

*Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People — Fifth Report —
Report review 2022: Examination of selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and Young People*

Resumed from 30 March.

Motion

Hon AYOR MAKUR CHUOT: I move —

That the report be noted.

I rise today to speak on the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's fifth report. On 30 March this year, the committee tabled its fifth report, titled "Report review 2022: Examination of selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and Young People". I happen to be on this wonderful committee that is chaired by my parliamentary colleague Robyn Clarke and deputy chaired by Hon Neil Thomson. Also, we have Rebecca Stephens. I acknowledge our staff who support us, including Sarah Palmer, who is no longer with us. I acknowledge Lucy and, of course, Carmen. I would like to acknowledge the people who support our joint standing committee.

The report reviews the Commissioner for Children and Young People's annual report for 2021–22 as well as several other selected reports published by the CCYP office in the preceding year. Most of the selected reports were published subsequent to Jacqueline McGowan-Jones' commencement as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, a role previously held by Colin Pettit. It must be acknowledged, however, that in some instances the work referenced by this report was originally commenced by Mr Pettit. For example, the second Speaking Out Survey, which was conducted in 2021 and is referenced in this report, collected the views of 16 500 students in year 4 to year 12. The commissioner's office continued to explore this data after Ms McGowan-Jones commenced as commissioner, revealing additional significant findings on the views of kids. As a parent as well, I think it is important that we listen to young people because they know what is right for them and how we can assist them in the community.

The commissioner's annual work plan was conducted on three key platforms, which I will speak about today. The first is promoting the rights, voices and contributions of children and young people. That is very important; as I acknowledged earlier, it is good to listen to voices that come from the community. The second platform is monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all WA children and young people. The third key focus is prioritising the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

Firstly, I would like to speak on promoting the rights, voices and contributions of children and young people. As time is not in our favour, I will give members a small summary of the focus. A key activity for this platform is the commissioner's listening tours, which involve the commissioner talking with children and young people, and others in the community, about what youth need to be healthy and to reach their potential. Since tabling the fifth report, the commissioner has continued to travel across the state to visit children in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. A total of 4 512 children and young people have shared their views with her, which is very important.

Another thing that the commissioner looked at was monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all children in Western Australia. The publication of the Speaking Out Survey 2021 results was a key achievement for this platform as well as an extension project to survey marginal groups not reached by the main survey. The commissioner received Lotterywest funding to extend the Speaking Out Survey to several groups, which is very good. The commissioner targeted students who are homeschooled, students with special educational needs and students in remote communities. It is important to capture the views of minority populations to provide the best possible understanding of what children and young people in this state are experiencing. I think all of us here are for that vision. The committee looks forward to hearing the voices of those children.

The girls' wellbeing project is another fantastic project, which is also part of this platform. The relevant insights were released with the Speaking Out Survey. Findings from the Speaking Out Survey showed that female students consistently rated their wellbeing below that of their male peers, which is really worrying. This worrying finding basically made the commissioner establish the girls' wellbeing project to explore the reason for the gap and gather views on how to improve girls' experiences. As a means of further understanding this finding, almost 1 000 people took part in this online survey. It is so fantastic because we sometimes say that the girls and young people do not take part in what the commission does, but they are interested to be a part of it. This was conducted in late 2022.

Also part of this platform is the continued promotion of support for the implementation of child safe principles and practices and child-friendly complaints mechanisms in organisations, as well as continued monitoring of how WA government agencies deal with complaints from children and young people. That is another fantastic way for us to design effective policies that will benefit young people.

Another area of key focus is prioritising the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people in our state. Deeper analysis of the Speaking Out Survey 2021 responses has focused on views on mental health and safety and wellbeing from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people. The commissioner has subsequently been involved in a number of initiatives to promote the interests of Aboriginal children and young people. One is the Young Aboriginal Researchers in Community project, which is a fantastic project. The commissioner is also a member of the Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing Steering Committee, which brings together state government agencies with the Kimberley regional governance groups to support and enable Aboriginal-led solutions to improve youth wellbeing.

Through a series of focus groups, the CCYP remains aware of serious challenges for gender-diverse young people. Ms McGowan-Jones said the cohort is very vulnerable and at risk in a range of ways, but particularly in regards to mental health and housing, violence, engagement in community and not being believed on what they are going through. That is another way of saying the commissioner is really concerned about the day-to-day issues of our young people. As a member of the committee, I look forward to working further with the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I also want to thank my colleague Hon Ayor Makur Chuot along with my other colleagues on the committee. Working across the aisle together on committees for the betterment of Western Australia is one of the more enjoyable parts of the job in Parliament, particularly on the issue of children and young people. This report is a year old. We are a little behind and we have got more coming. It is the fifth report titled *Report review 2022: Examination of selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and Young People*.

As mentioned by my honourable colleague, the Commissioner for Children and Young People is Jacqueline McGowan-Jones. I want to make a comment about her. She has been in this job for about two years now. I am sure that she has made comments about a whole range of things in the media that the government has not always agreed with, but I think it is good that we have independent commissioners in these roles. No matter which side of the aisle we come from, whether we are in government or opposition, having someone who can speak their mind as an advocate for children and young people is a very important part of our democracy. We need to make sure that we have senior people who are not fettered by the policy of the day. The commission undertakes research and it does important work. It has done an amazing amount of work over the last 12 months, which we will no doubt speak about some time next year. An incredible amount of very important research has been undertaken.

I refer to point 2.2 of the report titled “Monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all WA children and young people”. The key issue for the committee and the role of the commission is to give children a voice and to enable them to be heard in a way that they have not always had. In fact, it is very difficult for children to have a voice in the public policy space. The commission does amazing work to reach out to students; for example, 4 500 students were reached through surveys funded by Lotterywest. An amazing amount of work was done there. There was the Speaking Out Survey on girls’ wellbeing. This work is vital. It is important that young people have a voice. The perspectives of adults sometimes get lost in the day-to-day grind and we do not see the perspectives of children because they are subject to many new changes and influences that have emerged through, for example, social media.

One thing that came out of the girls’ wellbeing study is the huge issue of body image and the role of social media. There are challenges in making sure that young girls are not constantly up late on their devices. Something that came through was the impact this has on participation in sport. Practical issues have emerged around body image such as the provision of change rooms and so forth in sporting facilities. All of these things were picked up by the wellbeing survey and the substantive work that has been undertaken. It is vital work because it is the way that the commission has been able to speak directly to young people and hear their concerns. We know that there has been a negative trend in wellbeing that has really impacted mental health and the ability for those young people to step into opportunities in the future and live a full life in the way that we would expect.

The commission also looks at the matters of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and other groups. For example, it looked at Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children. I just want to commend Hon Ayor Makur Chuot for her participation on the committee. It has also been very helpful to us in our consideration in our oversight role of the commission, in providing a different perspective and in highlighting the need to progress and do work. There will no doubt be more work to be done and reported on next year. I do not want to get ahead of myself, but the important thing is that the commission has also been engaging with CALD communities.

As I said, there have been a number of key reports such as *Missing out matters: Child poverty in Western Australia*. Child poverty is a major scourge for young people. It impacts their educational outcomes, wellbeing and future opportunities. There was the report of *Students’ wellbeing during the primary–secondary school transition and transition practices—A literature review*. We know that transitioning from one point in a child’s school career to another is a massively challenging issue. There was also the *Girls’ wellbeing insights from the 2021 Speaking Out survey*. The Speaking Out Survey has been a very long process and has provided some incredible data for us to

assess and compare year on year. Former commissioner Colin Pettit was involved in that work as well. I think that is a credit to him and the ongoing commitment of the current commissioner to continue with that work.

There is also the issue of a position of commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people. It was recommended and put forward, but has not been picked up yet. Notwithstanding that, the commission continues to do work in this sector to engage with Aboriginal children in particular across our state, many of whom face unique disadvantages that need to be properly considered.

Concern was raised about a lack of an oversight mechanism in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. I think that has been an ongoing discussion. It is something that was raised by Jacqueline McGowan-Jones. I think many members here would probably be aware of that. It is a very serious issue that has been raised before. Of course, we no doubt will continue to seek the best resolution as we go forward.

This is the report. I just want to commend the commission and commissioner for the work they do. As I said, the government does not necessarily adopt everything it says, but I think it is vital. I think even the opposition would probably not support everything that was said, but it is vital that we have a tradition in this place, firstly, of bipartisan oversight committees with the joint standing committee and, secondly, having an independent commissioner and commission. We need to ensure that children and young people have a voice in Western Australia in a way that is supported by evidence and research. Thank you.

Hon SHELLEY PAYNE: Today it gives me great pleasure to talk about the fifth report of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Report review 2022: Examination of selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and Young People*. I would like to acknowledge the comments made by Hon Ayor Makur Chuot, who is a member of the committee, as well as the deputy chair of the committee, Hon Neil Thomson. As the other contributors have said, this report examines some selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. I want to reiterate the comments made by Hon Neil Thomson about the work of the new commissioner, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, who has been in the role since January 2022. She took over from Colin Pettit. I acknowledge that she is the first Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People as well as a female Aboriginal person. That is a great addition. As some members may have mentioned, we have talked about another report of the committee dealing with having a specific commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people. It is great that we have appointed an Aboriginal woman as the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

This report refers to a number of reports that were examined by the committee, including the commissioner's annual report, setting out her work. I particularly want to talk about the Speaking Out Survey, which a couple of members mentioned. This is a great piece of work. Two of the three Speaking Out surveys have been completed, with one more to go. A record 16 500 children and young people took part in this landmark survey for Western Australia. It aimed to look at the perspectives of young people on their health, mental health, education, safety, community life and their hopes for the future, giving us an insight into how our young people are faring. I note that triple the number of children engaged in the second survey compared with the number who engaged in the first survey in 2019. Hon Ayor Makur Chuot, who is away on urgent parliamentary business, acknowledged Lotterywest and the funding that it contributed to help extend the survey. I would also like to acknowledge Lotterywest because those funds extended the survey to groups that the mainstream survey could not cater for, including homeschooled kids, students with special educational needs and students in remote communities.

One of the reports that came out of the survey related to the wellbeing of girls, entitled *Girls' wellbeing: Insights from the 2021 Speaking Out Survey*. This is a really great piece of work. Of note, the Speaking Out Survey acknowledged that young girls were struggling more than young boys, particularly the older girls in the higher years. I would like to briefly talk about this report on girls' wellbeing. It included the results from the second Speaking Out Survey. I noted that it found that female young people in particular rated their wellbeing less favourably than male young people. It found that young people feel like they are not being listened to; they feel they do not belong; they feel unsafe at home, at school and in public spaces; and they feel like their male siblings and peers are treated differently from them. The report outlined that there is a clear need for targeted services and programs to support girls' mental health, their self-esteem and their sense of belonging. The report concluded that there is a broader requirement to continue to decrease gender inequality and gendered attitudes in Australian society. This is a great piece of work. It asks us to carefully consider the views of young people and take action to make meaningful changes across multiple areas of young people's lives to ensure that female children and young people are supported and given opportunities to achieve their potential.

One of the things that Hon Neil Thomson noted was the transition to high school being particularly challenging. My daughter was in the first cohort that went to high school in year 7. By year 8, nearly every single girl in her class had moved to the other high school in Esperance. I acknowledge the difficulties with that transition; maybe the needs of young girls during that transition were not met.

Interestingly, Hon Neil Thomson noted the *Students' wellbeing during the primary–secondary school transition and transition practices—A literature review*, which was commissioned by the Commissioner for Children and Young People and which the committee looked at. This is a really important piece of work. It highlighted some of the issues my region is facing and that people talk about in my community, such as kids from smaller schools being required to go to the bigger centres to attend high school, and the transitioning that occurs.

I commend the work of organisations such as the Clontarf Foundation, their importance within our schools and their ability to think freely and look at the issues. I want to commend Clontarf on some of the work that it is doing, going into primary schools and helping to prepare some of the kids to transition to high school.

The literature review examines a few things. It addressed the impacts of the primary to secondary school transition on students, the best practice approaches and some guiding principles that we can use to help kids transition to high school. This is an important time in young kids' lives. Obviously, they are experiencing puberty at the same time. Lots of things, including emotions, have to be considered. I will run through some of the guiding principles that came out of the literature review that would help support students' wellbeing during the transition. One of the things that Hon Neil Thomson mentioned was a student voice, allowing people to directly participate and contribute on how the transition should occur. I think we are really good these days in listening to people, whether it is young people or the community, talking about issues and taking their views into consideration.

Another principle related to family engagement and having well-informed parents. That involves really engaging families on their viewpoints and informing parents about the significance of school transition practices and how they can support their children. The review also looked at how primary and secondary schools can collaborate. I see some of this in my region when students have to transition to bigger centres. The primary and secondary schools work with each other. My kids had what they called their transition days. Another one of the principles related to multiple stakeholders, making sure that a lot of the support networks external to the school and other organisations are included to help with the transition. The review also examined communication, sharing information and educating teachers on how they can help support students.

Consideration of report postponed, pursuant to standing orders.

Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to standing orders.