WA Government supports the principle of planning policy ensuring the health and wellbeing of children and young people, but does not support adopting this recommendation as proposed.

The Government is confident that in maintaining the Western Australian Planning Framework, the Western Australian Planning Commission is considering the needs of all members of the community, including children and young people.

An underlying principle of all land use planning systems is the consideration of the impact of land use and development on community health and amenity. Matters of public health, accessibility, co-location of activities and services are all key matters for the planning decision maker, both in developing strategic plans and policies that apply across the State, as well as in statutory decision making.

Recommendation 23: The Minister for Health ensures that state health service providers have sufficient resources to provide information on the health and wellbeing needs of children and young people to local governments, to assist with their Public Health Plans.

Noted.

The Department of Health (DOH) provides significant support to Health Service Providers (HSP) and Local Government Areas (LGA) to assist with their public health planning using data collections managed by the DOH through self-service reporting tools (e.g. Health Tracks) and health and wellbeing profiles for LGAs.

The DOH recognises that the number of children and young people currently captured in the WA Health and Wellbeing Surveillance System (HWSS) is insufficient for reporting at the LGA level. The DOH is investigating ways to improve this however, there are associated resourcing and budget implications.

Recommendation 24: The Premier allocates a minister to take responsibility for overseeing:

- **the development of a Child Wellbeing Strategy**
- **food security, with the twin aims of achieving food resilience and, in the meantime, better coordination of food relief.**

Noted.

Poverty is a complex and multifaced issue for which the WA Government provides a cross-government collaborative response.

The levers influencing child wellbeing and food security sit across a number of ministerial portfolios including Youth, Child Protection, Early Childhood Education, Education, Aboriginal Affairs, Health and Housing.

The WA Government will continue to consider the wellbeing of children and food security through all of these portfolios.