Our Children Can’t Wait – Executive Summary

Review of the implementation of recommendations of the 2011 Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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COMMISSIONER’S FOREWORD

The 2011 Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia was one of the largest and most important undertakings of the Commissioner for Children and Young People’s office since its inception.

A major factor that contributed to the decision to undertake the Inquiry was the views expressed directly to the Commissioner by children and young people, families, communities and service providers across WA about their concerns for the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

A key concern was that sufficient attention had not been paid to the existence of mental health problems and disorders affecting children and young people, including very young children, and that inadequate priority had been placed on their needs.

The 54 recommendations of the Inquiry report were intended to be a roadmap to guide the development and implementation of comprehensive mental health services and programs for children and young across the State, particularly those who were vulnerable, and those living in regional and remote areas who were often unable to access appropriate services.

Since the tabling of the Inquiry report in the Western Australian Parliament in May 2011, much has occurred and mental health has been high on the agenda of the community and the State and Commonwealth Governments alike.

This report provides a detailed review of what has been achieved since 2011, and what more needs to be done to effectively support the mental health needs of our youngest citizens.

The review has found that while progress has been made in some areas, particularly in relation to enhanced services for young people, significant gaps remain, with children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing far from being comprehensively supported.

There remain shortfalls in access to appropriate specialist services for children and young people with severe mental health needs, particularly those with complex needs.

It is of concern that there has been limited progress on essential promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies that are required to prevent children and young people from reaching the stage of requiring treatment for more severe mental health illnesses.

There remains a reluctance to acknowledge that very young children can and do experience mental health issues that may manifest as serious social, emotional or behavioural problems (for example, aggression, anxiety and depression), and a mistaken belief that issues experienced by young children will be outgrown; despite all of the research showing that early childhood experience impacts on lifelong mental health and wellbeing and that intervention at the earliest possible stage will have the most beneficial impact.

It is fundamentally important that mental health planning places a high priority on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and their families by providing the full spectrum of services, from promotion/prevention to acute, commencing prior to birth and considering the needs of children at all stages of their development.

This includes providing timely access to effective services for children and young people and their families, closing the gaps in services for particularly vulnerable children and young people and those with complex and severe mental health needs, developing effective promotion and prevention strategies, and building the capacity for early identification and intervention.
Considering the initial Inquiry report, progress made against the original 54 recommendations and other factors that have emerged since 2011, this report makes 12 new recommendations which are intended to identify the current priorities and guide the planning and delivery of mental health programs and services for WA children and young people into the future, so that we can be better assured that ‘children and young people get the services they need, when and where they need them’.

I would like to acknowledge the former acting Commissioner Jenni Perkins, who initiated this important review and guided the development of the report and its 12 recommendations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010 the inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People commenced an inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia (the Inquiry).

The Inquiry was conducted under section 19(f) of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 and its purpose was to report on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and make recommendations for action on how to strengthen mental health and wellbeing from pregnancy through to young adulthood.

The term ‘wellbeing’ was included in the Inquiry’s scope to ensure a broad definition of mental health – from the development of mentally healthy children and young people through to the provision of services and programs for children and young people who are unwell.

The Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia (the Inquiry report) was tabled in the WA Parliament in May 2011.

The Inquiry report found that Western Australian children and young people’s mental health needs had not been given sufficient priority and there were significant shortfalls in programs and services, particularly in regional and remote areas, for vulnerable children and young people, and in prevention and early intervention services.

Also identified was a general lack of understanding in the community that children and young people can experience mental health problems and disorders, including limited awareness that even very young children can suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression.

An urgent need for reform in terms of both investment and focus was identified, and 54 recommendations were made as a ‘road map’ to guide government, non-government and community to undertake immediate and long-term action to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

While the Commissioner had reported on progress made on the recommendations in Annual Reports subsequent to 2011, the office in 2014 commenced a review of specific initiatives, investment in infrastructure, planning and funding for programs and services related to each of the 54 recommendations made in the Inquiry report.

In undertaking this review, the Commissioner considered changes to the demographic status of children and young people in WA and the findings from relevant reviews and research that had occurred since 2011.

The population of children and young people aged up to 18 years has increased by approximately 50,000 since the time of tabling, and is expected to increase by 31 per cent to more than 800,000 by 2025.

The draft of The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015–2025 identifies mental disorders as being a high cause of disability for children aged 0 to 14 years (accounting for 30% of all years lost to disability) and a leading cause of disability (61%) for young people aged 15 to 24 years.

The comprehensive report of the Young Minds Matter survey, The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents, published in August 2015 found that 13.9 per cent of children and young people (aged four to 17 years) met the criteria for a diagnosis of a mental disorder in the last 12 months. Of this group, almost 60 per cent were assessed as having a mild disorder, 25 per cent a moderate disorder, and 15 per cent a severe disorder. The report also found strong associations between several social and demographic characteristics and rates of mental disorders.
Further, there have been a number of relevant national and state reviews and research undertaken since 2011, including:

- the Review of the admission or referral to and the discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia
- the Ombudsman Western Australia’s own motion investigation into ways that State government departments and authorities can prevent or reduce suicide by young people
- the National Mental Health Commission’s review of national mental health programs and services
- the National Commissioner for Children’s examination of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children and young people
- the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy.

In the context of this work, the review on progress on the Inquiry report’s recommendations found the following:

**Significant developments**

- Increased mental health treatment services for children and young people, including the reform of, and increased funding to, the metropolitan Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, the establishment of a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week acute mental health service and associated psychosocial support for the metropolitan area and in some regional areas, reform of WA Country Health Service Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and expanded tele mental health services.

- Improved early intervention and treatment services for young people aged 12 years and over through additional headspace centres, the establishment of the headspace Youth Early Psychosis Programs in two locations and additional funding to Youth Focus for early intervention counselling services for young people aged 12 to 18 years living in the Perth metropolitan area.

- A strengthened focus on youth services (for young people aged 16 to 25 years) through the development of youth-specific services such as Youth Axis and a new youth mental health unit at Fiona Stanley Hospital with associated specialist community mental health service.

- The implementation of dedicated prevention, early intervention and treatment initiatives for specific groups, for example, the Young People with Exceptionally Complex Needs (YPECN) program, and Links, the Perth Children’s Court Mental Health Court Diversion and Support Pilot Program.

- The establishment of the Swan Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Service and the Fiona Stanley Hospital Mother and Baby Unit to better support maternal and infant health, and the development of the Competency Guidelines training resource for the perinatal and infant mental health workforce.

- Increased funding to parenting services and additional supports for young children and their families through the introduction of 16 Child and Parent Centres on school sites, along with additional funding for community child health nurses, school health staff and Child Development Services, and Royalties for Regions funding to support regional initiatives such as Better Beginnings and the Responsible Parenting Program.

- The Suicide Prevention 2020 Strategy that includes specific actions for children and young people and their families, particularly those who have high vulnerability.

- The systematic rollout of KidSport across the State to help facilitate participation in a broad range of sporting and recreational activities.
**Significant gaps and challenges remaining**

- Access for children and young people in regional areas to programs and services across the full service continuum.
- Services and programs for children aged younger than 12 years that intervene early in symptoms or in the course of an illness and provide treatment.
- Community mental health treatment services for infants, children and young people with severe mental illness.
- Early intervention and treatment services tailored to the needs of specific groups of children and young people vulnerable to mental health problems and disorders, particularly children and young people in care or in contact with the justice system.
- Culturally appropriate services and programs for Aboriginal children and young people and their families, tailored to recognise the importance of culture and healing and to address the impact of intergenerational trauma, particularly for younger ages.
- Planning for, and provision of, services for children and young people with mild and moderate mental illness and with early signs and symptoms of mental health problems.
- Implementation of evidence-based social and emotional learning programs throughout all primary and secondary schools.
- Access to mental health early intervention and treatment programs and services on school sites through Child and Parent Centres.
- Access to mental health early intervention and treatment programs and services on primary and secondary schools.
- Better coordinated universal and targeted parenting programs and supports, including for parents of older children and young people.
- Broad community education about the importance of children and young people’s mental health.
- Collaboration and coordination between the Commonwealth and State Governments and a comprehensive and integrated approach across and within government to planning and providing the full range of programs and services needed to maintain and improve the mental health and wellbeing of WA children and young people.
- A comprehensive approach to building the capacity and skills of the workforce to deliver mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment services to children and young people.
- Greater involvement of children and young people in the development of mental health policy, program and service design.
- Reliable data on the mental health and wellbeing of WA children and young people and the impact of programs and services on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Some of these concerns are addressed in the draft of The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015–2025 (the draft Plan), which was released for consultation in December 2014.

Based on national modelling tools, the draft Plan estimates ‘the optimal mix of services’ required over the next 10 years, and describes a range of actions for the development of services and supports specifically for people (including children and young people) with severe mental illness.
The draft Plan makes several important acknowledgments, including that the current gap in infant, child and adolescent community treatment mental health services is ‘substantial and requires urgent resources’, and proposes to almost double the Infant, Child and Adolescent (to 16 years) mental health community treatment hours of service by 2017, and almost quadruple them by 2025.

However, the draft Plan does not include detail of funding arrangements so it is not possible to assess how effective the initiatives included may be in improving children and young people’s health and wellbeing.

What the analysis of progress on the Inquiry report’s recommendations does show is that the mental health and wellbeing of Western Australian children and young people must remain a priority for parents, families, communities and governments, and there is still much to be achieved.

Many of the key findings and significant gaps identified by the Inquiry report in 2011 remain current, and most of the report’s priorities are as critical now to improving the mental health and wellbeing of WA children and young people as they were at the time of the Inquiry, specifically the need for:

- recognition that lifelong positive mental health begins at pregnancy and is crucial for healthy development through early childhood, childhood and adolescence
- recognition of the importance of parents and families to children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing
- program and service development across the service and severity continuum
- a focus on outcomes for children and young people and implementing and evaluating services and programs accordingly
- recognition of the unique and specific needs of vulnerable children and young people, for example Aboriginal children and young people, and children and young people with disability or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- a more strategic, coordinated and integrated approach to mental health planning and program and service delivery across the State and Commonwealth Governments and across portfolios
- involving children and young people in mental health policy, planning and service design
- workforce development and capacity building to address shortfalls, particularly in regional areas.

Recommendations

This report makes 12 new recommendations to guide the planning and delivery of better mental health programs and services into the future to achieve improved outcomes for children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, in line with the intent of the 2011 Inquiry.

They have been made after considering the progress made on the original 54 recommendations from the Inquiry report, the remaining gaps in services and programs, current demographic information and the findings from relevant reviews and research.

The recommendations support a balanced approach, which recognises the important role played by parents and schools in the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, along with the importance of responding to the needs of particularly vulnerable children and young people, including those in care, Aboriginal children and young people and those living in regional WA.
**Resource and planning priorities**

1. Initiatives in The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015–2025 aimed at improving services and supports for children and young people with severe mental illness and meeting the needs of vulnerable groups of children and young people be fully resourced and implemented.

2. The Mental Health Commission report annually on the progress on implementation of The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015–2025 and key outcomes for children and young people aged 0 to 18 years in regional and metropolitan areas.

3. The Commonwealth Government implement the findings and recommendations from the *Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services* in relation to children and young people and their families, including Aboriginal children and young people and those living in regional areas.

**Investment in younger children**

4. The number of Child and Parent Centres be increased to support more children aged 0 to eight years and their families state-wide, and services be expanded to include mental health early intervention and treatment programs.

**Prevention and early intervention**

5. The State and Commonwealth Governments work collaboratively to improve planning and increase resources for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention services for children and young people, to ensure children and young people across the State have access to the full continuum of services and programs they require.

**Parenting information and support**

6. A detailed assessment be undertaken by government of the availability and effectiveness of existing parenting programs and services in WA and a model of service delivery be developed to support more equitable access to quality parenting advice and support, especially for parents at risk, tailored to children and young people’s key life stages and transition points. This needs to include both universal and targeted support, be culturally appropriate, and across all ages.

**Strengthening the capacity of schools**

7. Schools be resourced to provide whole-of-school approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting resilience and supporting social and emotional learning.

8. A model of integrated services be piloted in primary and secondary schools, to provide better access to mental health and wellbeing supports and services for children and young people and their families.

**Vulnerable children and young people**

9. Government agencies to report on the Rapid Responses Framework in their annual report how they have prioritised access to services or programs to meet the health, mental health, disability, educational, housing and other needs for children and young people in care and for care leavers up to 25 years of age.

10. The development of a specialised children in care program and dedicated youth forensic mental health service as outlined under The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015–2025 be undertaken as a high priority.
11. More innovative and flexible models of service delivery and support be adopted in regional areas, including wider and better use of technology, local workforce development and funding that takes into account the costs of regional service delivery.

12. More culturally appropriate mental health programs and services be provided for Aboriginal children and young people and their families, to be achieved by initiatives such as employing more Aboriginal staff, cultural competency training and the development and implementation of tailored programs and services. This must include the full continuum of services, from programs supporting wellbeing, addressing trauma and loss and building resilience, through to early intervention and treatment services, tailored to recognise the importance of culture and healing and to address the impact of intergenerational trauma, particularly for younger ages.

ENDNOTES

1. The Inquiry considered the needs of Aboriginal children and young people, children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, living in regional and remote areas, in care, with disability, experiencing difficult circumstances and in contact with the youth justice system.