



## Regional Visit Report

### Mid West and Gascoyne (Carnarvon, Geraldton and Northampton)

20 – 23 February 2017

#### Commissioner's comments

It is always motivating to meet with children and young people and service providers in regional WA, all of whom have strong hopes and desires for the future of their communities. In my recent visit to the Mid West and Gascoyne regions I met many people who were dedicated to making their communities a better place for all.

I am very pleased to have one of my two 2017 Advisory Committees, comprising 15 young people, based in Geraldton. I had a dynamic first meeting with the committee and the group will continue to provide me with their views about how social media and technology can be used to support young people's mental health.



**Photo: Commissioner Colin Pettit with members of his 2017 Advisory Committee in Geraldton.**

The young people I met with from schools in Northampton, Geraldton and Carnarvon spoke positively about their communities, recognising the uniqueness of their local environment, safety of their communities and opportunities to enjoy participation in sports. They also were clear on the issues affecting their towns and spoke about their desire to help children and young people who were struggling.

I encourage local community decision makers and service providers to reflect on the views of children and young people in their communities outlined above, and

continue to explore ways to include children and young people in decision making, particularly around services and the infrastructure they need.

In every community it was apparent that many children and young people are doing well. However I also heard concerns about smaller groups of children and young people who are seriously affected by disadvantage and family dysfunction.

Local service providers are working hard to help the most vulnerable children and young people to remain in school and develop their skills.

There needs to be continued effort to collectively address areas of disadvantage within communities as well as dispel the negative stereotypes of children and young people that are sometimes portrayed.

I will endeavour to use these insights to accurately inform government and the community about what we need to do to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing.

I thank everyone who took time to meet with me and discuss local children and young people's wellbeing.

## **Colin Pettit**

### **Commissioner for Children and Young People WA**

#### **Who did the Commissioner meet with?**

In Carnarvon the Commissioner met with:

- Staff and students at Carnarvon Community College including the Aboriginal Education Officers, student councillors and the Work Readiness Boys Group.
- Staff and students at St Mary Star of the Sea Catholic School, including observing an Explicit Direct Instruction lesson in the Year 4 class and meeting with the Year 6 and Year 10 student leaders.
- Aboriginal stakeholders from local agencies and the local community.
- Service providers for children and young people from government and non-government agencies including the Department for Child Protection and Family Services, Department of Corrective Services, Police & Community Youth Centre (PCYC), youth outreach services and day care services.
- Local Magistrate Janelle Scutt.
- The President, Acting CEO and community services staff from the Shire of Carnarvon.

In Geraldton the Commissioner met with:

- Aboriginal stakeholders from local agencies and the local community.

- Staff and students from Geraldton Senior College.
- Youth Services Network members at a meeting hosted by the City of Greater Geraldton.
- Staff and students from St John's Catholic Primary School.
- Service providers for children and young people from government and non-government agencies including Department for Child Protection and Family Support, Department of Corrective Services, WA Police, Department of Education, family and youth outreach and day care services.
- City of Greater Geraldton's Community and Cultural Development Manager.
- The Commissioner's 2017 Geraldton Advisory Committee comprising 15 students from Geraldton Senior College, John Willcock College, Nagle Catholic College and Strathalbyn Christian College.

In Northampton the Commissioner met with staff and students at Northampton District High School.



**The Commissioner Colin Pettit listens to students in Years 5 to 6 from Northampton District High School.**

### **What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Carnarvon**

Good things about living in Carnarvon included:

- Fishing, beaches, weather, the skate park next to the pool, having the space to go out riding on motor bikes, living on the plantations, small town where everyone knows everyone. They like the freedom they have in Carnarvon and the open environment as it is not as closed in as the city.
- Love the way tourists talk about the town and enjoy it. It is good with the beach nearby and seeing dugongs and turtles.
- Pretty easy to get around but you do need a car or a bike.
- They like being able to travel to other regional events for sporting activities.

- The work readiness boys program was a very positive thing about the school and helped them to stay at school and learn.

Things that could be improved were:

- Air conditioning in the gym or at least fans, grass around the skate park as the gravel gets on the skate park and is dangerous, better shops, stricter policing of the little children who throw rocks at cars and break windows around town, more control of big dogs that walk around, need more rubbish bins particularly down on the beaches and the Fascine.
- The town is going backwards with shops closing; need more shops and attractions to amuse the tourists and young people. More shops would give more children the opportunity for part-time work.
- Activities need to be free for children that can't afford them and there needs to be programs at school to get them back to school.
- Need more volunteers to support activities at the PCYC. Everyone needs to help out and support the activities rather than just complaining and hoping the children who misbehave stop. Need to keep children doing things in the school holidays and need to have a way of getting children to activities through transport.
- Community scout group is good and it would be good to do more things like the clean-up days as they are great at bringing the community together. Have them more regularly and give children who come a free BBQ or movie ticket.
- More opportunity to participate in a variety of sports. Lots happening but all on at the same time – it needs to be better coordinated between the different clubs.
- Sports are sometimes sexist and need to allow for girls teams and boys teams and mixed teams when appropriate.



**The Commissioner Colin Pettit with students from St Mary Star of the Sea in Carnarvon.**

## **What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Geraldton**

Primary school aged children said:

- The things they liked about Geraldton included: friendly people, school, safe environment, good variety of sport, supportive families, free Wi-Fi.
- Ideas for improvements included: recycling bins (currently only green rubbish bins), more bike racks and paths, more shops (some are closing), more tennis courts, a gaming arcade, more festival and celebrations (like for the start of winter), parks to have more play equipment for older children and particularly equipment that requires teamwork, more tourist attractions like museums, more restaurants.
- If they were the Commissioner they would: get everyone healthy and active, get a list of what everyone needs and give it to the heads of government, provide more homes for the homeless people, more homes like Nazareth House for the aged people, help children with special disability, more transport, a children's hospital, entertainment for the disabled, bigger shops and fix houses that are broken, animal farms for entertainment, help with nature and fix up the litter, getting another hospital as theirs is too full and you have to wait, better amusements for people – a laser tag venue, a bowling alley, all children to have the opportunity to play sports, money for children to have shoes.

High school students shared a range of insights into life in Geraldton and ideas for improving young people's lives including:

- There are a number of good venues in Geraldton, including the beach front, but they are not being fully utilised as there isn't anyone to run activities.
- Difficult to know what is going on – need to have better communication about activities that are available.
- Not as much to do if you don't like sport.
- Thursday night lots of children are hanging around in town causing problems. Policing has been increased but it won't fix it.
- Stigma around certain suburbs creates racial divide and negative stereotypes; this leads to children just living up to the reputation.
- Need activities to bring all young people together.
- Young people like stimulation and they want options for activities.
- Some good organisations. But they are limited in how much they help. For example, headspace can only give you 10 sessions which might not be enough if you have bigger problems.

## What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Northampton

- Everything is safe and close, you could ride your bike, you know everyone, there's sports like netball and squash and the community centre, it's quiet, there's good food stores with a wide range, it's close to the beach, you can live on a farm away from town and there's a bus that picks up children from farms and town to take them to school.
- They want to be able to get a driver's licence at age 16 to give them access to social events and activities.
- Would like a youth centre/PCYC to go to afterschool that's air-conditioned, a skate park and activities for older children to do after school.
- Want to make the town cleaner (there used to be clean-up days), more trees and more opportunities to plant them.
- Would like to create middle schools (some students have siblings and friends who go to boarding school at Year 7 for schooling).
- A waterpark, like a splash and play, or a pool.
- Better water fountains at the parks.
- A cycleway to Geraldton.

### Primary school aged children said:

- The things they liked were: wildlife, the animals on farms, the beach, lack of traffic, low crime, the area's history, its serenity and its people.
- Things they wanted to improve include: adding a Year 11/12 class so they don't have to leave to finish schooling at a boarding school, more parks to play on (due the fire on the current one which has taken a long time to be fixed), more incursions/excursions at school, more free activities like pools, more shops to help employ parents locally.
- If they were Commissioner for a day they would want to cut down peoples' use of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.



**Commissioner Colin Pettit with Northampton District High School students in Years 7 to 10.**

## **What the Commissioner heard from service providers and community members**

### **School and education**

- The importance of engagement programs was highlighted. It was important to have programs to help students to remain at school or re-engage in their learning as it was very hard for them to catch up once they fell behind.
- The sports programs were good but programs for children not into sport were also needed.
- Cultural programs were also needed and these should be embedded in all the programs, including at school. It would be good to see local Aboriginal young people doing a welcome to country at assemblies.
- There is an ongoing problem with threats and bullying at school associated with feuding between families. This was cited as the major reason why children didn't attend school.
- More comprehensive training is required for educators to handle instances of extraordinary, trauma-based student behaviour.
- A proactive approach is needed to prevent incidences of sexting among young people.

### **Families**

- Drug use is getting younger and some children are not at home because it is not safe. A school holiday program had 50 to 80 children under 14 years of age attend. A number reported they were hungry which demonstrated a significant level of disadvantage at home.
- Programs to support the families are also essential. A number of young people are being brought up by grandparents without money or support to do this role. Everyone needs to come together to support the children, including the services and the families. Children need to have a safe home life where they get enough food, sleep and encouragement to go to school and learn.
- Grandparents caring for grandchildren need a lot more help to get the support they need to provide effective care.
- There's a problem with older young people accessing Centrelink payments and government agencies overriding the authority of parents or grandparents when they should be helping them to look after the young people and set boundaries.
- A number of families were deemed to be in poverty, creating a cycle of disadvantage as young people then committed crimes to get the clothes, toiletries and food they needed to survive.

- Effective programs such as Stronger Families have had their funding cut.
- Methamphetamine use is escalating rapidly due to its ease of access and cheaper cost than other drugs.

### **Youth justice**

- More police is not the answer to address local justice issues. There is a lack of programs for at-risk children and young people.
- PCYC program is good but more activities are needed to keep children and young people engaged. There are fewer problems or crime when the centre is open.
- Need safe houses where children can go to until a safe adult can be found, as well as local youth rehabilitation services and facilities as young people currently have to travel without their families to Broome or Perth.

### **Recreation and community involvement**

- Social media criticism of children and young people, particularly Aboriginal children and young people, is very negative and damaging.
- Need a space where children can interact and hang out.
- The cultural centre in Carnarvon needs to be reopened for Aboriginal people to have a place that recognises and supports Aboriginal culture in the area.

### **Employment**

- There is a lack of employment opportunities for Aboriginal people.
- Need programs like the Green Army to help get young people job ready.
- Stereotyping of Aboriginal people as unreliable means they cannot get work even when there are jobs available.

### **Service provision**

- Carnarvon needs locally-based services. Visiting services are not able to build relationships and provide the level of service needed.
- Lots of good programs could work better if they were properly resourced.
- There is strong Aboriginal leadership in town (Geraldton) but they are not given the resources to run programs. The perception was that funding goes to the non-Aboriginal led services.
- Services are being asked to do more for less money. It is very hard to service regional communities, such as Meekatharra.
- It takes time to develop effective relationships with young people and this requires adequate and secure funding so that workers have the time and continuity, particularly for children with trauma who need constancy and trust.

- Need more holistic programs that address the underlying causes of disadvantage; this will require increased collaboration between agencies.
- There are not enough local volunteers to deliver programs such as the PCYC.
- Aboriginal people are not engaged about support programs. Services need to talk to local people and involve them in service delivery, including employing local Aboriginal people to run services.
- Transport in Geraldton was also an issue in getting children into central activities from the suburbs.
- Services are seeing young people with higher levels of trauma.

### **Facts about children and young people in Carnarvon, Geraldton and Northampton**

- Around 9,770 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years live in the Geraldton Significant Urban Area.<sup>1</sup>
- At the 2011 Census there were 1,617 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years in the Geraldton area, representing 15 per cent of that age population.
- The birth rate in the Greater Geraldton Local Government Area has decreased slightly between 2009 (617 births) and 2014 (605 births).<sup>2</sup>
- Around 1,451 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years live in the Carnarvon area.<sup>3</sup>
- At the 2011 Census, Aboriginal children and young people made up 31.8 per cent of people aged up to 19 years in the Carnarvon area (there were 489 in total).<sup>4</sup>
- The birth rate in the Carnarvon Local Government Area is decreasing. In 2009 there were 112 births and in 2014 there were 78 births.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Significant Urban Area category incorporates the City of Geraldton and the fringe areas served by that city, ABS Community Profile, Geraldton, Significant Urban Area as at the 2011 Census

<sup>2</sup> ABS Births 2014

<sup>3</sup> ABS Community Profile, Carnarvon, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2011 census

<sup>4</sup> ABS Community Profile, Carnarvon, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2011 census

<sup>5</sup> 6 ABS Births 2014