



Submission to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations: Inquiry into the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy

Introduction

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy.

I was appointed as Western Australia's (WA) inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act). Under this Act, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting children and young people's entitlement to live in a caring and nurturing environment and to be protected from harm and exploitation.

In performing all functions under the Act, I am required to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the best interests of children and young people must be my paramount consideration.

I must also give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

It is with these responsibilities in mind that I submit comment on the Inquiry into the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy to ensure the needs and views of children and young people are considered.

It is clear that the existing way of providing services to children and young people and their families in regional WA is not meeting their needs effectively. There needs to be a focus on new ways of working in the regions to ensure children and young people reach their potential. The 'Royalties for Regions' Policy presents a unique opportunity to deliver improved services to children and young people.

Any additional resources which are directed through the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy should not duplicate existing efforts by government or lead to a reduction in resources currently being directed through government agencies.

Any increased investment in services should be based on sound research and there must be a commitment to evaluation to ensure improved outcomes for those citizens living in regional and remote communities.

The 'Royalties for Regions' Policy to be effective, will maximise consultation at the local level so that local needs and solutions are attended to. The Productivity Commission, for example, advocates that the most successful Indigenous Programs have the following elements:

- Cooperative approaches between indigenous people and government (and the private sector);



- Community involvement in program design and decision-making—a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' approach;
- Good governance; and
- On-going government support (including human, financial and physical resources).

Children and young people as citizens must also be included in the consultation process.

This submission focuses on the likelihood of there being a Regional Community Services Fund (or similar), and on the term of reference (d) which focuses on the potential operational impact of the policy on government agencies.

This submission concentrates on four central themes:

- That there is a significant need for more activities and programs for children and young people in regional and remote WA;
- That there is insufficient coordination of the existing activities and programs for children and young people in WA, which could be improved through funding a Regional Children and Youth Plan;
- That a meaningful portion of the 'Royalties for Regions' funding should be allocated towards improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people in the State's regional and remote communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, by providing them and their families with appropriate services; and
- That children and young people should be given the opportunity to participate fully in decision making and policy development that affects them and that their contributions should be given serious consideration and taken into account.

This submission is informed by visits to regional and remote WA since commencement of my appointment in December 2007.

Population of Children and Young People 0 – < 18 Years in Western Australian

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census the total population of children and young people in WA aged between 0 and 18 years is 481,840. 28% of this total live in regional and remote areas, this equates to 135,612 children and young people.

The total population of indigenous children and young people living in WA is 25,659* or 5% of the total population of children 0 – 18 years. The total indigenous population of children and young people living in regional and remote areas is 16,027* or 62% of total WA indigenous population of children and young people.

*Indigenous population statistics are subject to increase due to an undercount and "Unknown Indigenous Status".



Issues for Consideration

Investment in Early Childhood Services

There is a growing recognition that the first years of life are the key to children's growth and development toward a harmonious and productive adult life. The nature of our society will be greatly shaped by the value which is placed on young children and the resources and support offered to them and their parents. As well as the benefits to children, there are sound economic arguments that an investment in early childhood leads to benefits for the community and government in that children are more likely to be physically healthy, succeed academically, have greater employment options, commit less crime and are less likely to be engaged in child protection systems or dependant on Centrelink payments in the long-term. These outcomes are even more strongly indicated for children who live in disadvantaged families or areas.

I remain concerned that government agencies in WA have not given sufficient priority to the wellbeing of children and young people, particularly in relation to children's early years and in regional and remote areas. Also, that service planning and delivery in education, childcare, health and parenting support is fragmented and not as effective as it could be. Once again, this is exacerbated in regional and remote areas where some regional centres are without any early childhood services.

Western Australia urgently requires a comprehensive Early Childhood Plan (similar to the strategies developed by Victoria and South Australia), to plan which outcomes for children need to be achieved, bring government and non-government agencies together to deliver complementary services, monitor and promote best practice (evidence based research) and develop methods for measuring how family and children's lives have been improved.

It is my view that a lead agency such as an Office for Early Childhood would be the best vehicle for administering a State-wide Early Childhood Plan. Such an Office would bring together parenting programs, maternal health services, playgroups, child care, and early childhood programs, including those incorporating Aboriginal parenting, to give the best start to young children and their families.

With these developments in place, service delivery to and by the early childhood sector would be streamlined across the State, bringing much needed cohesion and coordination and vastly improving economic efficiencies. Importantly, WA would then be best placed to maximise the opportunities arising from the COAG Early Childhood Agenda directions and resources, and potential investment by the private sector.

Children and Young People's Views

The 2008 *National Survey of Young Australians* by Mission Australia identified drugs, stress and depression, personal safety and body image as the key concerns of young people. The 2005 survey found that kids saw a healthy lifestyle, good health, and a healthy living environment as important, particularly healthy eating, obesity and physical activity and "being able to do things we wanna do, like not just sitting at home watching TV which gets boring, like getting outside, playing sport and having fun."



In consultations with children and young people, they repeatedly tell us that having things to do and keeping active are extremely important. "Boredom" and "lack of things to do" were identified as the things that aren't so good about living in Australia. "Having more activities, facilities and sport" was rated as a high priority in things that could be made better about Australia. The nature of the activities children and young people were interested in varied primarily according to age, although there were some differences according to geographical location.

Youth Services

In almost every regional and remote community I have visited through the Pilbara, Kimberley and Goldfields regions, there was a call for more activities and programs for young people of all ages, including Aboriginal children and young people.

While most communities have some sporting activities, particularly for young boys, there are limited alternative organised activities or programs in their local communities. The benefits of such programs are enormous both in the short-term and the long-term — with positive outcomes for health, emotional and social development, and as diversions from anti-social behaviour.

I have previously called for a percentage of the 'Royalties for Regions' funding to be allocated to activities and programs for children and young people. A coordinated plan developed to administer that funding would resolve the current fragmented approach to service delivery in this area and benefit children and young people and their communities significantly.

Health and Wellbeing

Drugs and Alcohol

The need for cohesive service, support and rehabilitation was raised in many regional and remote areas I visited. This includes increasing access to drug and alcohol treatments and support programs for parents or carers.

In Fitzroy Crossing, community members informed me that alcohol restrictions had given them the breathing space to assess need and plan services to improve their children's quality of life and future opportunities. Locals also told me about the positive impact the alcohol restrictions were having on children and young people - that their children and young people are living in a safer, less violent community and are less stressed. The need for appropriate alcohol restrictions is further supported by the views of children and young people; in particular the recent series of community consultations in Halls Creek where all 76 children involved voted their top wish as an alcohol ban for the town.

Community members from Halls Creek have also advised me about the alcohol problems in their town and the need for a rehabilitation centre rather than people being sent away for treatment. Members highlighted support services for children and young people and appropriate responses to the ongoing health impacts of alcohol abuse on mothers and child protection issues for children as urgent requirements. They continue to raise with services the need for a 'safe house' in particular, and a healing centre with provision of a counselling service as currently none is available.



A good example of one support program initiative is a 'group home' in Halls Creek which I visited for at-risk children ran by the Department of Child Protection. This home, like any other dwelling in appearance, provides short stays for children whose parents are struggling to come to terms with their responsibilities. Staff at the 'group home' provides positive support to parents in equipping them with the necessary tools and skills to care for their child during home visits. The 'group home' continues to keep a strong indigenous culture, taking the kids out to collect goanna, bush fruit and berries, and English is a second language for most of the children.

In many regional and remote centres I have visited, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) has consistently been reported as another major health concern. There is a critical need for preventative health education as well as immediate implementation of a model of care so that children with FAS, and their families, can receive appropriate diagnosis, treatment and support. This support should also extend to meeting the learning needs of children affected through to care into adulthood.

I support the imposing of alcohol restrictions for those communities that request it, acknowledging the importance of concurrently offering a range of interventions and support, considering at all times the safety and welfare of children and young people in those communities.

Health and Mental Health

In some Australian communities the lack of access to basic infrastructure such as safe drinking water and adequate housing leads to infections and disease. This problem is exacerbated in some regional and remote communities through the inequity of access to basic health care which can then lead to long-term health problems.

An example of this is the failure of basic services to young children and their parents to keep pace with WA's significantly increased birth rate which has risen almost 16% since 2002. Right now, WA is short 94 community child health nurses, 135 school health nurses and over 100 child development staff, meaning the basic health needs of babies, toddlers and children are not being met particularly in regional and remote areas.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Report Card on the Wellbeing of Young Australians ranks Australia 20th of 27 nations for infant mortality. This is a major concern but of even greater significance is that the infant mortality rate for indigenous Australians is more than double that of non-indigenous Australians.

My aspiration is for an increase, particularly in regional and remote WA, in maternal health services and school health nurses to meet the demands of current needs and the needs of an increasing population. This will offer a range of appropriate, locally designed services with the capacity to target all new mothers and provide the necessary health assessments on new-borns and children as required.



A need to increase health and mental health services, support and rehabilitation facilities was reported consistently as well as the problems in some areas of transport to and from services. To ensure the best outcomes for children, the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy cannot be developed or implemented separately from other policy levers which are required to give children a good start in life.

There are other broader strategies that also need addressing to have any impact on improving health and outcomes such as provision of adequate housing and physical infrastructure in regional and remote WA.

Learning and Development

Education

The poor education outcomes for Western Australian Aboriginal children and young people are of great concern to me. The 2008 *National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) results showed, once again, that in WA, in every year and every area tested, Aboriginal student achievement is significantly lower than non-Aboriginal student achievement.¹ Despite wide recognition of this disparity, there has been little to no improvement over the years.

Some individual programs and schools are, however, achieving marked results and provide promising practice of ways to support and enhance the educational experience and outcomes of their Aboriginal students.

The programs offered by the schools vary in their strategies and target groups but share a number of critical success factors including: a child-centred view to improve the educational wellbeing of the students; a commitment to encourage student participation; and support from the local community. An access program at Swan View Senior High School, for example, is achieving outstanding results with Aboriginal students completing year 12 and then securing a place in further education, training or employment with the support of local businesses and the community.

It is my view that WA requires a comprehensive, strategic approach to improving Aboriginal education outcomes, and I am encouraging the WA Government to maximise the opportunities provided under the COAG National Education Agreement to achieve this goal.

Employment

Many young people reported to me that they have limited opportunities for training in their local communities.

Another concern I have is the limited opportunities for Aboriginal children living in regional and remote WA. Any review needs to be cognisant of the effects of geographical location, the resulting lack of choice for some school leavers and also the opportunities this may afford to participate in local employment programs. For example, a number of remote communities are looking to their students to take on key roles in their towns such as rangers and lifesavers.

¹ *National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) Summary Report: achievements in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy*, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008



In these areas, sustainability is paramount; in one community I visited, the new local swimming pool was closed due to a lack of suitably qualified staff, and another, a new all-purpose recreation centre was empty and unused due to the absence of youth workers.

In these circumstances, offering local training would be a means to ensure sustainability of activities, employment and services, and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Safety and Protection

Housing

The lack of accommodation for a wide range of people is a commonly reported issue, for families seeking employment as well as those living in remote communities. Inadequate and overcrowded housing, particularly in Aboriginal communities, is responsible for poor health, poor educational outcomes and places children at an increased risk of suffering child abuse.

The lack of appropriate accommodation also exacerbates youth justice issues, with some young people being denied bail on the sole grounds that no accommodation is available. This is unacceptable, particularly in light of the overarching legislative principle that detention must be a last resort.

The recent Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability has identified significant housing stress and increased risks of poverty due to rising housing costs relative to income. The particular disadvantage of indigenous families is highlighted as requiring significant and immediate action to overcome low levels of home ownership, low access to private rental and high levels of housing stress, overcrowding and homelessness.

Specific programs and funding agreements delivering housing for indigenous communities also need to be incorporated into this action plan. Linkages between overcrowding and health outcomes are raised as a concern. Concerns about the range and magnitude of impact of inadequate housing and homelessness on indigenous children and young people's wellbeing have been extensively documented in other recent reports and inquiries.

Youth Justice

The continuing overrepresentation of young Aboriginal people in WA's justice system is of great concern to me. There are a vast number of areas in the youth justice system where improvements are required (many most recently highlighted by the Auditor General's Performance Report²) but one of the most significant for regional and remote areas is the transportation of young offenders, particularly Aboriginal children and young people, from remote areas to Perth. I have been informed that in some cases young people are held in custody for days at a time until arrangements can be made to transport them to a detention centre.

² Auditor General's Report, *The Juvenile Justice System: Dealing with Young People Under the Young Offenders Act 1994*, 2008.



Lack of accommodation (as mentioned previously) and the shortage of Police Officers and Corrections Officers available to participate in Juvenile Justice Team meetings in regional and remote areas are also contributing factors that are undermining the principles of the *Young Offenders Act 1994* - particularly that detention must be a last resort and that young people should be dealt with in a manner that is fair and culturally appropriate.

There is also a dearth of programs available both for young offenders and for young victims of crime in regional and remote areas. The recent disclosures of sexual abuse in the Kimberley, for example, revealed the need for programs for young sexual offenders, healing centres for victims, and significantly increased educational and preventative behaviours programs.

Staffing in Regional and Remote Communities

Service providers in Halls Creek informed me of the difficulty in recruiting people. That finding them housing was almost impossible and that the alternative was to have fly in - fly out workers which meant that residents were unable to create meaningful relationships with service providers.

Housing and lack of social infrastructure were cited as some of the main reasons for the difficulty in recruiting as well as:

- Lack of childcare;
- Lack of access to good quality education for children;
- The increased costs of living in regional and remote i.e. food produce;
- That professionals were seeking alternative employment in the mining industry as pay was considerably higher; and
- Lack of feeling safe due to large influx of mine workers living in temporary accommodation.

I welcome the Premier's announcement to build 1,000 new homes which will see the building of 600 homes by the Department of Housing and Works and the construction of more than 400 houses for government employees in regional areas. This initiative will help address some of the difficulties in attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff which was raised as a serious problem during my visits.

These new homes should be built to the same standard as those by some of the mining companies who have constructed family day care appropriate housing which allows for childcare services to be delivered in the home providing additional jobs for partners.

The 'Royalties for Regions' Policy development should consider further incentives for enticing professionals to the regions as well as developing opportunities for local people.

Conclusion

This submission has outlined a child wellbeing focused approach to the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy.



Based on the information available, I welcome any measures from the 'Royalties for Regions' Policy which are designed to fund, in a coordinated way, more programs that provide children and young people with activities outside of school, including sporting and cultural activities, which are proven to provide a range of benefits to children and the community. Any funding provided should be allocated to those programs and services that are based on sound evidence to improve the wellbeing of children and young people.

The 'Royalties for Regions' initiative provides a unique opportunity to focus attention and directly benefit those living in regional WA. This Policy needs to be sustainable over the long-term if we are to create stronger local communities.

In summary, children and young people wherever they reside are entitled to the same levels of basic services such as health and education. They should also have access to basic amenities such as clean water and affordable fresh foods, having the same opportunities as those living in metropolitan areas. The 'Royalties for Regions' policy should address these issues and work in partnership with agencies to deliver better outcomes for all children and young people in WA, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.