



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

**Speech** 17 February, 2014

**Jenni Perkins, A/Commissioner for Children and Young People WA**

**Youth Settlement Forum, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network  
(MYAN)**

**Opening Address**

## **Supporting cultural diversity**

### **Welcome and introduction**

Good morning everyone.

I would like to pay my respects to and acknowledge the traditional owners and elders of the land on which we meet today.

Thank you to the [Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network \(MYAN\)](#) for inviting me to open your first Youth Settlement Forum.

I commend the focus of today's forum on the settlement needs of humanitarian young people in Western Australian.

I also acknowledge the important work undertaken by each of you in providing services and support to children and young people and their families who have settled in Western Australia.

I was appointed as Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People in WA in December 2013. As many of you will know I have worked throughout my career in the human services sector across local government, the community services sector and state government. Most recently I have worked with the Disability Services Commission before becoming director general of the Department for Communities in 2010.

The role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in WA was established by an Act of Parliament (The Commissioner for Children and Young People Act (2006) to advocate for policies, programs and services that enhance the wellbeing of the 560,000 children and young people (under 18) who live in Western Australia.

This means I am independent, and I report directly to the WA Parliament.

A key principle outlined under the Act which guides the Commissioner's work is that the best interests of children and young people are paramount.

While my focus is the wellbeing of all children and young people, the Act highlights that the Commissioner should have particular regard to Aboriginal children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

I must also have regard for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Importantly, in promoting the wellbeing of children and young people, my work is informed by the views and opinions of children and young people, and the best available evidence and research of what works well.

### **Consultation with children and young people**

The Act requires me to consult with children and young people from a broad range of backgrounds and age groups throughout Western Australia each year to ensure their views and concerns are heard, respected and addressed.

I think it is no mean achievement that to date the Commissioner's office has consulted on a range of issues with almost 6000 children and young people aged from five to 18 years from diverse cultural, socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, including from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Another way we consult with children and young people is by appointing Advisory Committees.

In 2010 and 2011, young people aged between 5 and 15 years from the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre (MMRC) in Mirrabooka formed the Commissioner's metropolitan advisory committee. They completed a project showcasing the wonderful contributions that migrants have made to Western Australian cultural life. Other advice they provided reflected their experiences and challenges as young people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Committee members told the Commissioner that they and their peers wanted to have their cultural backgrounds better acknowledged and understood in the broader community.

They also said they experienced bullying and discrimination because of stereotyping related to their cultural, religious, linguistic or racial background.

In fulfilling the functions listed in the Act my role is one of broad advocacy. As advocates yourself you would understand the broad range of issues and mechanisms through which this work is undertaken for example:

- an Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- seminars on topics such as reducing alcohol-related harm
- research into youth health
- Submissions to parliament and government on draft laws
- producing publications on the built environment, making complaints processes responsive and accessible and participation
- arts projects such as the sponsorship of the Perth International Arts Festival where Sudanese young women created the infamous fluffy pink talking couch you will recall from our foyer – as an aside can I encourage you to listen to the couch sometime to hear their story.

A major project that my office is currently completing is the second edition of the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework – this includes data on a number of agreed ‘wellbeing’ indicators, along with information on best practice programs and services shown to improve wellbeing. This will be tabled in Parliament, and helps to provide reputable, accessible data on key areas of children and young people’s wellbeing to assist with the development of policy and planning of services.

### **Advocacy for the needs of refugee children**

In the last few years this office has had a specific focus on advocacy for the needs of children and young people who come to Australia seeking refuge.

The office worked with the Human Rights Commission and commissioners and child guardians from other states to make representations to Government regarding the treatment, services and supports required by children and young people and their families in immigration detention.

My predecessor travelled to Leonora and met with children and young people and their families to hear first-hand their experiences and concerns. This visit together with research conducted for the mental health inquiry has informed the ongoing advocacy of the office.

Following the Inquiry into mental health a series of policy briefs has been released, focusing on key areas of need, including in September last year, the specific mental health needs identified among children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

This brief recognises children and young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, including refugees and immigrants are at higher risk of mental health problems and need more support to overcome the challenges of re-location.

As you are aware many have experienced significant trauma such as war, refugee camps and loss of and separation from family.

Others experience language barriers, challenges from belonging to two cultures, racism, discrimination and bullying which can impact negatively on their mental health.

While many young people of culturally-diverse backgrounds show great resilience and have developed strategies to stay mentally healthy, there are those who experience isolation and significant resettlement stress.

Cultural differences in understanding, language and stigma present barriers that result in fewer children and young people from culturally-diverse communities accessing mental health services for help.

This [information is available from my website](#), you may also find some other resources that are useful to you in your work including the data and programs outlined in the wellbeing monitoring framework.

I believe that forums such as this one today that bring together those committed to change in this area, can make a real difference to the quality of the lives of new arrivals to our community.

I took the opportunity to view the summary report from the [first national conference on young people from refugee backgrounds](#) which was convened by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network in Sydney last year.

The report from the deliberations of that conference was particularly insightful in terms of highlighting the complexity of the settlement journey for many young people which can include learning a new language and culture; navigating an unfamiliar education system; establishing new peer relationships and doing so while also negotiating the developmental tasks of adolescence.

A strong focus of the Commissioner's work has been on developing guidelines and promoting the participation of children and young people.

I was particularly pleased therefore that recommendations from the discussion sessions from the national conference focussed on the importance of young people themselves being closely involved in both the design and implementation of support programs – as one group concluded: ‘fundamental to any policy and program response is a recognition that young people have unique experiences and knowledge and should be supported to articulate the issues impacting on their lives and identifying appropriate solutions’.

Similarly I would encourage your discussions today to consider how the participation of young people can be enhanced – and I look forward to hearing more from the voices of young people themselves on their experiences of settlement and how their journey may be made better.

It is my pleasure to open the Youth Settlement forum. I hope you find it an insightful and informative day.

Thank you.