

Division 9: Commissioner for Children and Young People, \$3 069 000 —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr J.R. Quigley, Attorney General.

Mr C. Pettit, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Mrs P. Heath, Director, Policy and Research.

Mr D. Emerson, Senior Policy Adviser.

Miss L. Markussen, Ministerial Liaison Officer.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: I give the call to the member for Dawesville.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: I refer to page 105 of budget paper No 2 and the first dot point under the heading “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, which states in part —

prioritising the needs of children and young people who are our most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

What is the commission’s role, if at all, in any investigations or operations in relation to the community in Roebourne? Does the commission have a presence there; and, if so, might we have a brief about what that might look like?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I defer to the commissioner because I know that he is keen to address that issue.

Mr C. Pettit: In terms of our role directly related to Roebourne, we have an oversight view of that particular issue. I visited the Roebourne site with the Commissioner of Police and talked to a range of leaders in that particular setting. We are scheduled to go back to Roebourne regularly to talk to children and young people, particularly, and early next year to see how the rollout of support for those young people is taking place.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: How many times have commission staff, or otherwise, visited Roebourne to date as a result of the ongoing investigation?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I will ask the commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: As a result of the ongoing investigation, we have been to Roebourne only once, but subsequent to that, we have also had various conversations with local people who are keeping us informed of what is going on.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: How many FTEs within the commission are dedicated to this issue in Roebourne?

Mr C. Pettit: It is a bit awkward to answer that question, because no one person is designated to this role. In fact, when we need to deploy people, sometimes three or four people will go. We are scheduled to go to Karratha to talk to children and young people, but some of them will come from Roebourne.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: I am sorry if I was being confusing. Is there a regional officer presence or anything like that on the ground?

Mr C. Pettit: There is no regional office; we are based in Perth.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: The opposition has spoken about our concern for the victims in that community at this time. We have raised concerns in this place a number of times about those individuals who might be living with convicted or charged sex offenders. Is the commissioner aware of any of those concerns? Is that something that the commission is actively looking at?

[3.30 pm]

Mr C. Pettit: I would have to say that we are equally as concerned with the plight of all children and young people in Roebourne. We have raised that with various agencies here. We often get briefings from relevant agencies, particularly from the Department of Communities itself, and we have also asked for briefings from the minister around what action has been taken. We monitor from that point of view. We are concerned about young people, but, equally, the last thing that they need is a lot of people coming up all the time and asking how they are going. We need to make sure that implementation is well and truly put in place to support those young people and their families.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: As the commissioner has staff who look at places such as Roebourne and specific issues that have been identified, what powers does the commissioner have to make recommendations to particular agencies? Through whom does the commissioner make those recommendations so that there can be any improvement or follow-up on those identified issues but perhaps is not able to deal with through his agency?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: To the commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: Thank you. It is quite a complex question. We certainly have a monitoring function within the legislation. When we find or uncover issues such as the Roebourne scenario, we certainly talk to the directors general of relevant agencies, particularly police in this case, education, health and others. We also have a role through reporting back through our joint standing committee, which also represents us back into Parliament. We also have the capacity to do an inquiry and then table a report into Parliament. We have not done that in this instance because we are supporting the agencies in how they are dealing with this issue.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: In relation to the commissioner's discussions with or recommendations to directors general of various agencies, is the communication public? Is it information that he could inform us as the house about how many times he has communicated with various directors general on issues that he might be concerned with in Roebourne?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: To the commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: I do not have that with me at the moment, but I am certainly happy to provide the number of times we have had conversations and the nature of those conversations.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: I am happy to have that taken on. I think the Attorney General needs to describe it.

The CHAIR: He does. Attorney General, the commissioner just indicated that you would provide some information as supplementary information.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Yes.

The CHAIR: You need to identify exactly what that information will be.

Mr C. Pettit: The information would be, I take it, the number of meetings I have had with relevant directors general.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: Meetings or discussions.

Mr C. Pettit: And the type of discussions that were taking place.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: Also if you could incorporate it, I am not sure whether the commissioner can, any specific outcomes that have come from those discussions.

Mr C. Pettit: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Commissioner, you do not have to accept all those things. You can agree to the first two parts of it.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: He is being coached by the Chair!

The CHAIR: No.

Mr C. Pettit: The outcomes will be very broad, because the government reactions are already on public record. A lot of those outcomes are the result of conversations that we have had with relevant agencies.

The CHAIR: Attorney General, you are the one who has to agree to that and provide the information.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I do. I agree with that and will provide the supplementary information, of course.

The CHAIR: For clarity, can we just outline exactly what information is going to be provided. I would like the Attorney General to do it.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Certainly. It is the number of contacts that the commission has had with directors general concerning matters impacting their agencies in young people and the nature of those contacts.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Attorney General

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: In relation to Roebourne specifically—for clarity.

[*Supplementary Information No A35.*]

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, I am keen to understand from the commissioner where Roebourne sits in the paradigm or the matters that he deals with. Is there a community that gets more of the commissioner's attention and focus? Is Roebourne the larger issue? How do the concerns that this house has, and I am sure the community and the Attorney General have more broadly, sit in relation to other issues that he deals with?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I hand that one to the commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: Thank you. All issues that we deal with are really important for children and young people; there is not one more important than others. When we look at a range of issues that are happening across the state, we certainly take seriously all those issues. In terms of Roebourne, we have that on a monitoring brief to make sure that we follow through with the relevant agencies about what is happening.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: I appreciate the commissioner's response. Roebourne is a priority, but the commissioner is conducting inquiries into other areas. Why does Roebourne not warrant full focus? I am trying to understand; why is a community in Western Australia where 20 per cent of its children have been victims of sexual violence not occupying a larger portion of the commission's attention and time?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: To the commissioner.

Mr C. Pettit: We do not have a direct function in terms of where the member would like this to go. We certainly have a monitoring function, but we do not have an oversight function to the level that the member is describing. As such, although it is a real priority for us, it is one of the many priorities that we deal with.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: Given that the commissioner has been in the role for some time now, he would have identified some gaps in what he can do, as opposed to community expectation—I am trying to put it as nicely as possible. Given the discussion we have just had about what the commissioner can and cannot do in Roebourne, does he think there would be value in providing more of an oversight role to his office or some other body to ensure that these serious issues are not only addressed by agencies but also that there is oversight in the way that they are addressed to measure their effectiveness, and in this particular case, their responsiveness as well?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: To bring the questioning back on course, as the Chair indicated at the start, it should be tied back to some line item. This is a very philosophical debate.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: It is definitely under "Relationship to Government Goals", and "Safe communities and supported families."

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Which page?

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: On page 106 under "Relationship to Government Goals", and the service "Consultation, Research and Promotion of the Wellbeing of Children and Young People". Our entire focus is on that.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I am not challenging the question; I just want to tie it to a line item that was invoked by the Chair at the commencement. Thank you.

Mr C. Pettit: I will try to pick up the member's question; if I missed it, I am sure the member will ask again. The member may recall that late last year I tabled a report to Parliament regarding the mapping of oversight groups within Western Australia, and the weaknesses and the strengths that Western Australia has compared with those in other states. In answer to the member's question, we indicated in that that there could always be a better system including oversight of children and young people in a range of areas. We would be very happy for the member to look at that report and see whether he thinks that answers his question.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I also would like to just briefly ask the Attorney General about service summary item 1, "Consultation, Research and Promotion of the Wellbeing of Children and Young People" on page 106 of the *Budget Statements*. I was interested in exploring a little more the mechanisms of the commissioner's office. The member for Hillarys asked how the commissioner goes about consultation and discussion with government and other agencies when an issue is highlighted. How do issues attract the commissioner's attention? Are there referrals by complaint, for instance, by members of the public about a particular matter or is it something that the commissioner does because of his ear to the ground and he seeks out circumstances and investigates matters that may pique his interest? I wonder how the commissioner goes about making matters important to the commission.

[3.40 pm]

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: The question was directed to the commissioner, so I defer to him for the answer.

Mr C. Pettit: The member will know that every year we put out a work plan that very much reflects the key issues in the community at the time. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, for example, is one that we listed very carefully and we made sure that we responded to it. Other community issues also come forward through either political or community channels. Unfortunately, the act does not allow me to investigate individual cases, but when we receive three or four complaints about the same issue, we deem that likely to be a systemic problem and we will investigate from that point on. We look at what issues we will deal with in a range of ways, but, by and large, they come from what is topical at the time. We also have a national meeting twice a year at which we discuss a range of issues that are occurring across Australia and how that affects Western Australia. We also talk to the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, which also raises issues with us.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: The first dot point on page 106, under the heading, "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency", refers to —

promoting and working on the recommendations of the School and Learning Consultation Report that reflected the voice of children and young people, and was tabled in Parliament in January 2018;

It is a very important and good report. I will start by asking a more general question and then I will home in on online activity, including bullying. More generally, what aspects of that report is the commission particularly focusing on? What is the commission prioritising in promoting and working on those recommendations?

Mr C. Pettit: As members know, the report has seven findings and 14 recommendations. Those 14 recommendations are all very, very important. We are dealing with a few. We are asking that the federal government look at the national goals for schooling and see whether that should be reviewed, given that they are over 10 years old. Right at the moment we are focusing on the issue that a number of children have self-identified having learning difficulties or a disability. We want to investigate how that could be better articulated both within schools and across all three systems and, therefore, how that could be better supported. Young people have reported that although they thought they had a disability or a learning difficulty, it was not recognised by many and, therefore, they are not getting support. We are focusing on those two areas. We are also focusing on a range of other issues in relation to the 14 recommendations.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: Were there any particular cohorts or types of disability that these children self-identified? Was there a particular trend or was it across the board?

Mr C. Pettit: It was across the board. We did not get into specifics with children and young people because of the timing. It was one of those issues that sprung up on us and that we did not anticipate. Work needs to be done. We need to work with agencies and others across all three sectors to see how we can better identify that.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: I refer to young people's understandable trepidation or fear—concern, is probably the best word because I do not think it falls into the category of fear—about the online world generally, including online bullying, victimisation and the like. I realise a lot of it is controlled by, as much as it can be, federal law. As far as awareness and providing young people with mechanisms to deal and cope with these issues, what work is the commission doing through either education campaigns or other means to give young people those sorts of tools so that they can cope if these incidents happen?

Mr C. Pettit: We are not doing any direct work on that at the moment. However, we work closely with the Office of the federal eSafety Commissioner in Western Australia, and she visits regularly. It is her remit to do that work, so we are really keen to support her. We have also done a lot of identification when we have talked to young people about their issues and made sure that they have the right levels of support and know who to go to et cetera. We are very much aware of how the eSafety Commissioner and education systems can be supported.

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: It is really the quintessential Western Australia versus the rest of Australia question. I know that the eSafety Commissioner and the previous commissioner would visit Western Australia, but I understand that they have no permanent staff here. They have no permanent presence whereby a community can identify a problem and seek the commissioner's attendance next Wednesday night or whenever and address a school community or suburban or regional community. Does the Attorney General think that that is an issue? How could we as a state overcome it other than putting it on the long list of concerns, including GST distribution, road funding and everything else?

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: Is that not really a matter for the commonwealth?

Mr P.A. KATSAMBANIS: The commissioner indicated that he works with the eSafety Commissioner in this area. I think the eSafety Commissioner does as good a job as she can, given her resources, but would it be valuable to have a permanent presence here?

Mr C. Pettit: The eSafety Commissioner attempts to be in Western Australia as much as she possibly can and if she cannot be here, some of her staff are here on a regular basis. I do not think any one of us, including me, are available every Wednesday, for example, to talk to parent groups et cetera unless it is well and truly organised for larger groups. I am not sure that that is realistic with the current resources federally. We have been doing some work to look at e-safety and supporting the eSafety Commissioner, and we will continue to do that.

Mr J.R. QUIGLEY: I wonder whether we can clarify one comment. The answer was short.

Mr C. Pettit: To clarify a point, I said that the mapping and gapping paper was tabled. It was not tabled. We sent it to every member. I apologise for that.

The appropriation was recommended.