

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

*Sixth Report — Hungry for change: Addressing food insecurity  
for children and young people affected by poverty — Tabling*

**MRS R.M.J. CLARKE (Murray–Wellington)** [10.08 am]: I present for tabling the sixth report of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People titled *Hungry for change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*.

[See paper [2050](#).]

**Mrs R.M.J. CLARKE:** Over the past year, the committee has seen and heard some accounts of Western Australian children not having enough to eat. We heard from charity groups, teachers, health professionals, academics, canteen managers, parents and children themselves. It was eye-opening. We heard that several families are struggling, some because of recent increases in the cost of living, and others because of problems that recur over multiple generations. That is not likely to change soon. Some parents are going hungry as they try to make impossible choices between feeding their kids and paying for other necessities. Feelings of isolation, guilt and shame can prevent them from reaching out for help.

We set out to find ways to address food insecurity for children living in poverty, acknowledging that every child has a right to sufficient good food every day. As well as conducting hearings in Perth, committee members travelled to Albany and Katanning and remote communities in the Pilbara, Gascoyne and the goldfields. We visited Foodbank Australia's shop and warehouse; the Clontarf Foundation's North Albany Academy at North Albany Senior High School; Worklink WA, an organisation that works with disengaged youth to engage them in further schooling and training; the Salvation Army in Albany, which runs a significant food relief operation; the Child and Parent Centre co-located at Mount Lockyer Primary School, where the committee spoke with mothers about the challenges of providing nutritious food for children; and the Albany Youth Support Association's residential refuge for at-risk and homeless youth, along with its youth centre, where the committee met youth workers who run engagement programs for youth. We also met with staff from the WA Country Health Service, who were able to give us an insight into the situation across the great southern and other areas of the state. We visited the Albany Migrant Resource Centre, meeting a group of Karen youth who were refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia, many of whom had been born in refugee camps in Thailand. While meeting with the Noongar leadership group in Katanning, we discussed priorities for Indigenous children in the town. At the Katanning Migrant Resource Centre, we were part of a Shire of Katanning roundtable with the CEO, councillors, community workers, including WA Country Health Service social workers, an Anglicare domestic violence advocacy support worker and the community resource centre manager. We learnt about the Deadly Sista Girlz program during our visit to Katanning Senior High School.

Two committee members—Hon Ayor Makur Chuot and Hon Neil Thompson—attended a community briefing and visited the Burringurrah Remote Community School. They also visited the Burringurrah community store, which is currently not in use, as well as the Puntukurnu Aboriginal Medical Service; the Jigalong outback store; the Jigalong Remote Community School; and representatives from the EON Foundation in Jigalong. We were part of a roundtable discussion with the Shire of East Pilbara president and councillors, along with community services and Martu support staff. We visited Kanyirminpa Jukurrpa, a Martu community organisation working to build strong communities; representatives from the Shire of Ngannjatjaraku, including community and youth workers; the Warburton campus of the Ngannjatjarra Lands School; Leonora District High School, where we learnt about the Food Ladder program; and the representatives of the local WA Country Health Service.

Witnesses made it very clear that the physical problems of undernutrition and malnutrition can turn into mental health problems and social problems. The ability of students to complete their education or to pursue training opportunities that could lead to employment is compromised, and they remain stuck in the cycle of poverty. It is time to find a way to break this cycle, but we need ongoing solutions, not just quick fixes.

We investigated how food relief and food literacy can assist children experiencing food insecurity. Children need to eat to learn, but they also need to learn to eat. Food relief does not always reach children in need, and its nutritional value is not guaranteed. But without access to good food, lessons on how to prepare good food seem irrelevant. One of the only ways for children to access good food and potentially to learn about it at the same time is through a school lunch program. We discovered that a surprising number of WA schools are already providing meals and snacks to students using school funds because they see it as a matter of necessity. As one principal told us, it is a “no-brainer”; hungry kids cannot learn effectively.

WA can build on these programs and extend school lunches in an equitable way to mitigate the impact of food insecurity on our next generation. We gathered ideas for how this could be done during a visit to Tasmania, where a school lunch program initiated by Canteen Tasmania is currently being piloted. We visited some schools in the low socio-economic suburbs of Hobart and saw how much the students appreciated a free hearty hot lunch. We

met with School Food Matters, the organisation with responsibility for implementing the school lunch pilot in Tasmania, which is facilitated by Julie Dunbabin, the school lunch project manager. We visited New Norfolk High School, Rokeby Primary School and Gagebrook Primary School. Teachers and principals at those schools told us how that program was making a difference to attendance and how it had impacted positively on concentration and behaviour. It was extremely valuable to see the school lunch pilot program in action; it assisted us when making some of the recommendations set out in the report.

We also heard that Tasmania has implemented a child and youth wellbeing strategy, which is something we would like to see prioritised in WA. Tasmania has also created a dedicated department and Minister for Education, Children and Young People, making it clear where responsibility for child wellbeing lies. We also met with Hon Nic Street, the Minister for Community Services and Development; and Hon Roger Jaensch, the Minister for Education, Children and Youth. We met with ministerial staff, including Mellissa Gray, the deputy secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet; Courtney Hurworth, director of Community Policy and Engagement in the Department of Premier and Cabinet; and Monique Reardon, a public health nutritionist in the Department of Health. We met up with the Commissioner for Children and Young People of Tasmania, Leanne McLean, and staff; representatives from Loaves and Fishes Tasmania; and Dr Kim Jose and Dr Kylie Smith, senior research fellows from the Menzies Institute of Medical Research at the University of Tasmania, to discuss the evaluation of the school lunch pilot.

Such an investment in our children and young people now will pay dividends in years to come. We received 494 submissions to this inquiry. Around 450 of those were from students who attend Catholic schools across WA, including in some of the most remote areas where the Catholic school is the only school.

In addition to our travels around the state, we reached out to members of the multicultural community via two forums held in Mirrabooka, which provided an essential insight into the experiences of newly arrived migrant and refugee families. We thank all those who contributed their insights and experiences, especially those children and young people who made themselves heard. Their voices are important. We included some of their frank and heartfelt comments in the report. We are extremely grateful to Julie Dunbabin and the team at School Food Matters for showing us the pilot program in Tasmania, and to all the schools and leaders here and in Tasmania who met with us to discuss the program.

I would like to thank my fellow committee members: deputy chair Hon Neil Thomson, MLC, from the Mining and Pastoral Region; Rebecca Stephens, MLA, member for Albany; and Hon Ayor Makur Chuot, MLC, from the North Metropolitan Region—for their work and valuable input into this inquiry, including throughout our extensive travels. I also thank the committee staff who have worked tirelessly on this inquiry, including principal research officer Sarah Palmer, who is leaving us for a new career—we wish her all the best—and research officers Lucy Roberts and Carmen Cummings.

On a personal level, I want to say that I was not aware that food poverty was such an extensive issue across Western Australia. The Tasmanian school lunch pilot program really showed the impact that feeding a child a hot hearty meal even once or twice a week can have, making a huge difference to a child's learning and wellbeing. After seeing the attendance records in the schools running that program reach almost 100 per cent on those lunch days, I am sure that would make a positive impact to some of our low socio-economic schools in some of the regional areas of Western Australia where nutritious food is not always available.

I commend this report to the house and thank the committee.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms M.M. Quirk):** Before I give the call to the member for Albany, I wish to second the chair's acknowledgement of Sarah Palmer, the principal research officer. She has probably worked in this place for over a decade. I have had the pleasure of working with her on committees. We wish her well in her future endeavours. Thank you very much, Sarah.

**MS R.S. STEPHENS (Albany) [10.19 am]:** I rise as a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People on the tabling of the report *Hungry for change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*. Over the last year, the committee heard some pretty heart-wrenching accounts about Western Australian children not getting enough food. These came from all sorts of people in the community—charity groups, teachers, health professionals, academics and canteen managers, who are probably at the coalface of children who do not get fed. Parents also explained that they sometimes simply do not have enough money to put food on the table or that, generationally, they have not been taught how to feed and educate their children about nutritious and wholesome food.

The committee set out to address food insecurity for children living in poverty, acknowledging that every child has a right to sufficient food every day. It is estimated that approximately 17 per cent of children and young people in Western Australia live in food insecurity. The problem is likely considerably greater than available statistics suggest, as families and children hide the fact that they do not have enough food. As the chair mentioned, we conducted hearings here in Perth and also travelled extensively through Albany and Katanning and to remote communities in the Pilbara, Gascoyne and goldfields, as well as visiting Tasmania. Witnesses made it pretty clear that physical problems resulting

from undernutrition and malnutrition can lead to mental health and social problems. The inability of students to complete their education or pursue training opportunities could lead to their employment being compromised.

As a former regional manager of Worklink WA in Albany, I saw that firsthand. We were able to deliver a program, funded by the Department of Education, to disengaged youth. We would go around and pick these kids up in a bus in the morning. I was very fortunate that Jane Kelsbie, the member for Warren–Blackwood, was the CEO. Between the two of us, we would send our staff out or go out ourselves in the bus to pick up the kids. These kids had just rolled out of bed and had not been fed. We would feed them breakfast and lunch. The fridge was always full of fruit or they could make toasties. We also did cooking with the kids, which really engaged them. We made sure that they were fed. I have seen it firsthand as an educator.

During the inquiry, we found that the factors that make it difficult for children to get enough food include having an inadequate family income; location, as some regional and remote areas suffer higher rates of food insecurity; being a member of a disadvantaged community or social group, such as being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, a migrant or a refugee; family and home circumstances; and, sometimes, just being a child. I was fortunate to go with Hon Ayor Makur Chuot to the Ishar neighbourhood mothers group in Mirrabooka. It was fantastic to attend with her as she is not only a committee member but also a migrant who had used that service. We heard firsthand about some of the challenges that these women face. One lady told us that she sometimes does not have enough money to buy bread. Another issue they face is that their kids are not eating their traditional foods—the foods that the parents had been brought up with—because they want to eat junk food. These mums are struggling because they cannot read some of the labels on the food. The other thing they talked about was the heating facilities in some schools. I am sure my kids would rather that I send spaghetti bolognese for them to eat at school, but students at their school do not get the privilege to use the microwave or toaster to heat their food until year 12. This was also evident with some of the beautiful children in the Karen community in Albany, who mentioned that they like eating rice and noodles at lunch but that their school does not have heating facilities.

I was proud that the committee came to Albany when we travelled through the great southern. We saw firsthand the incredible work that Foodbank Australia does in Western Australia and we went through how it operates in the great southern. Albany is the hub and the food goes out into the great southern region. We met with the manager, Rod Pfeiffer, who is an incredible advocate for our community. He shared some stories of what he had been seeing with some of his regular clients, who were now coming in once a fortnight rather than once a week due to the cost of fuel and that they were not getting as much food. Another barrier that we found to people accessing food relief is a sense of shame and stigma, which can make the experience distressing for some people. We heard from some parents in Albany about the shame and stigma around accessing food relief programs.

One thing that I had not really thought about until we started the inquiry was that this is a basic human right. Australia signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1978. It was really fascinating to hear that children have a basic human right to food; that is at the core of this issue. It was really eye-opening for me personally and something that I think the whole committee kept at the forefront of our minds as we travelled through Western Australia and over to Tasmania. One of the findings in the report is that a children's rights-based approach would shift the blame from the individual and broaden the understanding of a child's experience of poverty and food insecurity. One of our recommendations is that the WA government place children's rights at the core of policies and strategies to address poverty and food insecurity.

As the chair mentioned, we travelled to Tasmania to see a school food program being delivered. It was just fantastic. The program provides not only nutritional value for the children who get fed when they are at school, but also a range of other social elements, such as the conversations the kids share as they interact with each other and being taught how to use knives and forks. Julie Dunbabin, a lovely lady who had been on a Churchill Fellowship around the world to look at food programs, shared some of her experiences of what happens in other parts of the world. In Tasmania, the children all sit down in a classroom or outside. They eat off crockery and with a knife and fork. They learn how to scrape their plates. The teacher talks about the menu. When we went to see the program at work in a primary school, the kids were having lasagne, salad and bread. The kids all have to try it. It is not about whether they are hungry or not hungry; they all have to have a go at having a taste. If they do not want their tomato to touch their lettuce, they can move it around the plate, but everyone had to have a taste, and it was okay to put food in the bin. These kids all learnt from the teacher what food they would be eating that day. The teacher was making up different names for lasagne so that the kids did not think, "Oh, I don't like that", because mum made a bad lasagne! It was really heartwarming. If there were leftovers, the teachers would package it up and pass on extra food at the gate to parents as they came to collect their kids. They made sure that they gave the extra food to the parents who they knew needed it. There was no food wastage. It was incredible. They flipped the program at the high school; it was really agile. They held it outside, under a marquee. The kids help to serve. Again, there were conversations happening in the line. Teachers can come. The social workers come. We could see the conversations that were happening between people. Stigma was taken away because everyone got to go to this free lunch program. I really commend

the Tasmanian government for its school lunch program. It is a pilot program, and we will be following its success. It was really fantastic to see it firsthand.

I would like to conclude my comments by thanking my fellow committee members: the chair, Robyn Clarke; Hon Neil Thomson; and Hon Ayor Makur Chuot. It was a fantastic inquiry. I also put on the record my thanks to Dr Sarah Palmer for her guidance, research and support in this inquiry. I wish her all the best in her next endeavours. No doubt our paths will cross again. I also thank our other research officers, Lucy Roberts and Carmen Cummings. It has been a pleasure to work alongside you, and I thank you for your professional support in this inquiry.

I recommend the report to the house. It has lots of pictures, so members should make sure that they get a copy and have a look at some of the incredible things that we were able to find around the state. This an issue. I look forward to our government addressing some of the recommendations in this report to ensure that all kids can have a healthy life and do not have food insecurity. I commend the report to the house.