

41ST PARLIAMENT



Joint Standing Committee on the  
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Report 8

REPORT REVIEW 2023

*Examination of selected reports by the Commissioner for Children and  
Young People*

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Presented by Mrs R.M.J. Clarke, MLA and Hon N. Thomson, MLC

April 2024

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Report No. 8

Presented by

**Mrs R.M.J. Clarke, MLA and Hon N. Thomson, MLC**

Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council on 18 April 2024



## Chair's Foreword

This report provides a summary of the reports released by the Commissioner for Children and Young People over the period from June 2022 to December 2023. The Committee's key functions include the monitoring of the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner, as well as the examination of her annual report and other research reports. This report by the Committee is in part fulfilment of that role.

The Commissioner has released a broad range of reports over the relevant period, many of which are discussed in more detail in this report. I would like to draw attention to several of these research reports, as I feel they are important contributions to our understanding of the wellbeing of children and young people in this state.

The first of these research reports is the *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing* report. This report continues the investigations into girls' wellbeing that the Commissioner's office has carried out since the first Speaking Out Survey in 2019 (SOS19). The SOS19 revealed the disturbing gender gap between male and female students, with female students consistently rating their wellbeing considerably lower than male students. Further research since SOS19 confirmed this gender wellbeing gap. The current report provides a set of recommendations designed to improve girls' wellbeing, and directs these recommendations to young people, families and other adults, and schools. This emphasises that the wellbeing of children and young people is an issue for the whole community.

Another important research report released by the Commissioner during the year was the '*I just want to feel equal*' report, which relayed the results of consultations with trans and gender diverse children and young people. The report focuses on the experiences and perspectives of trans and gender diverse children and young people, and identifies ways to improve their wellbeing.

The Commissioner's office received funding to extend the Speaking Out Survey to several groups of children and young people outside the mainstream schooling system. Two reports from this year resulted from these extensions: *The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs*, and *The views of home educated children and young people on their wellbeing*. Both of these reports provide important insights into the wellbeing of these groups of children, and I commend the Commissioner and her office on their efforts to reach these groups and give these children a voice.

Finally, the *Talking about vaping* survey report gives voice to the 3,303 participants aged between 12 to 18 years who gave their opinions on vapes and vaping. This is valuable research that I hope will inform policy as we move forward with managing the impact of vapes and vaping on the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "R Clarke". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

MRS R.M.J. CLARKE, MLA  
CHAIR

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# Oversight of the Commissioner's activities

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## 1 The Committee's role

As agreed between the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly, the key functions of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People are to:

- i. monitor, review and report to Parliament on the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People;
- ii. examine annual and other reports of the Commissioner; and
- iii. consult regularly with the Commissioner.

The Committee conducts a yearly review of the Commissioner's activities as part of its fulfillment of these functions. This year's review included an examination of the annual report 2022–2023, and reports published by the Commissioner to the end of the 2023 calendar year. The Committee also conducted a hearing with the Commissioner in November 2023, and the discussion at that hearing has informed the development of this report.

## 2 Examination of the Commissioner's Annual Report 2022–23

The activities of the Commissioner's office are outlined in the Commissioner's annual report under three key platforms, as defined in the Commissioner's *Strategic Directions 2023–24*. Highlights from each of these platforms follow.

### 2.1 Promoting the rights, voices and contributions of children and young people

The Commissioner advised the Committee during the review hearing of the importance she places on highlighting the voices of children:

A priority for our office is that we need people to understand children and young people must be at the absolute centre of all decision-making that impacts them, and this includes in the Family Court, the Children's Court, out-of-home care and education—their voices must be heard. We must demonstrate a continuing and ongoing commitment to high expectations for children and young people, particularly in education, and stop the current rhetoric of defining a child by the circumstances into which they are born and over which they have no control.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Listening tours*

During the 2022–23 year, the Commissioner continued her listening tour across the state, visiting 'schools, advisory groups, and support services throughout the metropolitan area as well as in Kalgoorlie, Albany, Esperance, Northam, Broome, Balgo, Merredin and the South-West region'.<sup>2</sup> The Commissioner reports that a total of 4,512 children and young people

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1 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 2.

2 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2022–23*, Perth, 31 August 2023, p. 17.

had shared their views on issues including ‘the environment, their wellbeing, homelessness and housing, youth justice, education, training and employment.’<sup>3</sup>

### ***Advisory committees***

During 2022, the Commissioner maintained two advisory committees that informed the ongoing work on girls’ wellbeing. One advisory committee was drawn from the student group at Margaret River Senior High School, and the other from Penrhos College. These groups participated in talks with school leaders, local councils and local members of Parliament, and advocated for ‘young people to be included in discussions around gender inequality, early consent education and the need for more inclusive school environments.’<sup>4</sup> They also advocated for free period products to be available in schools.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Stand Up, Be Heard forum***

In June 2023, the Commissioner hosted a forum for young people to explore ‘what youth advocacy is, what the barriers are to young people speaking up, and how barriers could be overcome to enable young people to have a say about issues important to them.’<sup>6</sup> The forum was called ‘Stand Up, Be Heard’, and involved 97 year nine students from 13 schools in the Perth metropolitan area. The report from the forum was published in November 2023. It found that:

many young people feel confident in speaking up about issues that are important to them but are unsure of how to do so effectively, with them believing they would not be listened to if they did voice their opinions...having parents and friends support them through encouragement and listening would help build their confidence and skills in advocacy. Young people at the forum stated a preference for advocacy platforms that offer anonymity.<sup>7</sup>

Barriers to speaking up were identified as both internal factors (such as fears about how others may respond to them when they speak up) and external factors (such as the public perception of young people). Forum participants showed ‘an interest in volunteering opportunities to improve perceptions of young people, while simultaneously allowing them...to be involved in issues that are of interest to them.’<sup>8</sup> Events focussed on key issues and advisory groups were also identified as advocacy opportunities for young people.<sup>9</sup>

The key finding of the ‘Stand Up, Be Heard’ forum was that:

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3 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2022–23*, Perth, 31 August 2023, p. 5.

4 Ibid, p. 17.

5 Ibid, p. 17.

6 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Stand Up, Be Heard Report*, Perth, November 2023, p. 2.

7 Ibid, p. 12.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

children and young people want to be involved and need to be heard, but...more work is needed to build their own confidence and skill sets as well as changing the perceptions of children and young people in the wider community.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Youth Engagement Co-Design Project***

The Commissioner's annual report stated that the 'Stand Up, Be Heard' forum report would provide guidance to a further project focussed on youth engagement, known as the 'Youth Engagement Co-Design Project'. This project is being conducted in partnership with the Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA), and aims to co-design a youth engagement strategy. The annual report describes this project as follows:

A key component of the project was to convene a youth steering group to carry out investigations to co-design the Commissioner's youth engagement approaches for 2024 and beyond. Following an expression of interest process in May–June 2023, the steering group will commence the co-design process in the second half of 2023. This project will provide the Commissioner with the views of children and young people about how best to engage them into the future, and gain advice from a broad cross-section of children and young people.<sup>11</sup>

The Committee looks forward to further information from this project becoming available, and will be interested in the suggestions of the youth engagement strategy.

## **2.2 Monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all WA children and young people**

The Commissioner and her office continue to devote considerable effort to the second platform of the strategic directions. The Commissioner continues to provide and promote resources for Western Australian organisations to become more child safe. The Commissioner also continues to call for 'the appointment of an Independent Advocate for children and young people in care' and the establishment of 'mechanisms for independent oversight and accreditation' within the child protection system.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Monitoring of complaints by children and young people***

The Commissioner has a role in monitoring trends in complaints by children and young people to government agencies. While the Commissioner cannot deal with individual complaints, she can review overall complaints to identify systemic issues. The annual report states that in 2023, the Commissioner reached agreement with the Ombudsman to gain de-identified information on all complaints received from, or on behalf of, children and young people.<sup>13</sup> This will strengthen the Commissioner's ability to identify systemic issues that may impact upon children and young people in their interactions with government agencies. The Committee will be interested to see what insights the Commissioner is able to gain from this improved information sharing mechanism with the Ombudsman.

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10 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Stand Up, Be Heard Report*, Perth, November 2023, p. 12.

11 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2022–23*, Perth, 31 August 2023, p. 18.

12 Ibid, p. 20.

13 Ibid, p. 21.

## ***Girls' Wellbeing***

During the period covered by the annual report, the Commissioner's office undertook an online survey relating to girls' wellbeing. The Speaking Out Surveys in 2019 and 2021 discovered that female students consistently rated their wellbeing below that of their male peers. The Girls' Wellbeing survey conducted in 2022 therefore asked young people questions about self-esteem; the transition from primary to high school; belonging; and gender inequality.<sup>14</sup> The report from the survey, *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing*, was published at the end of 2023.<sup>15</sup>

The survey was developed in response to findings in recent literature that there is a:

marked and steady decline in girls' wellbeing, experienced in various aspects of their lives, as they mature into adolescence and enter high school. This decline is not as apparent for male young people. While girls and boys in primary school report similarly high levels of self-esteem, interpersonal connection, safety and belonging, this changes as they enter high school, with many female young people consistently rating their wellbeing and life satisfaction below that of their male peers.<sup>16</sup>

The survey received 938 participant responses.<sup>17</sup> The report provided a summary of the responses under the following themes:

- Self-esteem: girls feel that the opinions of those close to them are very important, but the views of almost anyone around them can 'strongly impact' on how they feel about themselves.<sup>18</sup> It is common for girls to compare their attributes and abilities to others, including strangers online or in the media, with a particular focus on physical appearance and body weight.<sup>19</sup> 'Many respondents said they feel immense pressure to be good at school and sport, while also being pretty, thin or attractive, and caring and responsible.'<sup>20</sup> Having someone supportive to turn to is critical for girls' self-esteem.

Overall, the survey found in relation to self-esteem that:

Girls who engage in healthy habits, including being active, playing sport, eating well, getting enough sleep, taking time for 'self-care' and having a positive mindset reported how helpful these practises are for improving their self-esteem. 'Looking good' was also important to girls and was often linked to feeling confident about expressing their identity through clothing, hair, or makeup.<sup>21</sup>

- The transition from primary school to high school: the survey identified three key influences on the transition to high school, which were friendships; the cultural shift to a

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14 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing*, Perth, November 2023, p. 6.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, p. 6.

17 Ibid, p. 7.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, p. 8.

different social landscape; and how prepared young people felt for the change. Students identified 5 key initiatives that would help with the transition. These are:

1. Transition programs in primary school
  2. Secondary school programs to support them once at high school
  3. Feeling supported by teachers, school staff, and other students
  4. More respect and kindness from others, more self-confidence and being taught coping skills
  5. Accepting that some challenges are normal.<sup>22</sup>
- Belonging: feeling socially and culturally connected helps young people build healthy relationships and assists with identity formation, yet research shows that significantly fewer female than male young people feel a sense of community connection and belonging.<sup>23</sup> The survey results showed that:
    - almost one-half of female participants aged 12 to 18 years said they feel they do not belong because they cannot meet the social and behavioural standards placed on them by others.<sup>24</sup>

Girls feel pressure to 'be perfect' in all aspects of their lives.<sup>25</sup>

The survey identified 3 main barriers to girls feeling as though they belong to a community:

1. Girls being subject to different social and behavioural standards than boys
  2. Social interactions and relationships being more intense for girls than boys
  3. Gender bias in community-based activities and opportunities.<sup>26</sup>
- Gender inequality: a majority of female and gender-diverse survey participants responded that they feel gender inequality impacts many aspects of their everyday lives and is seen as a barrier to leading a full and happy life.<sup>27</sup>
    - Most respondents said it is possible that gender inequality will impact their future choices and opportunities, with many girls saying that being female limits their career prospects, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industries. It was also common for girls to feel worried that they will be denied equal pay, promotional or other development opportunities due to their gender, and that they will be forced to juggle or choose between having children and having a career. These worries were seen as another burden that males do not have to overcome, at least not to the same extent as females.<sup>28</sup>

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22 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing*, Perth, November 2023, p. 9.

23 Ibid, p. 10.

24 Ibid, p. 11.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid, p. 12.

Almost all survey participants were able to identify experiences of gender inequality, which included: gender inequality through stereotypes; boys getting more opportunities and freedom than girls; sexism; and feeling unsafe.<sup>29</sup>

The report concludes by outlining a set of recommendations designed to help girls feel safe, supported, good about themselves and that they belong. The recommendations are aimed at young people; at families and other adults; and at schools. The Committee feels that this is an important piece of research, and would like to draw further attention to the recommendations made in the report. For this reason, they are repeated below:

### **Recommendations from the Commissioner's report *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing***

#### **For young people**

- Be patient finding yourself, your friends and other support people
- Find and do things you enjoy
- Be kind to others and to yourself
- Set and work towards your own goals
- Get active

#### **For families and other supporting adults**

- Listen, without judgement or criticism
- Support girls' passions and interests
- Encourage girls to be active, regardless of ability

#### **For schools**

- Give young people more time and opportunities to adapt from primary to high school
- Support students by listening to and following up on their concerns
- Build a culture of respect, equal opportunity and inclusivity
- Help students manage expectations and stress from school.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians Group***

Another area of advocacy highlighted in the Commissioner's annual report is her activity within the Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians Group (ACCG), and its First Nations Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates (FNCCGA) Caucus. The ACCG is a coalition of independent children's advocates which works to promote the rights and best interests of children and young people, and to encourage systemic improvement based on children's views and input as well as evidence-based research. The FNCCGA was established in January 2023, and developed 11 advocacy priorities to 'guide collective efforts to improve

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29 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Speaking out about girls' wellbeing*, Perth, November 2023, p. 12.

30 Ibid, p. 13.

outcomes, not only for First Nations children and young people, but for all children and young people.<sup>31</sup>

### **2.3 Prioritising the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.**

As stated in her annual report, the Commissioner 'continues to advocate for changes to the WA youth justice system to improve the opportunities and outcomes for young people in the system and their families.'<sup>32</sup> Her annual report states that she meets regularly with the Director-General of the Department of Justice and the Commissioner for Corrective Services, and visited Banksia Hill Detention Centre six times and Unit 18 of Casuarina Prison three times within the reporting period. She has also met with the families of those detained.<sup>33</sup>

During the Committee's review hearing with the Commissioner in November 2023, the Commissioner reiterated her support for increasing the minimum age of criminal responsibility:

I will continue to advocate for raising the minimal age of criminal responsibility. National and international evidence is overwhelming that jailing is failing.<sup>34</sup>

#### ***Young Aboriginal Researchers in Community (YARiC) project***

Another area of work during the reporting period was efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. The Commissioner's *Young Aboriginal Researchers in Community (YARiC)* project was a part of this. Seven young Aboriginal women from the Goldfields were trained as peer researchers to investigate issues of girls' wellbeing. The YARiC group surveyed 54 young people, and presented a report on their findings to this Committee in November 2022. The Committee enjoyed meeting the YARiC team and found their insights very valuable.

#### ***'I just want to feel equal to others': hearing from trans and gender diverse children and young people in WA report***

Another project carried out by the Commissioner's office during the reporting period was the consultations with trans and gender diverse children and young people, which resulted in the report *'I just want to feel equal to others': hearing from trans and gender diverse children and young people in WA*. This report was published in August 2023.<sup>35</sup> The report collates the views and experiences of 20 trans and gender diverse children and young people from Western Australia, as well as the relevant findings from the Speaking Out Survey 2021 for students who identified 'in another way' rather than male or female.<sup>36</sup>

The *'I just want to feel equal'* report focuses on the experiences and perspectives of trans and gender diverse children and young people, particularly with regard to 'their experiences

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31 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2022–23*, Perth, 31 August 2023, p. 22.

32 Ibid, p. 23.

33 Ibid.

34 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 2.

35 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *'I just want to feel equal to others': hearing from trans and gender diverse children and young people in WA*, Perth, August 2023.

36 Ibid, p. 4.

in accessing support for their emotional wellbeing and their sense of safety, belonging and support within their families, schools and their communities.’<sup>37</sup> The report identifies a range of actions to be undertaken to improve the wellbeing, experiences and outcomes for trans and gender diverse children and young people. The Commissioner key areas for action as:

- Improving recognition and support of trans and gender diverse children and young people.
- Reducing discrimination and harassment of trans and gender diverse children and young people.
- Improving service provision and access for trans and gender diverse children and young people.
- Strengthening the capacity of parents and the community to support trans and gender diverse children and young people.
- Strengthening the education sectors support and inclusion of trans and gender diverse students.<sup>38</sup>

In the area of mental health, the Commissioner continues to advocate for improved access to mental health and social and emotional wellbeing services for children and young people, and she meets regularly with the Mental Health Commissioner.

***The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs: Insights from the Speaking Out Survey 2021***<sup>39</sup>

During the 2022–23 reporting year, the Commissioner’s office continued to work on extending the Speaking Out Survey 2021 to children and young people with disability outside of mainstream education. The Commissioner’s office used modified survey questionnaires to reach several different cohorts of children and young people with disability. The survey reached 545 children and young people with hearing or vision impairments, behavioural and engagement challenges, and multiple complex needs.<sup>40</sup> A report from this extension survey was published in late 2023.

This report, published in November 2023, details the results of the extension of the Speaking Out Survey 2021 to 545 children and young people with disability and complex needs. The extension project was initiated to reach children who are outside of mainstream schooling, and who may ‘face barriers in communicating their views through standard consultation and surveying methodologies.’<sup>41</sup> Many of these children and young people had ‘highly variable

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37 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *‘I just want to feel equal to others’: hearing from trans and gender diverse children and young people in WA*, Perth, August 2023, p. 4.

38 Ibid, p. 6.

39 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs*, Perth, November 2023.

40 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2022–23*, Perth, 31 August 2023, p. 24.

41 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs*, Perth, November 2023, p. 5.



skills and capabilities and for some this was the first time they had participated in a wellbeing survey of this nature.<sup>42</sup>

The students who participated in the survey were aged between eight and 17 years, and included students participating in the WA Department of Education School of Special Educational Needs: Sensory programs (SSEN:S)(for those with hearing loss and/or vision impairment); students in the School of Special Educational Needs: Behaviour (SSEN:B) and Engagement; and students in education support schools and centres who may have multiple complex needs.<sup>43</sup> As the report makes clear, children and young people with disability are not often asked about their health and wellbeing, so the survey was a unique opportunity to share 'their experiences and views on safety, mental health, engagement in education, connection to community and how they access sources of support.'<sup>44</sup>

Children and young people with disability often experience social exclusion and barriers to meaningful participation in their schools and communities. There are significant issues and a range of barriers that can discourage, prevent or actively exclude children and young people with disability from participating in decisions that affect their lives...this can be the nature of their support needs, however, more frequently it is a culture of low expectations, lack of opportunity, inaccessible processes and social and cultural barriers.<sup>45</sup>

The survey found that 'most participants report being healthy, happy at school, feel safe and supported at home and like where they live.'<sup>46</sup> Some results were consistent with the SOS21 results for other year 4 to 12 students across WA, such as the percentage of SSEN students who like school a lot or a bit (47.6%), with 30.4 per cent saying that it was okay.<sup>47</sup> Students participating in this survey also reported 'being bullied by other students from their school in similar proportions to students across WA.'<sup>48</sup>

One notable finding in the survey results was that almost two-thirds (61.7%) of Year 4 to Year 12 SSEN students 'said they felt anxious or stressed' when they think about COVID-19.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, around one-half (51.3%) of Year 4 to Year 12 students in education support schools and centres said they felt worried when they think about COVID-19.<sup>50</sup> The survey report remarks that 'these results suggest that children and young people with disability were more likely to feel concerned about COVID-19 than other students in WA.'<sup>51</sup> Finally, the report concludes:

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42 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs*, Perth, November 2023, p. 5.

43 Ibid, p. 3.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, p. 4.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

It is hoped that a key message from this report is that children and young people with disability have views and opinions on their own health and wellbeing and they should be given the opportunity to have these views heard and acted upon.<sup>52</sup>

The Commissioner’s annual report demonstrates the breadth of activities undertaken by the Commissioner and her office during the reporting period. The Committee was particularly pleased to see the research on girls’ wellbeing, as well as the range of advocacy the Commissioner undertakes on behalf of children and young people in WA.

### 3 Other activities during the reporting period

#### Reports published in 2023

In the latter part of 2023, the Commissioner published three reports that provide considerable insight into the views of children and young people in Western Australia.

#### ***The views of home educated children and young people on their wellbeing: Insights from the Speaking Out Survey 2021 extension project***

This report is another example of the Commissioner’s efforts to expand the reach of the Speaking Out Survey to children and young people outside of mainstream schooling. In this case, the Commissioner received Lotterywest funding to extend the survey to children and young people who are educated at home.

There has been a significant increase in the number of students who are being educated at home in WA in recent years.

**Table Error! No text of specified style in document..1: Students registered to receive home education 2017 to 2021<sup>53</sup>**

Year	Number	% increase
2017	3,464	
2018	3,563	2.9%
2019	3,720	4.4%
2020	4,116	10.6%
2021	4,562	10.8%

There has been little research conducted with children and young people who are educated at home. The Commissioner worked with Home Education WA to administer the survey, and

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52 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The health and wellbeing of children and young people with disability and complex needs*, Perth, November 2023, p. 4.

53 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The views of home educated children and young people on their wellbeing: Insights from the Speaking Out Survey 2021 extension project*, Perth, 2022, p. 1.

were able to complete surveys with 39 children and young people.<sup>54</sup> Some of the key findings of the report include:

- Most participants reported feeling physically and mentally healthy, supported by their family and safe in their community.
- Most participants had previously attended a mainstream school and many said they had switched to home education due to learning difficulties. Almost one-third (30.4%) stated that bullying was one of the reasons they stopped mainstream education.
- Almost all participants reported that they like learning when they are being educated at home. Most reported having good relationships with their family and feeling supported and listened to.
- A relatively high proportion of participants reported having a long-term disability (37.5%), with autism spectrum disorder being the most commonly reported condition.
- Almost half (47.4%) of the participants reported the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes to daily life had affected their life in 'a bad way', 'a lot' or 'somewhat'.<sup>55</sup>

Given the increasing numbers of students being educated at home in Western Australia, the Committee is glad to see efforts being made to reach these students to survey what they think about their wellbeing. It is to be hoped that future surveys will be able to reach a larger proportion of these students.

***The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing by education region***<sup>56</sup>

This report provides insights into the views of WA children and young people according to where in the state they live, drawing from the results of the Speaking Out Survey 2021. The survey results were analysed according to student participation by education region, with the regions being:

- Kimberley
- Pilbara
- Mid West
- North Metropolitan
- South Metropolitan
- South West
- Wheatbelt
- Goldfields.

While there are many similarities in the responses from students across the regions, there are some key differences, which are highlighted in the report. These are as follows:

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54 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The views of home educated children and young people on their wellbeing: Insights from the Speaking Out Survey 2021 extension project*, Perth, 2022, p. 1.

55 Ibid, p. 2.

56 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing by education region*, Perth, November 2023.

Many children and young people in regional and remote locations do not have access to the level of outdoor or recreational facilities that are available in the Perth metropolitan area.

Students in the Kimberley and Pilbara are much less likely to feel safe in their local area than students in other regions.

Children and young people in the Goldfields and the Kimberley are more likely to report that they are missing out on material basics, with one in seven students (around 14%) in the Kimberley and Goldfields only sometimes or less having enough food to eat at home (all of WA: 9.6%).

Aboriginal children and young people across the state are particularly affected by material disadvantage with around one in five Aboriginal children and young people in the Wheatbelt, Goldfields and the metropolitan area not always having enough food to eat at home.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Talking about vaping: WA young people's views and experiences of e-cigarettes***

In May 2023, the Commissioner's office undertook the 'Talking about vaping survey'. This anonymous, online survey invited anyone in WA aged between 12 and 18 years to give their opinion on vapes and vaping. The survey had 3,303 participants, and its key findings were presented in a report tabled in late 2023.<sup>58</sup>

The survey was initiated due to growing public concern around young people's use of vapes, and the dearth of WA-based research on the issue. The survey asked questions including:

what makes these products appealing to young people, where and how young people usually get them, any worries or concerns young people may have about 'vapes' or 'vaping', and the kinds of supports they would like from adults to manage these concerns.<sup>59</sup>

The survey results revealed many insights into how children and young people view vaping in WA. While most participants reported they had never tried smoking or vaping, 'a higher proportion of 'ever' users reported they 'vaped' before they tried smoking.'<sup>60</sup> Respondents reported the factors that make vapes appealing to young people, including the taste/flavours; a perception that it is 'cool' to vape; peer pressure; the addictive nature of vapes; and ease of access.<sup>61</sup> Vapes are generally perceived to be easy to access by young people.<sup>62</sup>

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57 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing by education region*, Perth, November 2023, p. 5.

58 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Talking about vaping: key findings from the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People's 'Talking about vaping' survey*, Perth, 2023, p. 3.

59 Ibid, p. 5.

60 Ibid, p. 9.

61 Ibid, p. 10.

62 Ibid, p. 12.

Participants also reported their concerns regarding vaping, which included the impact it has on the health of the user and those around them through 'secondhand smoke'. Other impacts on those around people vaping were described as follows:

Many participants talked about feeling uncomfortable, annoyed, scared or unsafe going into school or public toilets where other students or people 'vape'. Common negative experiences included having smoke (e-cigarette aerosol) blown into their face and/or having to hold their breath to avoid passive inhalation, being offered or peer pressured to 'vape', and their freedoms being restricted by rules designed to catch people 'vaping' at school.<sup>63</sup>

The survey asked respondents what they would like adults to know about vaping. The top five things identified in the results were:

- Vaping is bad for physical and mental health, and is not safer or better than smoking.
- Adults need to take responsibility to stop vaping, and help young people avoid it.
- That vaping is more common among young people than adults may think, and parents may erroneously think their child has never tried vaping.
- There are many reasons that young people might vape, including peer pressure and a desire to fit in or be cool.
- More education, information and warnings are needed about vaping, both for young people and adults.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, and importantly, the survey asked young people what supports they would like from adults. Survey respondents identified four themes, where they wanted adults to:

- help young people quit or not start
- implement bans, restrictions or other action to stop vaping
- provide information, education or advice to help young people avoid or stop vaping
- be understanding and open, not punitive, angry or judgemental towards young people who vape.<sup>65</sup>

Given the widespread concern about vaping within the community, the Committee feels that this research is an important addition to our understanding of the issue. It is hoped that the Commissioner's research can inform future policy developments aimed at addressing young people and vaping.

### **Other issues**

The Committee held its annual review hearing with the Commissioner on 15 November 2023. This hearing was an opportunity for the Committee to gain an overview of the Commissioner's work for the year, and for the Commissioner to highlight issues of concern. Some of the areas that were discussed at the hearing are detailed below.

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63 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Talking about vaping: key findings from the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People's 'Talking about vaping' survey*, Perth, 2023, p. 15.

64 Ibid, pp 22-28.

65 Ibid, p. 28.

### ***Speaking Out Survey***

The Committee took the opportunity to ask the Commissioner about the delay of the next Speaking Out Survey, and was curious to know the reasons for the delay. The Commissioner advised that:

The Speaking Out Survey is representational as a survey when it is statewide. When we break it down into regions, it is not because that is not how we stratify. I am looking at how we stratify so that regions can be represented in it as well, which would mean a lot more schools need to be involved. We have had extensive conversations with Independent Schools WA, Catholic Education WA and the Department of Education and it was agreed that we would delay so that we could see what the impact would be on schools if we want to stratify by region.<sup>66</sup>

Given the extensive benefits of the Speaking Out Surveys, and the extensions of the survey to groups of children and young people outside the mainstream education system, the Committee is keen to see the survey made as useful as possible, but also conducted as regularly as possible. The Committee hopes to see the arrangements for the new round of the survey confirmed as soon as possible.

### ***Child and Family Wellbeing Strategy***

The Commissioner continues to advocate for a child and family wellbeing strategy for Western Australia.

We still advocate strongly for the introduction of a comprehensive child and family wellbeing strategy in Western Australia, and I fully support the children’s policy advisory committee at the WA Council of Social Service in that push. We must change the fact that we put the money in the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, and if we will continue to do that we will continue to need more mental health beds; we will continue to have greater needs in emergency departments; we will continue to need alternative learning settings; we will continue to need juvenile justice teams to have more staff to monitor children in community—unless we do something concrete about intervening early.<sup>67</sup>

This Committee’s *Hungry for Change* report, tabled in June 2023, also recommended that the government prioritise the development and implementation of a child and family wellbeing strategy.<sup>68</sup>

The Commissioner’s annual report and other reports released during the year demonstrate the breadth of her activities to advocate for Western Australian children and young people. The research conducted by her office continues to provide valuable insights into the issues

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66 Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 3.

67 *Ibid*, p. 11.

68 Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Hungry for Change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, Report no. 6, Perth, 22 June 2023, p. 144.

and concerns that are relevant for children and young people in Western Australia, both for those based in Perth and those in regional and remote areas. The Committee looks forward to further insights as they become available.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Clarke', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

MRS R.M.J. CLARKE, MLA  
CHAIR





# Appendix One

## Committee's functions and powers

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The following was agreed by concurrence between the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council on 26 May 2021, establishing the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People:

1. Pursuant to section 51 of *the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, a Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People be appointed by the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council.
2. The Joint Standing Committee shall comprise 2 members appointed by the Legislative Assembly and 2 members appointed by the Legislative Council.
3. It is the function of the Joint Standing Committee to —
  - i. monitor, review and report to Parliament on the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People;
  - ii. examine Annual and other Reports of the Commissioner; and
  - iii. consult regularly with the Commissioner.
4. A report of the Joint Standing Committee will be presented to the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council by members of the Joint Standing Committee nominated by it for that purpose.
5. The Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly relating to Standing and Select Committees will be followed as far as they can be applied.







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