



# Commissioner's Listening Tour

## South West Region

**21-25 March 2022**

For five days in March 2022, the Commissioner visited the South West region of Western Australia to meet with, and hear from, children and young people about their concerns and what matters to them. Young people consistently raised concerns about: safety on public transport and in the community; the environment; mental health; homelessness, poverty and the cost of living; bullying - both at school and online; and the need for more opportunities in training and employment. A key event during the visit was the inaugural meeting of the Commissioner's Advisory Committee at Margaret River Senior High School.

The concerns raised by children and young people throughout the visit supported the information gathered by the Commissioner's office through the state-wide *Speaking Out Survey* in 2021 (visit [ccyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/projects/speaking-out-survey/](https://ccyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/projects/speaking-out-survey/) for more information). These concerns demonstrate there is a need for a cohesive, holistic and child-focussed approach to community development and service delivery which better supports children and young people in accessing the appropriate supports at the right time.

The Commissioner is grateful to everyone in the South West that took time to share their experiences and insights with her.

*"Money impacts everything – what we eat, what we wear, where we sleep"* (13 year-old)

### Who did the Commissioner meet with?

- Rapids Landing Primary School
- Margaret River Senior High School
- Shire of Augusta-Margaret River
- Busselton Senior High School including the alternative education facility Geo Training
- Various youth services providers as part of the Busselton Youth Network meeting, including but not limited to:
  - Shire of Busselton
  - The Salvation Army
  - Red Cross
  - WA Police
  - Department of Education
  - Department of Communities
- Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School
- South West Aboriginal Medical Service

- City of Bunbury Youth Advisory Council
- Child and Parent Centre – Collie Valley (managed by Investing in Our Youth)
- Collie Senior High School:
  - Clontarf Academy
  - Student Councillors
  - Shooting Stars Academy.

## What the Commissioner heard from children and young people

### Rapids Landing Primary School – students in Years 3-6



Founded in 2018, Rapids Landing Primary School is an innovative Independent Public School for children in Kindergarten to Year 6. They are a growing school with a current enrolment of 350 students.

The Commissioner met firstly with the Principal, Associate Principal and Chaplain. She then sat down with a group of students in Years 3 to 6.

Students told the Commissioner that they liked the following things about Margaret River:

- The community feeling, knowing everyone and having lots of friends
- At school they enjoy spending time with their friends (and making new ones!), having supportive teachers and getting to do fun activities where they are challenged and can practise their problem-solving skills
- They think their Buddy Bench is good for helping everyone feel included and like school when there is no bullying

- Some students said it was hard at school when you don't understand the work, when you get separated from friends and when you don't get to have a say.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- They are concerned about some people not having appropriate housing or enough food to eat
- One student suggested some land should be reserved for a homeless shelter to help with this issue
- Some children are also worried about the impact of feral cats on native fauna populations and want a pet shelter or wildlife sanctuary to help with this
- Students want more things built in the community that children and young people need, like a fun park, a giant chess board in town and more public toilets
- They think kids should be doing more things in the community
- They also want more sport and a better variety (like adventuring, gymnastics and roller-skating) with many saying that sport is often not at a convenient time for them and there aren't enough teams to participate in after school sports
- At school, students would like to have more of a choice about what they learn and think it was very important for the "true Aboriginal story to be told".

### **Margaret River Senior High School – Years 7 and 8, and Advisory Committee**

Margaret River Senior High School (an Independent Public School since 2012) is an integral part of the Augusta-Margaret River community. They have 1,026 students from Years 7 to 12.

The Commissioner met with members of her 2022 Advisory Committee and discussed their priorities for the year. The Advisory Committees' work will directly inform the Commissioner's current project focused on girls' wellbeing, giving young people a say on this important matter. The project follows from the results of the Commissioner's Speaking Out Surveys which identified that WA female young people consistently rated their wellbeing below that of their male peers; reporting higher rates of stress, low life satisfaction and not feeling happy about themselves.

The Commissioner also had a face-to-face meeting with four students in Years 7 and 8. Students told the Commissioner that living in Margaret River is good because:

- There is a good community feel with lots of friends
- Basketball courts and skate park are good and there is lots of wildlife
- At school they are well-supported by teachers and have mainly positive relationships.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- They said many sports are not affordable

- There was a sense that school in general doesn't work well for young people with ADHD and anger-management issues
- Some people in town are concerning to them; a lot of drinking and drug-taking is taking place
- Some felt the presence of tourists a bit challenging and disconcerting
- They said homelessness is a big problem
- They want more dog parks
- At school, they thought improvements could be made to the canteen and suggested a chill-out room would be helpful.

## **Busselton Senior High School (SHS) (main campus) – Years 9 to 12**

Busselton SHS was established as a High School in 1958 and became an Independent Public School in 2014. There are 672 students ranging from Years 7 to 12. Busselton SHS is a Registered Training Organisation and students can engage in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs to prepare them for life after school.

The Commissioner met with a large number of young people across various year groups and also visited Geographe Training, the school's off-site engagement program.

Upon arrival at the main campus, the Commissioner was met by the Principal before being given a tour of the school by Year 11 and 12 School Councillors. The councillors briefed the Commissioner on some of the school's initiatives, which include: the HUB, a very popular student recreation zone run by the Council; various waste and recycling programs; the Trade Training Centre; and the Visual Arts hall.

The Commissioner then met with a group of Year 9 and 10 students, followed by a group of Year 12 students.

Some students like Busselton because "everyone knows each other", but many others raised concerns about racism in town, saying they are often followed in shops by security staff. Several students also spoke about Busselton's "small town mentality" and that gossip and "town-talk" makes things hard for them. The older students also raised the issue of racism at school, along with general concerns about not being believed or listened to as young people.

Many felt well-supported by parents and had strong, positive relationships with certain teachers.

At school, they had some suggestions for change:

- Phones to be allowed at break times
- More places offered for elective subjects, as some students miss out.

Some of their other suggestions and concerns are:

- Needing more things to do in town – boredom is an issue

- Young people would like a mountain bike track near the wetlands and a bowling alley in town
- Marijuana use is a big problem everywhere
- There are not enough services – need a homelessness shelter/crisis accommodation
- Sport needs to be more affordable
- School to work transition – it is hard to find a job out of school
- The youth centre is geared more towards younger kids with not many activities available for older young people
- It is difficult to get your driver's license because of the associated costs, specifically training and being able to afford the necessary 'hours'. This is particularly true for families who don't own a vehicle.

### **Busselton SHS Geographe Training (Geo Training)**

The Commissioner then headed to the Geo Training campus which provides individualised support for Year 11 and 12 students at educational risk. The Commissioner spoke with a number of young people engaged in the program as well as a teacher, Pathways Coordinator and other key staff.

Students at Geo Training generously shared some of the complexities in navigating the service system as well as the accessibility and appropriateness of the health system. They also raised many of the same issues raised by other students, including:

- Limited transport options in town and surrounds and getting to Perth is also expensive, especially if you don't have a job or parental support
- Sport for children and young people is too expensive and they suggested a uniform allowance could help
- They want more education about Aboriginal culture
- There is limited youth legal support for those who need it
- Mental health concerns:
  - Education to teach mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviours needs to happen early in primary school
  - Children of parents with a mental illness often have PTSD and need extra support
  - Wait times and availability are an issue, particularly with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
  - Young LGBTIQIA+SB ((lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, sistergirl and brotherboy) people have been told they are either too ill or not ill enough to access mental health support. Many LGBTIQIA+SB young people had also experienced discrimination and inconsistent care.
- Young people shared their experiences as independent minors, single parents and young carers:
  - They said living as an independent minor is very difficult, with payments being insufficient to cover rent and living expenses. Practical assistance, such as food vouchers, would be very helpful to ease cost-of-living pressures

- More practical support needs to be provided to young carers: such as help with basic life skills like cooking and simple budgeting, particularly when parents have limited capacity to pass these on to their children
- More support needs to be provided to young single parents, particularly those experiencing homelessness
- Young carers experience poor outcomes on a number of fronts as a result of their caring role, including mental health issues and disrupted education. Supports such as counselling, tutoring and other services have been promised but not delivered.

### **Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School – Years 4 to 6**



Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School is on Wardandi Country and welcomes all children both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal from Kindergarten to Year 6. The school is unique in that Aboriginal culture, content and ways of learning are at the forefront of their practice.

The Commissioner met with the current and former Principal and six children across Years 4 to 6, who gave her a tour of the school before sharing their views about school and some of their suggestions for change.

Some of the things they like about school include:

- Learning about culture
- Being surrounded by lots of nature
- Doing fun activities.

The children's insights reflect the positive school culture and strong student-teacher relationships. The students also took their time to prepare a written account for the Commissioner of worries and wishes, which included:

- The war with Russia and how it will impact Australia
- COVID
- Snake bites – they suggested some first aid lessons for kids would help with this.

Their suggestions for improvements at school and in town include:

- At school:
  - More art classes
  - Traditional dance lessons/groups
  - Farm school
  - Camp school.
- In town:
  - Dirt-bike/off-road tracks with free access
  - A water park and trampoline park
  - Rock-climbing wall.

### **Bunyap House Crisis Accommodation (Accordwest)**

The youth accommodation at Bunyap House aims to give young people a safe place to call home where they can gain life skills, receive help and support; and keep attending school or other education. Accordwest also provides a Reconnect Program to break the cycle of homelessness by providing community-based early intervention services to the whole family; from counselling to group work, mediation and practical support. The Reconnect Program is for 12 to 18 year-olds living out of home or at risk of leaving home.

The Commissioner first received a brief program overview from the Team Leader of Families and Children and then met with two young people who were residing at Bunyap House. They shared their experiences honestly and openly, giving the Commissioner a stark insight into the challenges and complexities of the service system.

While both young people had experienced significant trauma and hardship, they displayed immense courage and resilience and have hopes for the future:

- They want to get jobs, be able to reconnect to their siblings and be listened to by adults
- They thought the Department of Communities (Child Protection) could prioritise resources better, in a way that was relevant and responsive to the needs of young people
- The cost and availability of housing was a challenge and their options were extremely limited
- They had difficulty engaging with Department of Communities (Child Protection). Examples include: having many different case workers; one young person would have preferred a male case worker; and not having a leaving care plan
- They want 'authorities' (police, school, others) to stop making assumptions about them
- At various points they had been disengaged from education and found mainstream school settings very difficult to manage
- They are worried about their friends, many of whom struggled with their mental health and were living on very low incomes, or were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

### **City of Bunbury Youth Advisory Council**

The City of Bunbury's Youth Advisory Council (known as "Bunbury Youth / by YAC") consists of approximately twelve members under the age of 25, led by the Youth Mayor. Bunbury Youth / by YAC is committed to elevating young people's voices across all platforms and is currently working to strengthen their governance arrangements to ensure the YAC is consistently represented at Council meetings.

Facilitated by the Senior Community Partnerships Coordinator, the Commissioner met with some of the YAC members to discuss the key issues impacting them.

As young people transitioning from school to further education or employment, many are struggling to keep up with high living costs associated with living independently. They raised housing affordability and availability as a priority issue, with some not being able to access appropriate housing at all.

Other key issues include:

- Mental health services and supports – there is urgent need for crisis beds in Bunbury
- More student housing is required
- Schools:
  - Need to better inform students about alternative pathways to further education – there is a general lack of education support and poor coordination between the local community and schools
  - Young people want mandated sexuality and consent education, citing Victoria as an example
- There is a need for an updated directory of services for Bunbury and the South West.



### **Collie Senior High School (SHS)**

Collie SHS delivers teaching and learning programs to meet the learning needs of a diverse range of lower school students in Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. Years 11 and 12 students are also supported to pursue university entry through an ATAR pathway or Vocational Education and Training (VET) opportunities. Collie SHS has also recently welcomed the Clontarf Academy (2020) and Shooting Stars program (2021) to the school site.

The Commissioner met with the School Principal and then spoke with students from the Clontarf Academy, Shooting Stars and members of the student council.

Some issues and concerns were consistently raised by all three groups, including:

- There are not enough footpaths in town. Roads in general also need maintenance
- Transport to other regional centres is too expensive
- Homelessness and access to mental health services are big concerns
- Rubbish in the environment, such as in rivers etc.

Some suggested improvements in town included:

- An athletics track so that people don't have to train on the football oval. The velodrome is not being used currently and would fit this purpose
- Better food, shopping and leisure activities, including:
  - Greater variety of fast-food outlets
  - Cinema, electronic gaming store and more clothing shops
- An Aboriginal cultural centre.

And they also spoke generally about the suitability and condition of community amenities:

- Lots of town amenities require upgrading and the Shire needs to provide more bins and waste facilities
- It was difficult for young people to get involved at the sports venues as they are all licensed
- There need to be more accessible spaces in town, particularly for children and young people with disability
- They said Roach Park could be better utilised for different community events not just sport.

### **Clontarf Academy**

The first meeting was with a group of young men from the Clontarf Academy. The Academy Coordinator and the students spoke to the Commissioner about what the Academy means to them, what is good about living in Collie, and some of the challenges and suggestions for improvement.

The Clontarf Academy is credited for keeping a number of boys attending school, with students reporting that they feel safe at school and enjoy the activities on offer. Many have had negative experiences at previous schools, being treated poorly by teachers and often feeling labelled and discriminated against.

The boys enjoy a number of good sporting opportunities in Collie such as BMX, football and cricket. They also told the Commissioner that the 4WD tracks, camping with mates and swimming holes provided plenty of fun. They reported generally positive relationships with the police.

Some of their concerns include:

- Problems with drugs, fights and petty crime in town
- Not many shopping opportunities or other things to do in town
- Many of the boys feel disconnected from their culture. They said they would like to organise a cultural camp with all the Clontarf Academy boys.

## **Student Council**



The Commissioner then met with a large group of student councillors. Like the students from the Clontarf Academy and Shooting Stars, the councillors also raised concerns about community safety, drug use and lack of amenities in town. Many students are also concerned with littering and people not looking after the environment.

The student councillor meeting also provided a good opportunity for students to identify common interests and potential areas of collaboration. For example, one student explained that they are writing a script. The idea of a drama club followed, with many other students saying they would be interested in bringing the script to life. Others were keen to explore the idea of a book or movie club, or arts and crafts groups and thought that a school survey to identify common interests among the student population would be a good way to gauge interest.

The student councillors told the Commissioner they like the following things about Collie:

- The push to encourage more tourism, for example the murals in town
- Sports opportunities like swim club, underwater hockey, basketball and netball
- The natural environment and being able to do activities outside
- Speedway.

At school, they had some ideas for improvements:

- Some students want more options in the humanities, such as history and geography
- Disability access, for example, the performing arts lift needs to be repaired.

## **Shooting Stars**



In the afternoon the Commissioner met with a group of female students as part of the Shooting Stars program. The Commissioner and students were joined by Coordinators Kristine Ugle and Alyce McKeown.

The girls enjoy a range of activities in town and at school, such as:

- South West Aboriginal Medical Service (SWAMS) camp
- The pools at Stockton
- Golf and netball.

They also told the Commissioner they were concerned about some things, including:

- Peer pressure to try drugs and alcohol
- The way they are treated by some boys
- Bullying at school, in town and online
- The impact of family suicides, community violence and drugs.

## **What the Commissioner heard from service providers and other organisations**

### **The Shire of Augusta-Margaret River**

The Commissioner met with a variety of staff from the Shire to discuss some of the major issues impacting children and young people and their families. Included in the discussion were the Shire President, Director of Corporate and Community Services, Coordinator of Community Planning and Development, the Shire's Youth Trainee and a youth worker.

Staff discussed a number of issues with the Commissioner:

- Housing affordability and homelessness for residents
- Unreliable internet and issues with technology are ongoing issues
- Current accommodation options cannot support the seasonal workforce
- Children and young people living out-of-town on farms are often isolated and disconnected from their peers
- Transport is costly and inaccessible
- Mental health services and supports are inadequate.

Creative solutions discussed included:

- The Shire is currently developing a bid to establish a sporting fund for low-income families, as KidSport is inadequate
- Establishing good partnerships with Margaret River SHS to deliver alternative programs for disengaged children and young people
- Concrete Club, Dismantle and Rise are examples of outreach and peer support programs that utilise special-interest areas such as bike-building, trail-bike riding and roller-skating to engage vulnerable or at-risk children and young people.

## **The Busselton Youth Network Forum**

The City of Busselton Youth Network meets quarterly and comprises stakeholders such as Department of Communities, Youth Pathways, South West Community Alcohol and Drug Service, Busselton SHS, School Drug Education and Road Aware (SDERA), CAMHS, YouthCare, Department of Education, City of Busselton, family centres and the Undalup Association, among others.

The City's Youth Development Supervisor convened a special meeting for the Commissioner to speak with service providers and discuss some of the priority issues affecting their services and the children and young people they work with.

Issues and challenges discussed were:

- Young people need more life skills and independence-building capacities or opportunities
- Young people need a stable, reliable basis from which to build knowledge and capacity in order to achieve long-term success
- Mentoring support has a strong positive impact for children and young people, but it is not properly funded
- Many service providers observed that disadvantaged young people are often hesitant to take up opportunities and need more holistic support to build up confidence and self-worth
- Teaching basic skills, without the pressure of assessment, would be very beneficial for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people
- Services need to elevate the profile and accessibility of their service to the broader community so that young people know where to go
- Overall, there is a lack of understanding at a community level about the issues impacting at-risk children and young people, and the interrelatedness of these issues.

- Service providers know that family dysfunction and hardship often affect a parent's capacity to provide ongoing love and support for their child. The community is reactive to the challenging behaviours of at-risk kids because they don't have a good understanding of the issues
- Early detection, identification and intervention is key. Parents and carers needed wrap-around, holistic support for their children
- Immediate interventions (particularly housing, financial support and mental health) are required. This needs to be followed up by regular therapeutic support.
- Having capacity to deliver advocacy is an ongoing concern.
- Funding and capacity to build good relationships are barriers to effective service delivery in Busselton.

In answer to "What is working well?", they said:

- Busselton has strong networks but is impacted by high staff turnover of service providers
- Engaging the whole family is effective but this is impacted by resourcing and constraints around accessibility (age, etc.).

## What the Commissioner heard from parents

### South West Aboriginal Medical Service (SWAMS)



SWAMS is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the only Aboriginal medical service in the south-west region. The service is founded on the principles of self-determination, empowerment and freedom of choice.

The Commissioner met with some young mums and their babies to discuss some of the issues impacting their lives. The Commissioner's visit was facilitated by the SWAMS team, including the CEO and key staff working across maternal child health, family and domestic violence and Indigenous outreach.

Some of the common themes discussed included:

- Difficulty in accessing transport – it is expensive and doesn't service the area well
- Not feeling safe on public transport – there are no transit guards
- Challenging the negative stereotypes and stigmatisation about young mums and Aboriginal young people
- School bullying and the negative impact of social media
- Racism in sport – it is extremely prevalent

- The costs associated with getting a driver's license
- SWAMS mothers' group is a very positive force and also provides a good contact point for involvement with Department of Communities – Child Protection. There is a sense, however, that many mainstream services were not culturally appropriate or safe for children and young people, therefore are not accessed.

## **Child and Parent Centre - Collie Valley**

The Child and Parent Centre in Collie Valley offers a range of free programs, services and family support for families and children aged 0 to 8 years. Some of these include: Baby Business for babies aged 0 to 18 months; Jo Jingles (music and movement for 0 to 5 years); MyTime (supporting parents of children with disability) and the Collie Valley Kids Playgroup for 0 to 5 years.

The Commissioner's visit was facilitated by the Centre Manager from Investing In Our Youth and the Wilson Park Primary School Principal as it is co-located at the school. The Commissioner sat down with centre staff and some parents and their babies during their weekly Baby Business program.

A number of issues were raised that are impacting local children and young people and their families:

- Many families were living with low incomes and under significant housing stress, some were couch-surfing and some are residing in nearby bushland
- Many children and young people have complex mental health issues and are unable to access CAMHS
- Families of children with disabilities need help to access NDIS support. This is extremely difficult and having transport is an ongoing issue.

