



Speech 13 November 2014

Jenni Perkins, A/Commissioner for Children and Young People

Mental Health Advisory Council

Good morning.

I would like to thank the Chair, Mr Barry McKinnon and the Deputy Chair, the Honourable Judy Edwards for inviting me to speak to you today.

In December 2013 I was appointed A/Commissioner for Children and Young People WA under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*.

The role is one of broad advocacy, representing the needs of all children and young people in Western Australia under the age of 18.

In performing any function under the Act the best interests of children and young people are paramount.

I must also have regard for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Under the Act one of the four guiding principles for my work is that:

The views of children and young people on all matters affecting them should be given serious consideration and taken into account.

Mine is an independent office and I report directly to Parliament.

I have a statutory responsibility to promote and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people.

In doing this I must have special regard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The Act requires me to consult with children and young people from a broad range of backgrounds and age groups throughout Western Australia each year to ensure their views and concerns are heard, respected and addressed.

In addition to my responsibility to promote and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people generally the Act describes a number of other functions including to:

Monitor and review written laws, draft laws, policies, practices and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people.

Promote the participation of children and young people.

Encourage agencies to seek the participation of children and young people.

Importantly, in promoting the wellbeing of children and young people, my work is informed by the views and opinions of children and young people, and the best available evidence and research of what works well.

I think it is no mean achievement that to date the Commissioner's office has consulted on a range of issues with almost 6000 children and young people from across WA, aged from five to 18 years and from diverse cultural, socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds - including Aboriginal children and young people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and children and young people with disabilities.

Children and young people have provided their views on what is important to their wellbeing broadly and their mental health and wellbeing specifically.

As with all my office's consultations with children and young people those with young people on ways to reduce alcohol-related harm and their experiences of youth health services have underpinned the work of this office.

Currently my office is undertaking consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from across WA on what is important to them and their hopes for the future.

As part of my child-safe organisations project we are asking children and young people about what makes an organisation safe and friendly.

Advisory Committees are another way I consult with children and young people and currently the three groups who were appointed for 2014 are concluding their work.

I would like to share with you the views of children and young people in two areas relevant to your work, firstly mental health and wellbeing and then youth health.

Consultation with children and young people was an important part of the mental health Inquiry conducted in 2010 by the former Commissioner, Michelle Scott.

Around 700 children and young people shared their ideas about what contributed to good mental health and feeling well and, conversely, to poor mental health and feeling unwell.

They described positive contributors to mental health including feeling:

- healthy both physically and emotionally
- positive about life
- loved and cared for
- acknowledged
- connected
- informed about mental health issues broadly.

Children and young people also spoke about some of the negative contributors to mental health problems including feeling:

- unloved due to family conflict
- alone or isolated if they were not connected to support networks, community facilities or appropriate services
- uninformed and therefore unable to seek help when they needed to
- down or sad
- pressured
- different.

There were some factors that impacted significantly on children and young people seeking the help they needed. Broadly, these related to stigma, cost and lack of access to services.

Some young people were also worried about confidentiality when speaking with adults about their problems, particularly in the school environment and in regional and remote areas.

In 2013 over 1,000 young people participated in a consultation about youth health services.

These young people expressed a holistic view of health that included physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions. They recognised the importance of nutrition, exercise, social and family relationships, education and work, and avoiding harmful substances, as important to their health.

Most young people relied on their parents for advice on health issues and to access services. Friends, siblings, teachers and school-based professionals also had a major role to play in providing information and facilitating care.

The internet is an important source of information, but some young people said they preferred to interact with a real person.

Many young people said they would like more information about health-related services and resources available to them and more education about how to access health care on their own.

Young people had generally positive experiences with health services, particularly those staffed by professionals trained to work with young people.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged young people were less likely to feel positive about their experiences with health services overall.

Young people said practical barriers to accessing health services include cost, having a Medicare card, transport and concerns about confidentiality, embarrassment and lack of knowledge.

To make it easier to access services and have positive experiences, young people suggested:

- greater awareness and reassurance about the emotional and psychological issues they confront when a health issue arises
- more youth-friendly staff
- more accessible and low-cost or free services
- better integration of services, such as through schools or youth centres.

I will briefly mention several other important areas of work for my office before providing information on my review of the recommendations of the mental health inquiry.

In July 2014 my office tabled in the WA Parliament the second edition of the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework.

The framework provides reputable, accessible data on key areas of children and young people's wellbeing to assist with the development of policy and planning of services, along with information on best practice programs and services shown to improve wellbeing.

Regional visits are an important way for me to hear from children and young people, their families and the community across WA.

Just last week I was in Narrogin seeing some of the great programs for young people and hearing from them about what it is like living in regional WA.

This year I have also visited Mandurah, Kalgoorlie, Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Geraldton and planning is underway for a visit to Quairading and Kellerberrin.

In May I welcomed Dr Michael Ungar as the 2014 Thinker in Residence for a two week residency.

Dr Ungar is an international expert in building resilience in children and young people, particularly those who were vulnerable and have complex needs.

Dr Ungar spoke about the nine things all children need to develop resilience.

It is interesting to note that there is a close alignment between these nine factors and the themes of the many consultations undertaken with children and young people by my office.

I turn now to my review of the implementation of the recommendations of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia.

As you may be aware, in April 2011 the former Commissioner for Children and Young People, Michelle Scott, tabled the Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia in the WA Parliament.

The Inquiry report contained 54 recommendations to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA and was positively received.

It was intended as a 'road map' for the broad community, governments and the non-government sector to guide action immediately and over the next decade.

The Commissioner's 2011–12 and 2012–13 Annual Reports contained information regarding the progress of the implementation of the 54 recommendations of the Inquiry report.

I am of the view that there has been significant progress since the Inquiry including the recent work by the WA government to implement the recommendations of the Stokes Review, including the ten year plan for mental health services.

On this basis I have determined that it is timely to undertake a comprehensive review of the implementation of the recommendations from the Inquiry.

The review will consider:

- the currency of all recommendations and progress on each.
- the impact of the Inquiry report overall.
- future priority areas for action.

A triangulation methodology is being undertaken and this involves:

- advice from the review Reference Group comprising members of the original Inquiry reference group and some additional members
- a request for information from government and non-government agencies on relevant recommendations
- a review of relevant literature published since the Inquiry was conducted.
- an informed stakeholder focus group
- a grey literature search.

I will table a stand-alone report in the WA Parliament on progress to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people by mid-2015.

More information about the work of my office is available on my website.

Thank you.