



Good morning everyone and welcome to this important forum.

I would like to thank Minister for Mental Health and Disabilities Services the Hon. Helen Morton, for formally opening the seminar, and Mrs Tonya McCusker of the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth for her words today.

I also recognise Dr Janet Woollard MLA, the Hon. Nick Goiran MLC and Mr Roger Cook MLA.

I would like to extend my appreciation the National Drug and Research Institute, the Drug and Alcohol Office and, again, the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth for partnering with me in presenting this forum.

They all are playing an integral role in raising public awareness about the harms caused by alcohol.

I am also pleased to see so many of you here today to hear young people's views on such on the important topic of addressing alcohol-related harm.

As the Minister and Mrs McCusker outlined, there is a growing concern about the impact of alcohol on children and young people.

It has been raised regularly in my consultations with agencies and with communities and children and young people all over the State, and the research backs up these concerns.

Research indicates that more than 60 per cent of 14 to 17 year-olds in Western Australia report being a recent drinker – and of those who do drink 26 per cent of males and 32 per cent of females drank at levels which put them at risk of harm.

Brain development is still occurring throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. Emerging evidence indicates that alcohol may have an effect on the development of memory, decision making and emotions, which can lead to problems with learning, problem solving and mental health.

Alarmingly, alcohol accounts for 13 per cent of all deaths of 14 to 17 year-olds.

We must also consider the vulnerability of children and young people, as dependants, to the impact of other people's excessive drinking.

The WA Parliament's Education and Standing Committee's report *Alcohol: Reducing the harms and curbing the culture of excess* released in June this year, identifies a range of legislative and other strategies to tackle alcohol-related harm across the community.

This has prompted much community debate in recent months about what is the best way forward to encourage change in how we, as a community, use alcohol.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People, I am charged with monitoring the wellbeing of children and young people and promoting policies, programs, services and laws that enhance their wellbeing.

I also have a responsibility to ensure children and young people are involved in discussion and debate about strategies to improve their wellbeing.

This is why I decided to undertake consultations to seek the views of young West Australians around alcohol use and ideas about strategies to reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

It is important that we know their views to ensure that we develop strategies that are likely to be effective, take into account any possible unintended consequences and to be more inclusive of young people as members of the community in their own right.

The consultation that you are going to hear about today involved nearly 300 young people aged from 14 to 17 years-old – an age group where alcohol experimentation is most likely to commence, from metropolitan and regional Western Australia.

I commissioned Painted Dog Research to undertake the consultation. They have extensive experience of working with young people on public health

issues. I've also sought advice from a reference group made up of experts in the alcohol field comprising representatives from the National Drug Research Institute, the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth, Mission Australia, the Youth Affairs Council of WA, the Drug and Alcohol Office, and the School Drug Education and Road Aware project.

I'd like to thank all the members of the reference group for their advice, enthusiasm and support for the project.

As you will see, the consultation reflects a range of views and offers valuable insights and creative ideas.

It is an important reminder that, like the adult population, not all young people are the same and there is no one-size-fits all strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Bearing this in mind, the consultation has provided some clear direction for the way ahead, of which you will soon hear, but I would like to stress one area of particular significance.

Through the consultation, young people clearly stated that they are influenced by the broader Australian culture of excessive drinking and the availability of alcohol in the community.

This understanding is central to any meaningful attempt to reduce alcohol-related harms on children and young people.

Essentially, it will be impossible to effectively address young people's increasingly risky drinking behaviour without tackling the community's accepted cultural norms concerning the omnipresence of alcohol and excessive drinking.

The young people themselves said this must be addressed, and they had ideas about what might be effective.

It is important that these ideas are respected for the value they provide in shaping future policy and that the meaningful participation of young people is part of the ongoing effort to better protect children and young people from alcohol-related harms.

I would like to thank, Amber, Lawrence, Maddison, Rickelle and Travis who will be presenting the findings from the consultation here today.

All these young people participated in focus groups for the consultation and have generously agreed to give up their time to present the findings to you on behalf of all the young people who participated.

They have all been working hard to prepare this presentation and are to be commended for their commitment and enthusiasm for this very important issue.

I thank you all for attending today's forum and I hope the presentations challenge your thinking in this important aspect of children and young people's wellbeing. – ENDS