



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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The Secretary of the Committee
House Standing Committee on Regional Australia
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam

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

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this important inquiry. Fly-in, fly-out workforce practices are prevalent in Western Australia and impact on many Western Australian children and young people, their families and their communities.

I see this Inquiry as an important step in considering the social implications of fly-in, fly-out work practices.

Role of Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

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).¹ Under the Act my role is to advocate for the half a million Western Australian children and young people under the age of 18, having specific responsibility for advocating for, promoting and monitoring their wellbeing.

In performing my functions under the Act the best interests of children and young people must be my paramount consideration.

I am also required, under section 19(b) of the Act, to promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives, and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity.

In the role of Commissioner, I travel extensively throughout Western Australia consulting widely with government and non-government agencies as well as with

¹*Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, Western Australia, Available: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/wa/consol_act/cfcaypa2006418/

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children and young people and their families in metropolitan, regional and remote communities.

It is from this perspective that I make my submission to the Inquiry.

Overview

In this submission I focus my comments on the importance of:

- considering the impact of fly-in, fly-out on children and young people (Terms of Reference 2, 3 and 8)
- hearing from children and young people directly about the impact fly-in, fly-out is having on their lives
- further research.

The impact of fly-in, fly-out on children and young people

There are two ways in which fly-in, fly-out workforce practices impact on children and young people. One is as members of the communities into which workers fly, and the other is as children of fly-in, fly-out workers.

1. As members of communities

Many communities in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Central and South Eastern regions of WA have some proportion of fly-in, fly-out workers, either within or in close proximity to the community. Although the workforce is primarily in the mining and construction sectors, it is also the case that services, such as health, have staff who fly-in, fly-out or drive-in, drive-out. This is to overcome the significant workforce recruitment and retention issues facing regional and remote WA².

In almost every regional and remote community I have visited, including those with a fly-in, fly-out workforces, two broad issues are consistently raised with me by children and young people, their families and community members. These are:

- The lack of recreational activities for children and young people, particularly activities other than sport.
- The lack of local training and employment opportunities available, particularly for young Aboriginal people.

A reliance on a fly-in, fly-out workforce without concurrent planning and investment in recreational services and programs, and training and employment opportunities will at a minimum retain the status quo.

On my visits to regional WA specific concerns that have been raised with me about the impact on children and young people of a fly-in, fly-out workforce (rather than a resident workforce) are:

² Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of Western Australian children and young people*, pp. 69-71, 75-78, Available: <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/files/MentalWellbeingInquiry/CCYP%20Mental%20Health%20Inquiry%20-%20Report%20to%20Parliament.pdf>

- The difficulty of obtaining coaches and volunteers to run activities for children and young people (acknowledging this is also the case with resident shift workers).
- The challenge of developing meaningful relationships with service providers who fly-in, fly-out (acknowledging this occurs as a result of an inability to recruit resident workers due to the lack of affordable housing and high living costs).
- Feeling unsafe due to the large numbers of workers (mainly male) living in temporary accommodation in the community.

2. As children of fly-in, fly-out workers

It seems that a significant proportion of fly-in, fly-out workers in Western Australia are parents, although no actual numbers appear to be available. Researchers at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, WA suggest that 'now many fly-in fly-out workers are family men'³ and that 'a growing number of families are now experiencing the repeated cyclical absence of the fly-in/fly-out worker'⁴.

Ngala, provider of early parenting services to families with young children in WA,⁵ also seem to be of this view. Families with a partner who works away have become a priority for them to the extent that they have undertaken research into the impact of fly-in, fly-out on parenting and provide specific parenting support to these families.⁶

I hear of both the increasing prevalence of fly-in, fly-out parents and the impact of this from children and young people, their families, service providers and community members. Concerns raised with me include:

- the isolation of mothers with new babies who have a fly-in, fly-out partner
- increased school absences either when a parent returns home on leave or because a young person is left home to attend school while the parent works

I have outlined some of the ways fly-in, fly-out workforce practices impact on children and young people. Submissions from other organisations and individuals directly working with families affected by fly-in, fly-out workforce practices are likely to contain more detail about these and other issues. I therefore recommend the Committee consider all the evidence submitted to it specifically in terms of the impact on children and young people.

³ Office of Research and Innovation, Edith Cowan University, *Workforce Challenges* http://www.research.ecu.edu.au/ori/info/news_view.php?rec_id=0000000131

⁴ *Pathways to resilience: Adolescent children of Western Australian fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) families*, Available:

http://www.ngala.com.au/files/files/523_Email_attachment_advert.pdf

⁵ Ngala, *Parents Who Work Away*, Available: <http://www.ngala.com.au/You-and-Your-Family/Work-and-Parents/Parents-Who-Work-Away>

⁶ Gallegos, D 2006, *Fly-In, Fly-Out Employment: Managing the Parenting Transitions*, Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, Ngala and Meerilinga, WA, Available: http://www.ngala.com.au/files/files/201_Fly_In_Fly_Out_Executive_Summary.pdf

Involving children and young people in this Inquiry

Wherever I travel throughout WA, children and young people tell me they want to contribute to discussions and decision making about issues that impact on their own lives and their communities. It is also my experience that children and young people have a good understanding of what is best for their wellbeing, have unique insights into issues and can offer creative solutions to the problems under discussion.

For example, nearly 1000 children and young people participated in research I commissioned in 2009 about what they felt was important to their wellbeing. The children and young people consistently reported that one of the fundamental factors was a supportive and loving family. As part of the research, an online survey of more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds found that 'family' was the most important thing in their lives. Fifty-five per cent of the children and young people surveyed said they would like to spend more time with their families. The children and young people who participated in this research said that a good family provided them with a sense of belonging, support, safety and guidance.⁷ Their views are consistent with research showing the importance of parenting throughout a child's development into young adulthood.⁸

Directly involving children and young people in decisions that impact on them and taking their views into account in the development of laws, policies and programs results in better outcomes for children and young people. This is true for all areas that impact on children and young people and therefore, for the reasons outlined previously, fly-in, fly-out workforce practices are no exception. I am of the view that in discussion to date about fly-in, fly-out the voices of children and young people are largely absent.

I therefore recommend that the Committee pay specific attention to submissions from children and young people and from organisations involving them in their work as they have the best knowledge and insight into how the issues impact on their lives.

Additionally the Committee may like to consider meeting with representative groups of children and/or young people, either those who have made a submission or those who provide advice to organisations who have. In my experience hearing from children and young people directly about the issues that affect them is both informative and inspiring.

The Committee may be interested to note that the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety undertook to consult with children and young people through online surveys as part of their *Inquiry into Cyber-Safety*.⁹

Further research

In preparing this submission I became aware that there is an apparent lack of demographic and geographic data about the fly-in, fly-out workforce and likewise a lack of social research into this trend, particularly in regard to the impact on children and young people and their families. If this type of evidence is not provided to it, I

⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2011, *Children and young people speak out about families*, Available: <http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/files/Policy%20Brief%20-%20children%20and%20young%20people%20speak%20out%20about%20families.pdf>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ *Joint Select Committee on Cyber Safety Homepage*, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jscc/index.htm>

recommend the Committee consider ways this information can be gathered in the future. Sound policy development and planning cannot occur without data and research.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this important inquiry. Should you wish me to provide any further comment on the issues I have raised I am more than happy to assist.

Yours sincerely

MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

7 October 2011