



Regional Visit Report

Northam, Merredin and Southern Cross

26–27 August 2019

Commissioner's comments

In my recent visit to Northam, Merredin and Southern Cross I was pleased to meet with local children and young people who were passionate about their communities. I also had the opportunity to meet with a range of local service providers and local government representatives who support them.

The young people I met with spoke positively about the support they receive from their close-knit communities and the unique opportunities of living in regional towns. They also raised some issues affecting their towns, particularly the presence of drugs and alcohol, amount of plastic in the environment and the lack of enough youth activities. The young people also recognised the role they can play to help keep their environment clean and appreciated their communities for supporting them to feel independent.

It was clear from my visit that most of the children and young people in the Wheatbelt are resilient and doing well. The service providers I met with reported an overall decrease in youth offending and improved intervention programs for children and young people who are seriously affected by disadvantage and family dysfunction.

Some service providers I spoke with also expressed a strong need for the education and medical sectors to retain skilled staff in regional towns. They also had rising concerns for the slowly increasing number of young people couch surfing and the need for resources to support youth homelessness agencies.

It is important that all local decision makers and service providers hear about the views and experiences of children and young people in their communities to ensure programs are inclusive, holistic and meet their needs. I also encourage service providers to reflect and continue to explore ways to include children and young people in decision making processes, particularly on issues that affect their overall wellbeing.

I will endeavour to use these insights to advocate on behalf of children and young people in the Wheatbelt to government and community service providers.

Colin Pettit

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA



Commissioner Colin Pettit with students from Northam Senior High School.

Who did the Commissioner meet with?

In Northam the Commissioner met with:

- Staff and students at Northam Senior High School
- Staff and students at St Joseph's Northam School
- Service providers for children and young people (and their families) from government agencies and non-government organisations including Northam Police, Northam Shire Council and Share & Care Northam.

In Merredin, the Commissioner met with staff and students at Merredin College and in Southern Cross the Commissioner met with:

- Staff and students at Southern Cross District High School
- Staff at the Shire of Yilgarn.



Students from Merredin College with Commissioner Colin Pettit.

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Northam

Positive aspects to living in Northam included:

- That there were lots of activities for young people, including the opportunity to play a variety of sports.
- That they have lots of friends, including the freedom of living in a smaller community where you know most people.
- How easy it is to get around locally because everything is so close.
- How safe and independent the young people feel in their community.

Things that they would like improved were:

- Housing accessibility for some young people who are couch surfing in the community.
- Limiting the number of alcohol shops around the town and strict supervision of businesses not adhering to the alcohol supply age restrictions.
- Availability of retail shops so that young people do not have to travel to Perth for shopping.
- More options and facilities for teenagers who are not interested in sports.
- Youth engagement programs after school hours and during weekends.
- The amount of plastic in the environment. The young people mentioned that even with the plastic ban in place the bags offered by the shops, the use of single use

plastic and rubbish containers continue to contaminate the environment.

- Road safety for children who have to walk to school. The young people would like to see some of the speed limits around areas they commonly access lowered.
- Monitoring the amount of time children spend on screens and for parents to build their awareness around the content their children are accessing online.
- Bullying in some areas designated for young people such as the skate park. The young people mentioned that they would benefit from mental health workshops that build their resilience and coping strategies.



Commissioner Colin Pettit with St Joseph's Northam School students

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Merredin

Positive aspects to living in Merredin included:

- That all the facilities are close to each other and the small community is closely connected.
- How it is a great opportunity to see and appreciate where their food produce comes from.
- How they have the opportunity to support their families with their businesses and farms.
- The opportunity to spend time in the nature and enjoy walking family pets.

Things that they would like improved were:

- More youth engagement programs in town led by enthusiastic and engaging coordinators.
- Having organised sports to make the most of local facilities and engage children and young people more.
- Having more youth program options for young people who are not interested in sports. Some suggested ideas included running youth theatre programs, creative arts workshops and youth clubs.
- Having increased support for students pursuing tertiary education opportunities and currently enrolled in ATAR subjects. Students suggested having more ATAR class options.
- Involvement of children and young people in decision making by service providers. Young people suggested having a children and young people representative body or individual that delivers their voices and opinions about things happening in their community.
- Young people would like to see state government agencies invest more in the Wheatbelt and support the businesses that provide young people with employment.
- Young people would also like to have access to adequate mental health support.

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Southern Cross

Positive aspects to living in Southern Cross included:

- All facilities are close and easy to access for children and young people.
- The sense of community in town where everyone supports each other and looks after each other especially during through times.
- The large space of the region provides great opportunities to use for community and youth programs.
- Sport is a major interest for the young people in Southern Cross.

Things that they would like improved were:

- The young people suggested building a youth zone where teenagers can meet after school and during holidays to connect and take part in programs and would like support from the local council to make this happen.
- Organising events in the town and surrounding area during school holidays that attract people to come visit and for the locals to get together.
- Increasing the variety of subjects available for study, particularly in high schools. The young people would like subjects such as woodwork, ICT and other skills focused subjects that students in the city have access to.
- Young people were concerned that they do not have access to medical practitioners

who reside in the town. The students would like to have a doctor, physiotherapist and psychologist working full-time in the town.

- The idea of boarding school to pursue quality education was one that concerned some of the students. The young people appreciate the connection they have with their community and their families so they would like to access those opportunities within their town or region.

What the Commissioner heard from service providers in the regions

The Commissioner met with various government service providers including school staff, members of the police, staff from local councils as well as a non-government organisation. According to what the Commissioner heard from all representatives, young people in the Wheatbelt are resilient and generally doing well. The services also identified that there are a portion of young people who are struggling due to poverty, family experiences with domestic violence and alcohol and drugs. The Commissioner also heard that youth homelessness is present in some areas of the Wheatbelt while youth offending has declined especially in Northam and surrounding areas. Some of the issues discussed included:

School and education

- Low literacy and numeracy skills in some students was a serious concern and some schools have identified the lack of resources provided to support those students who are struggling.
- Schools would like more support to build student interest in STEM and tertiary study. More opportunities and resources are also required for students interested in other employment pathways. Schools would also like for universities to arrange regional student excursions to their campuses.
- Schools identified that retaining highly skilled teachers can be an issue and it was suggested that more incentives could be provided to retain teachers in regional schools.
- More comprehensive training is required for educators to handle instances of difficult behaviour management issues with young people resulting from disrupted home lives.

Homelessness

- A small but increasing number of young people are couch surfing in various communities in the Wheatbelt. Service providers linked the increase to the rise of experiences with domestic violence and alcohol and drug related issues within families.
- Maintaining good schooling and interest in education overall is a struggle for a lot of the young people without a stable and safe home. Funding for youth homelessness services as well as services that support at risk families through early intervention programs are required in the region.

Youth justice

- While some youth offending is present, it is decreasing. More support is required to enable police to continue to engage with young people in the community through youth programs.
- Services would like to see opportunities be provided to young people with youth offending history and for young people who return from the juvenile justice system to prevent re-offending or getting stuck in a cycle of violence and crime.
- Services understand most of the contact with justice by young people is due to issues related to support at home. More resources need to be directed at organisations that assist families at risk.

Youth engagement

- The accessibility of youth facilities and the need for them to be open during after school hours, weekends and school holidays was identified.
- Communities and local councils need to work together to ensure the availability of events and youth engagement programs for those young people.
- Young people need to be supported to have a voice in the community through consultation and engagement, for example through an advisory committee which engages a broad spectrum of children and young people.

Service provision

- Underlying causes of disadvantage for disengaged youth needs to be addressed through supportive and holistic programs in partnership with community youth organisations.
- Local councils need to continue working closely with youth service providers and also with young people themselves to allow their involvement in decision making processes about services and infrastructures they need.
- In schools, concerns about attracting and retaining staff were voiced in relation to health workers particularly child health staff, speech pathologists, psychologists, and occupational therapists.

Facts about children and young people in Northam, Merredin and Southern Cross

Northam:

- Around 1,605 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years live in Northam.¹
- At the 2016 Census there were 256 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years in Northam, representing 14.8 per cent of that age population.²

Merredin:

- Around 674 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years live in Merredin.³
- At the 2016 Census, there were 114 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years, representing 15.3 per cent of that age population.⁴

Southern Cross:

- Around 124 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years live in Southern Cross.⁵
- At the 2016 Census, there were 16 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years in Southern Cross, representing 11.68 per cent of that age population.⁶

¹ ABS Community Profile, Northam, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.

² ABS Community Profile, Northam, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.

³ ABS Community Profile, Merredin, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.

⁴ ABS Community Profile, Merredin, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.

⁵ ABS Community Profile, Southern Cross, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.

⁶ ABS Community Profile, Southern Cross, Statistical Area Level 2 as at the 2016 census.