



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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Mr Tony Windsor MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Regional Australia
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Dear Mr Windsor

Inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Regional Australia (the Committee) at the recent public hearing held in Perth on 18 April 2012 and the invitation to submit further information if required. With the rapid expansion of fly-in, fly-out practice in Australia it is important to ensure that policies and practices are working for the benefit of the community as a whole and I welcome the Inquiry into this matter.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia it is my role to advocate for what is in the best interests of all children and young people with specific regard for Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way.

I would like to provide the following as a summary of the key points I raised with the Committee.

Need for further research into the impact of fly-in, fly-out work

There is a paucity of quality data on the impact of fly-in, fly-out work on families and communities. The rapid expansion of fly-in, fly-out work in Australia has been driven by economic factors and, whilst there are clearly economic benefits, the impact of this pattern of work is not well understood, particularly in the longer term. It is imperative that research is undertaken into the impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, their families and their communities to ensure that the impact of fly-in, fly-out work, and what works to ameliorate any negative impact, are understood. Such research should then inform decisions about policies, practices and services that are required.

Caring for the future growing up today

The Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Centre for Labour Market Research at Curtin University, Child Health Promotion Research Centre at Edith Cowan University and the Centre for Social and Community Research at Murdoch University have all conducted research in this area. Importantly, research should be conducted by independent researchers, be subject to ethics approval and peer review to ensure credibility and reliability of findings. I would also specifically advocate for research that is focused on the needs of children and young people and seeks their views as a vital component.

Impact of extended work hours on family life

Despite a paucity of evidence focused on fly-in, fly-out work, existing research into work and family life consistently links extended working hours with high levels of parental stress which, in turn, leads to poorer developmental outcomes for children. This is particularly pronounced in lower socio-economic groups and families who are disadvantaged in some way.

Fly-in, fly-out work is primarily based on extended working hours and significant periods of time away from home. I note the most common roster for fly-in, fly-out work is two weeks on and one week off with, ordinarily, 12 hour shifts worked during the time at work.¹ It would not be unreasonable to assume that such patterns of work are associated with high levels of stress in some families who under take this type of work and, subsequently, impacts on parenting and therefore outcomes for children. Again, further understanding of the extent, impact and ameliorating factors is needed.

Importance of flexibility and support for families

One of the most significant factors that mediate the negative impact of extended working hours is having flexible working arrangements.² Providing a variety of options and flexibility wherever possible, to suit different family's needs is therefore, important.

Additionally, information and services for workers and their families to ensure relevant support is available to assist particularly with the parenting and relationship challenges associated with fly-in, fly-out work, is also essential.

Addressing alcohol-related harm in communities

The excessive rates of alcohol consumption, more than double the state rate, in our northern states in Western Australia are of serious concern.³ The impact of the fly-in, fly-out workforce on this is not well understood. Reducing alcohol-related harm across the whole Australian community must be a national priority and the fly-in, fly-out industry needs to be included in strategies to address this issue.

Ensuring community safety

I have been particularly alarmed at the concerns of young people regarding their sense of safety in communities that host fly-in, fly-out workforces. Again, research to indicate the nature and extent of this issue is largely absent, however, that young people report feeling unsafe is of concern and requires attention to better understand the issue and respond appropriately.

Participation of children and young people

Finally, the involvement of children and young people in discussions and decision making process around issues that affect them is of importance to ensure that the decision ultimately made are made in consideration of what is in the best interests of children and young people.

I congratulate the Committee on its extensive consultation process regarding this important issue and look forward to reading the report of the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

23 April 2012

¹ Beach R, Brereton D, Cliff D (2003) *Workforce Turnover in FIFO Mining Operations in Australia: An exploratory study*. Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, Sustainable Minerals Institute, University of Queensland, pp21.

² Fursman L. *Parents Long Work hours and the Impact on Family Life*. Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand. www.msd.govt.nz retrieved 12/4/2012

³ *National Alcohol Sales Data Project: Final Report 2009*. Drug and Alcohol Office WA and National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University. www.dao.gov.wa.au retrieved 12/4/2012