



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

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Adj. Professor Tarun Weeramanthri  
Climate Health WA Inquiry  
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Dear Adj. Professor Weeramanthri

**Submission – Climate Health WA Inquiry**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry.

As the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have a statutory role to advocate for and promote policies, laws, programs and services that enhance the wellbeing of all children and young people in WA. My functions are set out broadly under section 19 of the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*.

In performing my role the best interests of children and young people are my paramount consideration. I must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

My office has undertaken significant work to better understand the physical and mental health needs of children and young people across the State, and made a series of recommendations relating to how these needs can be best met, which remain applicable today. This work has included the development of the *Speaking out about youth health* consultation with around 1000 WA young people; research and consultation regarding children and young people's wellbeing and reducing alcohol-related harm; the *Wellbeing Monitoring Framework* reports; *the Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, and the subsequent follow up report, *Our Children Can't Wait*, which reviewed how the recommendations of the Mental Health Inquiry had progressed.

It is with the responsibilities of my role and the breadth of the work of my office in mind that I provide the following comments.

### *Health and wellbeing*

Through my office's consultations over the last eleven years, children and young people in WA have consistently told me what is important in their lives and what contributes to their health and wellbeing. Themes include family, school, growing up in a loving, safe home environment, community and culture.

*"For me to be healthy I have to be happy, feel safe, feel comfortable, enjoy the people that I'm around."*

It is recognised that climate is important to health and wellbeing, and that the health of Australians is highly vulnerable to the country's climate and weather extremes.<sup>1</sup> Children and young people often describe how the environment impacts their wellbeing and the value they place on their physical environment.

*"I think the most important thing ever is the environment because we can't live without trees, grass or plants and the animals can't either".*

*"I like to dance and I like waterfalls and boab trees, I feel like I am dreaming when I dance. And when I see the waterfalls".*

*"I like living in the country because you can have bonfires and play around in the trees and paddocks. And when you wake up you always can smell something fresh in the air".*

### *Children and young people's views on climate and health*

There is emerging research on the psychological impact of climate change, from mild stress responses through to significant mental health problems.<sup>2</sup> Children and young people may be particularly susceptible to environmental stressors and worry about how the effects of climate change – including environmental degradation, pollution and natural disasters - will impact the planet and their futures. This may exacerbate already increasing levels of anxiety and other mental health issues among children and young people.

Children and young people who live in regional and remote areas, particularly those who are raised in farming families, may have heightened concern regarding climate change due to the more direct impact of weather-related disasters (such as floods, droughts and bushfires) on their family's livelihood and financial security, which may contribute to significant psychological distress.

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang Y, Beggs PJ, Bambrick H, et al. 2018, *The MJA-Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Australian policy inaction threatens lives*, Med J Aust, 209(11): 474.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

The impact of climate change on the physical environment can also affect the physical health and wellbeing of children and young people. For example, food insecurity and lack of outdoor spaces for recreational play can contribute to poor diet, malnutrition and lower levels of physical activity, which are linked to overweight and obesity.

In my office's 'We Are 10' consultation in 2017, children in Year 4 from more than 160 schools across the state contributed artwork and a statement representing what is great about their lives and what challenges they have. The issue of climate and sustainability was raised by many children in the consultation. This included discussion about pollution, keeping oceans and the general environment clean, not chopping down trees, wanting more green space, and protecting animal species.

Children also acknowledged that a connection with the natural environment had an impact on their wellbeing, telling the Commissioner that they were inspired and calmed by nature. Their comments demonstrate children's connection to the environment and their awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, and highlights the importance of involving children and young people in discussion and decision making regarding these issues in WA.

*"I love living in WA except for the pollution in the oceans. If we stop littering the Earth we will live happier and healthier".*

*"I am worried about deforestation because it is harming animals and leading to extinction so kids in the future won't be able to see them".*

*"I think this is a big problem. People are chopping down the poor trees and it makes me feel sad seeing the damage to the environment".*

*"Let's be kind to the ocean by picking up all the rubbish and save the environment".*

In recognition of the impact the environment has on children and young people's development, their quality of life and their experiences of the world, my office is currently undertaking a project to formulate a policy response on the effects of physical and social environments on the wellbeing of children and young people. This includes a broad review of the impact of changing urban and rural environments on children and young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing.

#### *Data and monitoring*

In undertaking my role to monitor the wellbeing of children and young people to date, I have been surprised by the lack of appropriate data to support and guide service development, delivery and evaluation. In particular there is very limited data available on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, and the extent to which they experience mental illness. Without this information, it is not possible to

accurately monitor changes or patterns in their experiences or prevalence of issues over time, nor to appropriately model the demand for services to meet the needs of children and young people.

In so far as climate change impacts the mental and physical health of children and young people, the availability of data to inform healthy system planning and response in relation to climate change will be essential.

My office's Wellbeing Monitoring Framework will be used to report on and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people in WA, as well as to identify what is working well and where we need to change policies and practices to improve their outcomes: <https://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/wellbeing-monitoring-framework/>.

*Participation of children and young people*

It is essential children and young people are involved as an ongoing stakeholder in the development of responses as part of the Climate Health WA Inquiry. There is enormous value in including children and young people in planning and decision-making processes to achieve better policies, services and outcomes. Young people have unique insights into issues, can offer creative solutions and can help ensure strategies are relevant and sustainable. I encourage you to provide children and young people the opportunity to participate in the consultation processes to develop the strategies that arise from the Climate Health WA Inquiry.

Finally, I encourage you to view the [WA Youth Health Policy 2018-2023](#) which outlines the WA health system's goals and priorities for children and young people's health and provides strategies, informed by the views of young people, to guide the health system, health services and communities to effectively meet the health and wellbeing needs of young people.

I would be happy to discuss any of these matters regarding children and young people's health and wellbeing further with you and look forward to staying updated on the outcomes of the Climate Health WA Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

1 August 2019