

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**2022 REVIEW OF THE ANNUAL REPORTS AND OTHER MATTERS
OF THE OFFICE OF THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE AND THE OFFICE OF THE CHILDREN'S GUARDIAN**

At Room 814-815, Parliament House, Sydney, on Friday 24 June 2022

The Committee met at 10:00 am

PRESENT

Mr Peter Sidgreaves (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. Greg Donnelly
The Hon. Chris Rath

Legislative Assembly

Ms Jodie Harrison

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Legislative Assembly

Ms Melanie Gibbons (Deputy Chair)

* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Good morning and thank you for attending this public hearing of the Committee on Children and Young People's 2022 review of the annual reports and other matters of the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People and the Office of the Children's Guardian. Before we start, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I pay respect to Elders of the Eora nation past, present, and emerging, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present, or are viewing the proceedings online. I now declare the hearing open.

I would like to welcome representatives from Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People: Ms Zoe Robinson, Advocate for Children and Young People, and Ms Shannon Longhurst, Acting Director. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today.

Ms ZOE ROBINSON, Advocate for Children and Young People, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

Ms SHANNON LONGHURST, Acting Director, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now invite the Advocate to make a brief opening statement before we commence with questions. Ms Longhurst, you are very welcome to make an opening statement as well.

ZOE ROBINSON: Good morning, Committee, and welcome to some new Committee members and obviously welcome back to some of the previous Committee members. Let me start by first acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gather today, and paying my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. I look forward to continuing to work with this Committee to ensure that children and young people across New South Wales, wherever they are, are heard, and their voices and opinions are considered, not only in this place, but wherever children and young people are.

I want to acknowledge that Shannon joins me today, and is currently the acting Director whilst Una O'Neill is on leave. She has taken some well-earned leave. Shannon has been in the role for a week. Following our session this morning, you will have the opportunity to speak to some of the amazing young people who have been part of the NSW Youth Advisory Council. Lua, Julie—who will join us online—and Mohmd are incredible advocates, with passion, empathy, and insights that I know you will all benefit from and appreciate.

The past year has seen children and young people continue to experience disruptions to school, work, and their lives. We have continued to work with and hear directly from children and young people and provide this information to government. We have this year launched not only the annual report that we are here to discuss, but also the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024*. It is ambitious and so it should be. This job is incredibly unique. It can be misunderstood, but it holds an important part in all the work that we do.

Children and young people need to be heard, and their voices need to be elevated. In this place, you make decisions that impact on their lives. That should be done considering their thoughts and opinions, hearing from them, and working with them. This role is a privilege and not one to be taken lightly. The ACYP team work incredibly hard to ensure that we are everywhere children and young people are, and that we are listening to the issues that matter to them. I am grateful and want to thank the many members of Parliament who create space for children and young people, who listen to them, and who bring them to their work. I also thank the many colleagues across government agencies who have included them, and continue to ask, "How can we do this better?"

I look forward to elevating the work of the office here with you today, and I hope the insight that is provided to you today is helpful, always remembering that what children and young people tell me is what I bring here with me today. They teach me, and I have a duty to do right by them. I also want to acknowledge that we have some other young people here today who won't be before you. We have a year 10 student who is with us this week, Sudhiksha, and we also have Taje Fowler, who joins us from LeaderLife in Dubbo. I want to acknowledge that they are in the room, and I understand that you also have the annual report video that we are going to play, and hear from children.

The CHAIR: Ms Longhurst, did you want to add anything?

SHANNON LONGHURST: No.

The CHAIR: Can we proceed with that video now?

Video played.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you for that. I am just going to start with a question now, and then I'll hand over to our other Committee members. I've had a good read of the strategic plan for 2022 to 2024. I would just like to ask which two commitment areas will the ACYP monitor this year?

ZOE ROBINSON: We have committed to health and wellbeing, and environments for joy and fun.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for coming along. In regard to the 2022 to 2024 report, specifically on the matters of the impact of social media on children and young people, in the report that is dealt with at various points. I am wondering, from the work that has been done up to this point, what children and young people are raising with you, about the impact of social media on them. It is obviously a very broad question, but I will open it that way.

ZOE ROBINSON: That's fine. Since the development of this strategic plan and the work that we did in terms of polling children and young people, we have also supported Minister Mitchell around the cyberbullying work that she has been doing. Just last week we hosted a roundtable with children and young people. That was from ages year 6 to year 12. In terms of what they are telling us, it's interesting and it's not surprising. So, there is this balance in saying, "It's a way that we connect with our friends. It's a way that we can stay connected to communities." But also there is this recognition that there are a lot of negative things that go on in the social media space.

I think I said this last time when I appeared: It is tricky and it is complex, and we have to work with children and young people to understand what that looks like for them. One of the things I thought was really interesting that was raised by a young person last week is—you may be familiar with the fact, Mr Donnelly—that now, in financial abuse, you can block certain words that are used in the subjects when you are transferring money in an account. One of the young people suggested that, "When we sign up to social media, why is it that we can't flag things that we don't want to hear about, or words that we don't want to hear about, or things like that?" So that was really interesting.

What we are doing with that is taking that information and working with the Minister and other young people to sense check some of the ideas that they have had, and then try and take that to some of the social media companies. But it's tricky, because the balance is that it is where they connect with their friends. It is where often they are communicating quite regularly, but there is a recognition from young people that they know it is not a safe space and some bad things happen in that. They have talked a lot about education—education of their peers, and then also education of others around them, of how you can positively use social media—but, if I am honest, I think there is a long way to go.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In regards to the negative things that have been raised through your engagement with children and young people, what are they articulating as the negative things that they are experiencing?

ZOE ROBINSON: They talk about online bullying and harassment. They talk about misinformation, so information that is shared on platforms where it is not accurate, or it does not appear to be accurate. They talk about not necessarily even trusting some of the social media providers, that is to say, "They are taking our data and they're using it for other purposes". So it does start with what we are aware of, in terms of that bullying and harassment online, and it goes all the way to data mining and their concerns about how their information is being used.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In terms of your engagement with the Commonwealth, with the eSafety Commissioner, can you elucidate on what work that involves?

ZOE ROBINSON: We work with the eSafety Commissioner broadly. We have helped this year, in terms of them establishing their own youth advisory council, so we provide them some advice as to what that looks like. We have worked with them around some of their materials, and promoting the materials that they have to children and young people, and obviously that sits in our Digital Lunch Break as well. We have worked with her, or with the team, around what advocacy could look like from a New South Wales perspective, of some of the things that we have seen here, and especially when we are talking about that bullying roundtable. Obviously, the eSafety Commissioner was present at the first meeting we had with all the external stakeholders. We just continue to support their work, their materials. When we go into schools and we are hearing about this, if children and young people don't know about it, we tell them about the eSafety Commissioner, and the resources that are available for them there.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I have some more questions, but I will share the time.

The CHAIR: That is all right, thank you. Do any other members have questions?

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: Yes. It is nice to see you, Ms Robinson. Sorry it is not in person this time.

ZOE ROBINSON: It is lovely to see you.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: Thank you. I just wanted to follow up a little bit on your answer about wellbeing. That obviously has a lot to do with your first answer. Can you elaborate on what that's going to produce?

ZOE ROBINSON: In terms of the strategic plan, the pillars that we committed to?

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: Yes.

ZOE ROBINSON: Absolutely. We have talked about the overarching goal, or focus, is that children and young people's mental, physical, and emotional health is nurtured and supported to enable them to flourish. So, obviously there is an ambitious statement in that. As you would appreciate, when we develop the strategic plan, we are working with government agencies to understand what already exists, and so try to elevate that work, but also from the work we do with children and young people, where they still say there might be some gaps in their opportunities for growth across government agencies.

In "Health and wellbeing", there is a focus around the first 2,000 days for children and young people, and we welcome those announcements that have happened; childhood death and accidental injury; suicide and self-injury, and then informal mental health supports. That is something that children and young people have talked about, both the formal mental health supports that are important, and investment in that is absolutely crucial—and again we acknowledge those announcements this week—but then also the informal. We have spoken before here about peer-to-peer support, and how they can be better equipped to support each other. Then we have talked about the need for additional supports for children and young people in addiction, and in terms of the post-COVID response, of course, and how we are continuing to work with children and young people.

The plan also then goes on to detail some of those very clear goals that we want to work with government around, which includes obviously reducing the number—we have seen a reduction around that—but decreasing death amongst infants, and childhood injury. Decrease in suicide and self-injury, I think, is one that we are particularly focused on seeing how we can shift this year. I should acknowledge that one of the things when we do this plan is, when we are working with people to explain what it is, it is not about us doing all of this. Children and young people are in many places, and so it is about working across government, and across business and community, to achieve these outcomes. Sometimes, our role is as much as letting children and young people know that there is a focus area on this and making sure they are engaged with it, but also sometimes it is about pulling some levers where we can bring groups together and have different conversations.

The CHAIR: Do you have any further questions, Ms Gibbons?

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: If I may, can I pick up on the COVID focus and ask what kind of consultation you do to find out about young people's feelings about what we went through? Are you planning on doing more and the like? How are they going there?

ZOE ROBINSON: Breaking this up into the variety of years that we had, when we first went in 2020, we did all of the usual things that we would do, in terms of providing advice and information to children and young people, that was being fed, obviously, from NSW Health. We share that information. But in terms of the consultation, you would have seen on the video there that we did some videos, with Dr Chant, with young people, to make sure that children and young people were informed, and obviously we had young people drafting those questions and sending them in so that we could ask those questions of Dr Chant. We also used a new tool called Bang the Table to try and do some online consultations in a different way. We obviously built the Digital Lunch Break as a way to engage with children and young people.

We did COVID tracking and polling. This was a really important decision for the office to make, because we knew that government wanted to hear from children and young people, and there was a lot that was going on. So we made a consistent effort to do fortnightly polls, monthly polls as well, and provide that information across government. That went to the Secretaries Board, and people saw that. That was a commitment that the office made to say, "We want to make sure we are regularly hearing and checking in with them," and that also—hello, young person. Hi!

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: She's [inaudible] a sick [inaudible].

ZOE ROBINSON: If she has a question, I am also very happy to take a question from a child, of course. We did that polling, and that was really important, because we knew that government obviously values polling and what that looks like, and it also gave us a way to track over both 2020 and 2021. We did various consultations online when we could, and we also put out surveys. In 2021—and I want to acknowledge the amazing work of a member of my team, Lucy Belling, who was doing weekly summaries with Multicultural NSW, who were chairing one of the responses. She was doing weekly summaries of feedback from children and young people.

At the end of last year, when children and young people were coming back to school, we did a survey with Minister Mitchell's DOVES, the young people there. They had asked for a survey, and so we put that out into the field. Just to know, in terms of the response for that, we had over 3,400 individual responses to that survey about returning to school, and from that, it was 2,023 that were full responses that were included in that report—so a lot. We also did little things to try and keep children and young people engaged. But what we did highlight last time, and what we have said before, is: a lot of the things that happened throughout that period of time emphasised things that children and young people had been experiencing before.

There is a real recognition, in terms of the investment that needs to be made, in supports for children and young people, but also how we dealt with being isolated, and loneliness during that period of time. We saw children and young people themselves connecting in new ways, and we've been positively supporting that. And then it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the incredible young person, Alyssa, who appeared at the press conference with Minister Hazzard, and how amazing she was, and the insight that she provided as well. It is a very long answer, but I think we did a lot.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: She was phenomenal. She was so impressive.

ZOE ROBINSON: Yes.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: Thank you for all you are doing, and now, to focus on where they go from here, with those two hard years behind them. Thank you for all that you did. All that insight is invaluable and being there for them as well. That is the end of my questions for now, but I might come back.

ZOE ROBINSON: And I hope that your young person feels better soon.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Gibbons. Ms Harrison, would you like to ask any questions?

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Robinson and Ms Longhurst, for being here today to address the Committee and to the Youth Advisory Council, who we will be hearing from a little bit later. Ms Robinson, in your opening statement you talked about the strategic plan being ambitious. I would like to find out whether there are particular parts that you think are extremely ambitious and what challenges and risks are there in being able to achieve what is set out in the strategic plan.

ZOE ROBINSON: I think the reason I described it as ambitious is that because it was children and young people who were designing this, rightly so, they have big goals and big dreams. In the first instance, what I thought was ambitious is the fact that we have released a strategic plan with "Love, connection, and safety". The word "love" being part of a government document is really important, and to see that. But when you have words like that, obviously, you've got to understand that for children and young people, it's their words and it's what it is, according to them. It is very hard to design what love looks like for children and young people, but there are elements in that that we know are what give them the safety and the connection and the feeling of that. Even the words that we've used in that, I think, are ambitious and bold, and I'm very proud of the team for doing that. More importantly, it is a reflection of the language of children and young people.

Things like, "Hope for the future"—again, they're ambitious, and rightly so. For children and young people, they do have big hopes. They do have things that they want to achieve. If you look at the pillar that is "A good standard of living", we're talking about eradicating childhood poverty. That's a big, big goal, but we know the impact that poverty has on children and young people, and their experience and trajectory, and all of that. It should be something that is in a document that we're held accountable to. We've talked about youth homelessness in there. We've also talked about things like the lack of transport in regional areas. You're obviously from Charlestown, as the member for Charlestown. That's something that we've heard time and time again from young people, for a number of years. It might not seem ambitious, because we've talked about it for a really long period of time. But if it's still coming up, there's obviously things that we need to be doing around that.

I think the difficulty is that, sometimes, we box ourselves in, and there's a process of ways that things are done, or there is particular red tape, or whatever it is. Sometimes, even in the role, when I hear from young people what they want, you go, "Oh, that's really big, and how will we achieve that?" But that shouldn't stop us. Part of the challenge is, one, keeping our office accountable, to make sure that we're doing the things that children and young people have asked for and, two, working with government to see how we can achieve these things. If it hasn't worked yet, how do we think about it differently, and bring the ideas of children and young people to the table? But, also, it doesn't stop at the three-year plan. Part of what we need to do in the strategic plan is make sure that people know this plan exists, that children and young people own it, and have their own advocacy as part of it. If it stops after three years, we know there are things in here that you won't solve in three years. But it needs to be about how we are embedding and seeing long-term change, in both policy and advocacy.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Can I go to the Youth Justice consultations that you undertook?

ZOE ROBINSON: You can.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Are there any particular learnings out of that? What were young people who had dealings with the youth justice system saying? What are their challenges and what are their experiences?

ZOE ROBINSON: We started these consultations when I first landed. We did some in—I think it was even 2020, when I was first in the role. What I would like to acknowledge is that, since 2020—and Shannon has been supporting in the reviews of Youth Justice and going into the centres—even in that short space of time, our staff have recognised there have been positive shifts. Since the feedback that we gave originally in 2020, you can see that there have already been changes, and positive changes, for the benefit of young people.

If we talk about what I hear in Youth Justice, the Committee may or may not be aware, but I spend at least—now it seems like I'm in Cobham every fortnight, but I'm in Baxter and Cobham very regularly. The opportunity to talk to young people about their 'before', and what they need here, and then on exit—I'm incredibly grateful for the fact that they are so vulnerable and share that with me. If we talk about 'before', one young man who I was speaking to only on Wednesday was talking about the fact that he played footy until he was 12, and then he could no longer get transport to the footy, for various reasons in relation to his brother, and so he no longer played footy. That's where he was getting suspended from school, and his parents kicked him out, and so he experienced homelessness. That's not an uncommon theme. The pre-going in is a lot about being not engaged in school, experiencing domestic and family violence, and financial instability—all of that. I hear a lot about what they need before going in. What I find really interesting about that is that, despite the plan being ambitious, they're really asking for a person, a trusted adviser—something to do, and patience, really.

When you're in there, what we've seen is some of the incredible programs that have been put into centres for the benefit of children and young people—or the young people in there, sorry, no children. That's been a response to them. In Cobham, as an example, you have the Pacifica program, and the young people speak very positively about the Pacifica program. They have ConFit; I've been privy to their football matches. They play a football match, and there's a police member who comes in and does the training with them. They're doing that every two weeks, and that's incredible. They've got the grand final on 24 August, and I'm sure you would all be welcome to come to the grand final. Things like that, but then also access to health, dental—all of that.

One young person was talking to me about that the other day, and the fact that the experience of what he's got in there is things that he'd never had on the outside, in terms of access to health, and now access to medication, if it is appropriate for him. But then also the courses—one of the young people who exited two weeks ago asked me to come to his exit, which was an incredible experience, and I was honoured that he'd had asked me to come to that. I can come back with a number, because we're still in contact, but I think he walked out with something like 10 certificates. He'd done everything, from a barista course, and has a job, and is going into concreting.

There have been really positive things that have happened in Youth Justice. To acknowledge Paul O'Reilly and the work of that team is important, because they have made changes. There is still work to be done, in terms of how we engage with them consistently. They talk about room time, and how long they're in rooms for—so making sure that we're balancing that really well. But one of the big things, because of the experience I've had now, being in there so often, is actually focusing on that exit, and making sure that we're connecting them into a community, that they've got stability when they leave, and that they've got employment. That's a lot of the things that they're thinking about, because they do want to think about what's next for them, and how they don't come back.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Do you actually advocate on behalf of those young people to get them a better exit?

ZOE ROBINSON: Yes, I do a lot of work. I mean, there's a lot of amazing caseworkers who do incredible work there. But with the young people—and some of them I've now known for quite some time—I've worked with their caseworkers to try and connect them into a service, if I know they're going back to somewhere else. "Are you aware of these people? Can I connect you into that?" As you would appreciate, my Act talks about systemic issues. It's not individual advocacy but, because I spend so much time in there, I do work well with the centres and the case managers, and other communities, about how we can exit them appropriately, and where they'd like to go.

The CHAIR: Do you have any statistics on those coming out of Youth Justice when they're exiting and returning to families?

ZOE ROBINSON: I can take that on notice, but I don't have any stats on me.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that's fine.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I turn once again to the 2022-24 report and specifically part 2, "Love, connection and safety". I may have failed to pick this up and, if I have, forgive me and draw it to my attention. In terms of that chapter in particular, but also in the other chapters in the actual plan, I see very little reference to or comment about the child's parents and the role that parents are capable of playing in dealing with a number of issues in the report and the plan looking forward. Would you care to comment on that? Obviously parents are critical in the lives of children. There are clearly some children who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the parental relationship may be fractured or broken. In some cases, in the worst situations, it may not exist at all. But for the vast preponderance of children and young people, parents are quite central to their lives. I am just curious that, in my judgement, there is very little connection in this plan to parents and what parents can do to help address a number of the issues that are raised in the plan.

ZOE ROBINSON: Forgive me, I wouldn't know the page that it might be for you, but there is a stat that's in the plan around love, connection, and safety, that says 81 per cent of children and young people said they had a good relationship with their immediate family. We do ask questions of the young people about relationship with family, and so obviously that's in there. The flipside, of those who talk about poor relationships, are those who we find in the Youth Justice system, or are financially insecure. So there are elements where we are acknowledging that children and young people themselves are asked questions about their parents. I absolutely agree that parents have a really important role to play in so much of this. And, as I said when Ms Harrison asked, love, connection, and safety is so much about—as you talked to—who's around you and what that looks like. I do think they have an important role.

What we hear in consultations is that children and young people do want to see parents have education about a variety of things, and when we talk about the disaster report, children and young people talked about them being able to get mental health first aid, so they could support their parents, and they want their parents to also have access to that, so it is better to acknowledge the importance of that relationship. It is not that we don't want to work with parents and programs around that. We, as an office, obviously don't design those programs, and don't have them, so we continue to work with other services, and other agencies, that would have a focus on that, and we provide them with the information of what children and young people have said they would like to see in—insert whatever program it is you might be talking about.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sorry, I'm not suggesting you are not or are playing it down. But, rather, if you take the issues of impact of social media, clearly parents have a huge appetite for wanting to know how they can help their children deal with a number of these issues—issues of mental health, which are also dealt with here in the report in some detail. Parents want to help their children who are manifesting with what is, or may be, a mental health issue. What I don't understand is that, thematically, there doesn't appear to be a narrative or theme that runs through this that is going back to, engaging with, or assisting or helping your parents. Across the domain of most of these issues contained within the plan, that is very important.

ZOE ROBINSON: I want to make sure I'm getting the question right, which is: you're not seeing in the plan a theme of how these pillars, and the recommendations and goals in these pillars, incorporate that interaction with parents. Is that right?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. Without using management jargon, it's like a virtuous circle. Children and young people are saying to you that there are a number of issues, and we know how important parents are in the lives of children. It seems to me that there is a natural inclination, or there ought to be a natural inclination, of looking to see how that engagement with children—encouraging them to go back and talk to their parents about these number of issues, and seek their parents' advice and assistance—seems to be missing as a key building block, or pillar, in a number of these chapters.

ZOE ROBINSON: Obviously, as you know, the plan reflects what children and young people have said. Part of the work in this plan, when we do it, and when we do it well—so when you're talking about resilience or training that children and young people want—that helps them, and assists them to have some of those conversations. Our plan looks at how government, community, and other agencies can support children and young people and families. So it is broad in the sense that, of course, naturally, in this we are considering the family dynamic. And, as you know, my Act talks about vulnerable children and young people, so we have to acknowledge, as you did, that whoever is the trusted adult in your life can look different. It might be a parent; it might be a carer.

Our view was, and it was what children and young people told us, is if we are giving them these tools, in some scenarios it helps them have better relationships with those people around them. The flipside is, in the work that we do, we need to continue to work with those agencies because, you're right, when you talk about things like social media, we know parents want to understand how they can help, and what they can learn. What we hear children and young people say is, "We want our parents to learn." So we have to then take that information and

say, "Right, you're telling me that you want parents to have better education. So now, absolutely, we've got to work with you as to what that program looks like." I'm not sure if I've answered your question but, more to say, it is in there, because we know that children and young people in these things think of themselves in the environment in which they are. It will have an adult around it. Part of the things that you will see in there is about them wanting to have tools and access to something that will enable them to be the best for themselves and, ultimately, the unit in which they might exist. It's not called out in the way that you're suggesting it should be, but I believe it's—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'm not imposing a "should" position.

ZOE ROBINSON: No, no.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: But, rather, obviously those key powerful family dynamics of child and parent are so important for the wellbeing of the child, specifically the figure that you referred to – it is on page 44 of the plan – about how many children and young people had high-quality relationships. That's a pretty significant phrase: "high-quality relationships".

ZOE ROBINSON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That is approximately seven out of 10 with their parents, which is something that is obviously very positive and good. It seems to me that that is something worthy of some real emphasis, because, if that is the case, it indicates that those key relationships are in, I'm sure we would hope, better order in an overall percentage but, nevertheless, in pretty good shape overall. That is something to be fostered and encouraged.

ZOE ROBINSON: Absolutely. I think the work that we do, and continue to do, in reflecting this plan will be doing that.

The Hon. CHRIS RATH: Thank you so much for everything so far. I want to ask about vapes at schools. I was wondering if you or your team have looked at all at that? I have been reading a little bit in the media about concerning reports of children accessing vapes. I think I read recently that a young girl had a seizure and collapsed after vaping. I was wondering if you had looked at all into that? It seems like a pretty big issue.

ZOE ROBINSON: We have. It is perhaps a good question to ask the Youth Advisory Council, because it has done some work around this. I am also a mother, so this is something that I have a particular passion about—vaping—and seeing it in the world that I am in, as a mum. I sit on the cross-government agency committee group that looks at this. So that was a Health- and Education-led response to what they were seeing as well. We provided advice on that. Importantly, what we have done—you will have seen the government ad that says, "Do you know what you're vaping?" That material was provided to our Youth Advisory Council to review and provide comment on. We continue to work with the government in that space, and the Youth Advisory Council had asked—definitely ask the Advisory Council this afternoon. We are absolutely aware that that is an issue.

I recently did a consultation in a regional town. The young people at that consultation were very free and open. They were saying, "Absolutely, everyone is doing it." Interestingly, there was a stat that said nine out of 10 young people don't vape. When I shared that stat with the young people, they said, "That's not right; it would be nine out of 10 do." That consultation was really interesting, because I was trying to work with them about, "We know it's bad; how do we work with you to stop this?" Some are now \$55, so price doesn't seem to be a particular issue. So what are we doing? They have talked a lot about, "Can't you stop it before it gets into a store?" and all that. It's something that—not simply because of my job, but also because I am seeing it as a mum—we have had a particular focus on. Children and young people are wanting to have conversations about it, so I think there's a lot of ongoing work that we need to do.

When you're looking at what's going on with children and young people, going back and unpacking that "why" and, "How do we do prevention really well?" around this is incredibly important. We don't know what we don't know yet. I know the Cancer Institute is looking into it a lot, and doing a lot of research around it. But in the conversations that we have had with them, and that this committee is talking about, there is a lot of unknown in this space, but we need to keep working on it.

The Hon. CHRIS RATH: It's very good you're looking into it. It's obviously a big issue. It seems like we've just moved away from or almost eradicated young people smoking, and then vapes come along. I've read that some schools are looking at having smoke detectors in bathrooms that can actually pick up when people are vaping, which not all smoke detectors can, but that's obviously only part of it. It's also the education piece that's important and how they're accessing vapes as well.

ZOE ROBINSON: Absolutely. There are some schools that have those smoke detectors in, and children and young people are fairly aware of it. Interestingly—Mr Donnelly, if I touch on parents—one of the things that we've talked about is the education of parents around vapes as well, because there is this assumption, or this view,

that they are not as bad as cigarettes. There is a piece that needs to be done about how you are educating the community on the impact of vapes. If you've ever spent time with young people, and you tell them not to do something, and there is no particular reason, you've got to work with them and understand why they are doing something in the first place. But there is a part to play in terms of how we, the adult population, understand the impact of vapes as well.

The Hon. CHRIS RATH: This is a completely different question. I read in the strategic plan that, in 2021, only one in five young people identifying as LGBTQIA+ reported being positive about their mental health. I was wondering if you could maybe expand a bit on that and some of the problems that exist and what we could be doing better on that front.

ZOE ROBINSON: Thank you for that question. I think it's really important to acknowledge that there has been good support, in terms of making sure that LGBTQIA+ children and young people are heard. I want to acknowledge that it's a good question, because I do want to take the opportunity to give the work that's being done across many organisations—to elevate their voice is incredibly important. I know I mentioned it in the last committee, but we are currently doing a huge piece of work—LGBTQIA+ consultations—across schools, the sector, and with services. In the polling that we have done, both in COVID, and when we have done polling, and people have identified, we have seen that across the board, overwhelmingly, they identify—it's not lower but the negative—their experiences are very different.

That led us, obviously, to say, "What we need to do is some piece of work." We have currently, to date, spoken to 118 students—actually, I think it's much bigger than that now; I think it's 160, and I spoke to 35 last week in a school—and we are trying to really understand a bit more of that "why". If you are consistently across things that we are asking about, in health and wellbeing, or love, connection and safety, and the percentage is much lower, in terms of a positive experience, then we need to understand what that looks like. That report will be released later this year. Obviously it will come to the Committee. We are trying to understand what that looks like.

The themes that are coming out throughout that is—we haven't met before, but I am very honest and transparent. I have to say, when we started this work, I didn't know what I didn't know, and what we are hearing is really concerning, in terms of the experience for LGBTQIA+ children and young people, and safety. The mental health or the mental wellness side of things is a result of all of the things that they are experiencing. We will obviously share that report with you. What I can also do, if it's helpful, we can share the polling with you that we have, where we are seeing the LGBTQIA+ community identify as not as positive in their experience, if that's useful.

The Hon. CHRIS RATH: That would be great. What I'm seeing anecdotally, from what I've heard and personal experience as well, is that a lot of people delay coming out as LGBTQIA+ until after high school, because it is actually quite difficult doing it at high school, because of the bad experiences that they have seen others have.

ZOE ROBINSON: Last week when I did a consultation, those young people were incredibly brave to come to that consultation. That made me a little bit heartbroken, because when they left their school classroom to come to the consultation, they were ridiculed for leaving. At the end of the consultation, wonderfully, the teachers and the wellness teachers all came in, but they held them in that room, because they were a bit concerned, because it was lunchtime, and they didn't want them to all exit at the same time. School is meant to be a safe place for children and young people. It is meant to be somewhere where they connect and all that. That, to me—I think for all of us—is fairly distressing to hear that that's the experience of some young people. That is echoed in a number of the consultations that we have done.

The CHAIR: I have a couple of questions. I noticed that bullying is coupled with discrimination—this is in the annual report. Is that to suggest that most bullying has to do with discrimination?

ZOE ROBINSON: Having not been a historian or a person who does that, I would say that, when children and young people talk about being bullied, it is often based on something, be it a disability, background, or being part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Noting that there are technicalities in terms of the words "bullying" and "discrimination", I think when children and young people respond to this, they do group them together. Those who have experienced it will often say it's because of a factor.

The CHAIR: Certainly, I know that when I consulted with some children and young people last year—I don't set the agenda; they bring up issues as they come—bullying was a major issue. For example, because it was during COVID when this happened, I had a bit of feedback from some of those high school students that they were quite happy to be in COVID because they didn't have to go to school and be bullied. That included those in the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as for other reasons, down my way in Camden, which is a growing

multicultural community that has typically been Anglo going back as few as 12 years ago. Certainly, their culture and so forth was another reason. Thank you.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: I have a question in relation to something that is in the annual report on the out-of-home care consultations. I was wondering what the key things were coming out of that.

ZOE ROBINSON: Excitingly, that report will be launched in July, so you will see that in late July. To give you that context, the questions that we asked children and young people in the care system were around rights, safety, identity, and family, and people who are important in their lives; their involvement in decision-making; privacy, dignity, and respect; Right to Thrive; health, education support; complaints; and exiting care. Obviously, the view of doing consultation like this was from being entered into care, their experience throughout the entire care, and exiting care. As you would appreciate, they talked a bit about exiting care, and wanting more supports and more access as they were exiting. Obviously, when the report comes out there will be a much clearer breakdown of this, but some of the children and young people spoke about not necessarily knowing their rights whilst they are in care.

They spoke about not having the best contact, sometimes, with family; some had great contact. Acknowledging that it was 99 children and young people that we spoke to—and we recognise that there are over 1,500 children in care—one of the recommendations we have is that we consistently speak to children and young people in care, so that we can get this information more readily. They talked about, if you had a really great caseworker, or if you had a really great service, you probably have amazing access to lots of things. If that wasn't the case, there was a lot missing—so, not necessarily engaging in school, or not necessarily having the best contact with family.

Then they talked a lot about the fact that they wanted to have more access, and more—I guess—being consulted around their plans for themselves, what that looked like, from a younger age. As you're exiting care, the plan starts to happen, but children and young people talked about wanting to know more, and being engaged more regularly when decisions are being made about them. The high-level advice that children and young people gave for government was, "Listen to children and young people. Be transparent and accountable."

It is interesting, they wanted to know why they had been removed. They wanted to understand that process—they talked a lot about that—and what was happening, as the case was going. I sat in on a consultation with a young person. They had been going through a court process since they were 11, and they were now 18. They were almost at the point of saying, "Well, what is the point now? There was a purpose that we were wanting to achieve as a family, and we didn't achieve it. So now, why does it matter? I'm 18." Things like that, in terms of them not understanding the process that they are involved in. They talked about more support for families before removal, better screening of carers, and more exiting-care supports. They talked about training for caseworkers, access to case files, and better resourcing. Those were the overarching themes. I am certain that the Committee will see a copy of that report soon.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: When you said that young people who are in out-of-home care often don't understand the reasons why they are there, did those young people that you spoke to think that it had been hidden from them? Or that someone was trying to protect them from knowing? Did they have any idea of the reasoning behind why they did not know?

ZOE ROBINSON: Children and young people will understand that adults want to protect and they want to care for them. I think they respect the fact that there are some things that they don't know at a certain stage. I might seek permission from someone to share an amazing video with you, where a young person, it is their voice, talks about that, when they were removed, there were a lot of assumptions that they had made because of, I guess, what they were hearing happened—why you are removed as a child. So this person thought their dad had particular issues, thought their mum had particular issues. Actually, that wasn't the case. The young person says, in this video, "I acknowledge the workers who had a job to do, and were trying to keep me safe and all of this, but I just wished I had known the story, that it was a different version that I had in my head."

I will ask permission to share that with you, because I think you would benefit from hearing directly from that young person. It is a bit about that balance. They acknowledge that there's reasons that they're not knowing pieces of information, but also they, on the flipside, acknowledge how important it is for them to have a connection to their family, and understand about themselves, and their parents. And doing that in an appropriate way. We acknowledge, of course, that there are probably times when it's not necessarily appropriate. I think bringing a child and young person earlier on in their own journey is really, really important, for them to understand that. You will hear a lot about people talking about their identity, and trying to find their identity. So I think it is important to work with children and young people early to do that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: To follow up, coming off the back of that answer, the question of "finding their identity", which is the sort of phrase you used—what do they mean by that? What do you discern as their meaning by that, when they say that they are finding their identity or trying to find their identity?

ZOE ROBINSON: Noting that I wouldn't want to speak for all children and young people—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No.

ZOE ROBINSON: —their identity is theirs. We are talking about cultural connection. For some of the young people we are particularly talking about, when I talk about that in this out-of-home care report, was Aboriginal children and young people who want to be connected to their culture. But, as you would appreciate, and the answer I often give, every child and young person has an identity. It is different for every child and young person. So, just providing a good space for them to understand what that looks like, and be connected to culture, be connected to community, that's broadly what I would be talking about around identity.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Going back to the Committee on Children and Young People report to Parliament and the 2021 review of the annual report—you may not have that accessible, but on page 24, paragraph 2.51, there is some questioning around the role of the nurses in schools.

ZOE ROBINSON: WHIN nurses?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. I presume you are still on the panel for the Wellbeing and Health In-reach Nurses (WHIN). Can you give us an update on how that is going?

ZOE ROBINSON: The panel hasn't met for a while, so I don't have much of an update for you, unfortunately. I know the rollout is happening. I was in Young recently, and the schools there talked to me about the fact that they do have a WHIN nurse, and they see the benefit of having that WHIN nurse. But that committee hasn't met for a while, so I can't give you a detailed update.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Okay. That's fine. Perhaps, on that particular case study example you have given—you were at a school, and it was raised—was it explained to you what the nurses in the school do? Did you actually get to speak to a nurse?

ZOE ROBINSON: I didn't speak to a nurse, no. The children and young people themselves wouldn't call them a WHIN, but they knew, in the school that I was in, that they had a wellness centre that they could go to, and they had various counsellors in that centre available to them. When I spoke to the principal, I asked whether they had a WHIN nurse. They said yes, and they were part of that centre. Their role is to provide support to children and young people as they come into the wellness centre.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sorry to press you a bit further, but to get a bit of clarity—using the school as the example, because that is someone you were talking about, not generalising it to others—in this particular school, there is a wellness centre? That's within the school?

ZOE ROBINSON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Who is engaged in the wellness centre? There is a nurse? That is correct, as you understand it?

ZOE ROBINSON: There is a counsellor. Children and young people knew them as a counsellor. When I asked the principal, because I, like yourself, am very interested in this program, whether the area had a WHIN nurse—as you know, they service a number of schools—they informed me that they did, and they service the high school, and the public schools in that area. I didn't have further detail than that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's fine. You've got the WHIN nurses networking out to schools, and you've got the counsellors. There is funding that comes from the Commonwealth government, also, in terms of people working in schools. There was some commentary recently over some slight tweaking of that arrangement from the Commonwealth, in terms of funding. Do you have any insights into how a child or young person inside a school works out who to go speak to? Because, it seems to me that, beyond the student-teacher relationship and the hierarchy within a school—deputy principal, principal—there is now this new group of people operating within the school. Do children and young people just, themselves, work out who to go speak to or how to get a referral to one or the other? Do you have any insights into that?

ZOE ROBINSON: It depends on schools, in terms of how they—if I can't speak across every school—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, sorry, I appreciate that—just generally.

ZOE ROBINSON: What I can say, broadly, is that children and young people do seek out trusted advisers. Sometimes it is a year coordinator who is a trusted adviser. Teachers would know where the resources

are in the school, so if they're working with a young person, they would refer them that way. But there is a lot of work being done in schools to let children and young people know that, "There are these various supports that exist for you." Sometimes they are supports that are in the school consistently, or sometimes they are groups that are coming into the school. Clontarf Foundation, as an example, is one that comes into a school. Children and young people recognise that Friday might be Clontarf day. So it is a number of ways.

I would say teachers and other people can let them know that they are there. Children and young people themselves are pretty good at seeking out the resources that they need, and understanding where they could go for that. But then, also, it's the acknowledgement of saying there's specific things that might happen on specific days in schools. One school has Bob the support dog, who comes in. Everyone knows about Bob the support dog but, obviously, someone comes in with the support dog, and they understand that their role is to be there to support children and young people.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What does Bob the support dog do?

ZOE ROBINSON: I didn't have the chance to meet Bob the support dog, but he is a therapy dog. He comes into classrooms and works with children and young people—obviously, with a handler, but a therapy dog.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I hope so.

ZOE ROBINSON: Yes. We have seen the benefit of what therapy dogs and other animals can do for children and young people as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I go to page 52 of the plan, and some commentary around headspace. At the top of the page, partway down the first paragraph, it says:

However, some who had experience accessing headspace reported feeling "caught in the middle" in that, by the time they were able to access support, their mental illness or concern had progressed beyond the level of support headspace provides.

Can you elucidate on that, to the extent that you've received feedback about the work headspace is doing with children and young people?

ZOE ROBINSON: I acknowledge that there was an announcement around funding for headspace this week, so that's excellent. headspace themselves are full; we know that. We've heard from children and young people that there is a growing need for that kind of support, and supports in community. I've heard headspace can assist in terms of, obviously, providing counselling and referral where it might be appropriate. But in some communities, headspace assists the young person with everything, from doing a CV, and working with them. Last week, when I was in the community, the headspace there provides support and counselling. It's the only group that runs an LGBTQI support group.

What I would say is headspace will respond to a community need. If there is a particular need in the community, they are very good at identifying it, and then, as an example, creating a group for those children and young people. They are in demand. There is a waitlist; it can take a long time. Children and young people know that and recognise that, so they do have to find alternative supports. I think the more investment that we're making in an organisation like headspace, which is a trusted provider for children and young people, the better it is. But we also know, and we've spoken about it at committees, there is a continuum of care. So headspace do a piece of that, but you also have to think about the acute end, and access to other services that might be required.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Robinson and Ms Longhurst, for attending today's committee hearing. The Committee may wish to send you some additional questions in writing, the replies to which will form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

ZOE ROBINSON: Of course.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for your time. It is much appreciated.

(Ms Shannon Longhurst withdrew.)

Ms LUA PELLEGRINI, Current Chairperson, Youth Advisory Council, sworn and examined

Mr MOHMD ALSOMAY, Former Member, Youth Advisory Council, sworn and examined

Ms JULIE CHARLTON, 2020-21 Chairperson, Youth Advisory Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from the Youth Advisory Council. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. Can each of you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

LUA PELLEGRINI: Yes, we have.

JULIE CHARLTON: Yes.

The CHAIR: To begin with, Ms Pellegrini, would you like to make an opening statement?

LUA PELLEGRINI: Thank you. I'd just like to start by also acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, whose land we are gathered on here today. I recognise their connection to country, their knowledge, and stories. Aboriginal people have occupied and cared for this continent since time immemorial. As a proud Wiradjuri woman, I pay my respects to our ancestors and Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us today.

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us young people to be here today, and I acknowledge the amazing work done by the previous YAC, that both Julie and Mohmd were a part of. I would like to thank and acknowledge the team at ACYP for their ongoing dedication and commitment to hero-ing the voices of children and young people in all aspects of their work. I also acknowledge the Advocate herself, the wonderful Zoë Robinson, for her ability to lead with humility and compassion, whilst consistently elevating the voices of children and young people across New South Wales.

It has been a privilege and an honour to be one of the young people involved in the work of ACYP in the role as Chairperson. I feel, at times, governments, organisations, and communities can be swept up in the notion that children and young people are the future. Although I believe this to be true, it is not entirely accurate, because we are the here and the now, and not a moment needs to be waited for us to have a voice in this state. I believe that the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People strives to do just that, ensuring that as many children and young people as possible are given the opportunity to have our voices heard.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Pellegrini. Mr Alsomay, would you like to make an opening statement?

MOHMD ALSOMAY: Good morning, everyone. My name is Mohmd Alsomay. I'm a young person who is a member of the Muslim community. I'm passionate about many topics that concern young people and their future. These topics include, but are not limited to, education, coexistence, multiculturalism, and family.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I now ask Ms Charlton if she would like to make an opening statement.

JULIE CHARLTON: Yes, please. Good morning to Mr Chair, to members of the Committee, to the Advocate and to the current and former staff of the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People. My name is Julie Charlton. I am 22 years old, and I am a person living with a disability. I am an elite para-athletics athlete, and I had the privilege of being a general member in the 2019 Youth Advisory Council, and received the absolute honour of being the 2020-21 Youth Advisory Council Chair.

Representing the issues and the desires of 2.4 million children and young people in New South Wales has been the most enlightening part of my career thus far. Chairing the Council in 2020 was a challenge that we had to combat, due to the unknown conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken a toll on young people across the country. As of today, I have just been diagnosed with COVID for the first time, so it's hitting me quite hard today. However, the ongoing support from the office and Zoë made the process feel way less daunting, and gave us, as young people, an opportunity to be where we needed to be the most, which was a place to advocate for the needs of our peers.

During our term we discussed many vital and ongoing topics. They are incredibly important to our council. These topics included, but were not limited to, sexual consent, education, safety for LGBTQI youth, vaping, the NESAs standards, mental health disparities, employment, and the list goes on. Discussing these issues opened up our world view, and gave us the ability to advocate for a range of topics, and learn so much in the process. Working with Zoë and her team at ACYP has given me the ability to feel confident and comfortable to

advocate for my communities—to continue the work that I have learned in my time in the Office, and continue to use it in my advocacy efforts as I move to other organisations.

The work of the Advocate is vital to the wellbeing of children and young people across New South Wales, as she actively cares about our youth in our state. She takes the time to learn our truths, and supports us on our journeys through life. As you would know, the purpose and the principles of the Office are known to be to advocate and promote the wellbeing of children and young people, promote the participation of young people in the decisions that affect their lives, and make recommendations to government on behalf of young people. The safety, welfare, and wellbeing of children and young people are paramount. The views of children and young people are taken into serious consideration, and taken into account. The cooperative relationship between children and young people and their families and communities is important for the safety, welfare, and wellbeing of children and young people.

I wholeheartedly believe that Zoe and the Office do everything that is humanly possible to advocate, protect, and support the young people of New South Wales. I watch every day the impact the ACYP has on young people across our state, and their ever-growing presence in marginalised communities. I thank Zoë for everything that she has done for New South Wales young people, and everything that she has done for me. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to young people, and take our thoughts and opinions into consideration. I hope it continues into the future.

The CHAIR: I can assure you that it will continue into the future; that is the first thing I will say. I will open with a question to the three of you. We have heard how outstanding the Advocate has been, but are there any changes that you think should be made to the youth council?

LUA PELLEGRINI: I will start by saying that, as the current chair of the Youth Council, obviously this year has been a bit of a different year, given that just under half of our Council meetings were online. I acknowledge that the difficulties of COVID have meant that we haven't always been able to gather in person. One thing, that I wouldn't necessarily change, but that I wish was a little bit different, was that the engagement from the relevant Ministers involved with youth was a little bit higher. I would highly commend the Hon. Benjamin Franklin for his dedication and commitment to engaging with the Youth Advisory Council, and for being very diligent in wanting to do so. But with other members who are involved with youth, I feel like there hasn't been the same wanting and willingness to be involved with young people.

The CHAIR: Would anyone else like to add to that?

MOHMD ALSOMAY: ACYP has always demonstrated that it welcomes feedback and that there is always a space for improvement. As you know, membership of the YAC is offered to all children and young people between 12 and 24 years of age. I believe there is a big gap between a person who is 12 years old and a person who is 24 years old. A suggestion I would make is, maybe, have two YACs that are age based, also dividing them into two groups: category A, children and young people from the age of 12 to the age of 17; and category B, young people from the age of 18 to the age of 24. The discussion in these categories will definitely differ.

People from category B, the older one, will prefer to speak about issues that will be sensitive to bring up in the presence of a person from category A, the younger ones. If it is not a sensitive topic, then it is probably a topic that does not really concern people in category A. They are definitely given the opportunity to discuss topics of their own choice. The choice of the topics was very good, and young people in the YAC did a great job doing so. However, it is important to appreciate that people from different age groups have different interests and topics to discuss. So my suggestion is, maybe, it is a good idea to have separate groups in there.

The CHAIR: I have some feedback on that. I absolutely agree with what you're saying. One thing that I ask the question of is do you think that some of the younger children, the 12- and 13-year-olds, may benefit from listening to their older peers?

MOHMD ALSOMAY: They definitely would benefit from that. However, some topics can be sensitive to discuss in front of them. For example, a 22-year-old person might want to speak about how abundant free pornography is causing serious problems to thousands of mostly young people, and what it means to grow up in a porn-structured culture, and a hypersexualised society. Such a topic can be sensitive to discuss in front of a 12-year-old child.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you all for coming along today; it is much appreciated. Thanks for the work that has been done on the committee by yourselves, the YAC. The matter of the impact of social media on children and young people is, unsurprisingly, a matter that gets discussed from year to year as we meet with the Advocate and her staff. Can you provide the insights that you have got from your engagement with members of the committee and other children and young people about the impacts of social media? It is a very general question.

LUA PELLEGRINI: One of the things that we have discussed as a YAC, in terms of the use of social media, is that there are often physical implications to long periods of use of your phone that don't really get noticed, or long uses of using technology. For example, one of our YAC members was explaining how they had a recurrent eye twitch, because they were constantly looking at their phone. Others who work office jobs were talking about a strain on their necks and their backs from constantly working on a laptop. Sometimes the conversation around social media is very focused on the mental health aspect, which is obviously extremely important and that is why the conversation normally steers towards that direction. But sometimes those other issues, such as the strains on your vision, and the physical impacts on your body, are often lost in that conversation.

I will touch on the mental health aspect. Our YAC is very understanding that social media has its barriers but it also has its benefits. Obviously, given the time of COVID, social media has been instrumental in ensuring that young people can stay connected to one another. Often I feel like there is an attitude that young people should just be able to get off their phone or, "Why can't they just get off it?" But in a world where everything is digitalised, and everything is online, it is very difficult to say to switch off, when our lives don't really allow for that. I can hear emails going off in the background right now. It's the reality of our life, and something that we have to learn to live and engage with in the most positive way possible.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Would any of the other witnesses like to make a contribution? I am particularly interested in the comments you made about the negative impact of social media on the mental health of children and any other related comments.

The CHAIR: Ms Charlton, Mr Alsomay?

JULIE CHARLTON: During my term we spoke a lot about cyberbullying, and the impacts of cyberbullying on young people, particularly in the middle primary school to lower high school range. We spoke a lot about how we can help schools support kids who are going through cyberbullying, and what are some of the ways that we can support children to speak up more about those kinds of issues. We definitely spoke a lot about the mental health aspects of social media use, but we were also very pro social media, in terms of being able to advertise and advocate for our different needs—so, using social media to be able to reach more young people about social justice issues. To be able to spread awareness about certain topics, we made sure that we utilised social media to the best of our ability, without it being a toxic aspect of our lives.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What sort of topics, themes or narratives did people comment on that they use social media to engage with?

JULIE CHARLTON: In terms of negativity or positivity?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You said that social media was a valuable—I am using my words—vehicle to engage with topics and subjects.

JULIE CHARLTON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What sorts of topics and subjects that you were familiar with were raised in your engagement?

JULIE CHARLTON: When we do our meeting teams, we usually have a thing called "hot topics". Members of the Council bring forward something that is really important to them to speak about. One of the things that came across was Save the Children. One of our council members was working with Save the Children, and they wanted to be able to advocate and push out some of their—what was it? I would have to take exactly what that was on notice.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's okay.

JULIE CHARLTON: It was more about the issues that were important to them. We had a member who was working at headspace, so they wanted to push some of the programs that headspace was putting out for young people, and some of the social events, and ways to engage while the pandemic was on. "We are all at home, so how can we connect using social media, so that we don't feel as alone during this time?" There were others who wanted to—we were all talking to Zoë about using the social media of ACYP to get more out to young people. I love that she is using her social media platforms even more now, so that they can engage more with young people, and it's been absolutely amazing to watch.

The CHAIR: I would like to ask a follow-up question on that, Ms Charlton. When you talk about cybersecurity, are you talking more about, for example, bullying or other matters online? Do you ever talk about, for example, when to use applications to connect and communicate with each other around the security of those applications?

I will give you an example. I am a father of four young daughters, and prior to being elected I spent 20 years in IT, so I'm quite savvy with all of that. I have one upset daughter because I won't let her use a particular app, which I won't name—I'm happy to call it "Discord"—and that's because it's not encrypted end-to-end. Are these things that you also consider?

JULIE CHARLTON: Me personally, I consider it but not as a Council. We did not speak about that.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Thank you to the Youth Advisory Council members for being here. Ms Charlton, I'm sorry that you got caught up this morning and tested positive. I hope you are well and continue to be so.

JULIE CHARLTON: Thank you.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: You mentioned being honoured, as part of the Youth Advisory Council, to represent 2.4 million children and young people in New South Wales. I know that there are certainly not 2.4 million people on the Youth Advisory Council. How does each of you ensure that the views that you bring to the Youth Advisory Council are informed by other people and are not just your own views?

JULIE CHARLTON: For me, I make sure that I consult with my fellow community. I am a person with disability. I am a member of the LGBTQI+ community. I make sure that I am speaking directly to the people that I will be serving. I take some of the issues that we speak about, and I give it, in general terms, to my friends and my family, who are part of the communities that I'm part of, and I just make sure that I get outside views, that help me then to further advocate for those communities. When it comes to the actual Council itself, Zoë and the team make sure that they get as wide a range as possible that are represented on the Council. It can be from a wide range of demographics, many different suburbs, and many different walks of life, basically, to make sure that as many points of view are covered as possible. Obviously, we cannot speak for every single young person in New South Wales, but we absolutely try our best to make sure that the thoughts, opinions, and needs of the young people that we represent are heard.

LUA PELLEGRINI: I will just follow on from what Julie was saying. I think we, as a YAC, hear a broad range of perspectives. That's really important to us, and I feel like it's important to the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People to also hear a broad range of perspectives. I know, on my current YAC, that our youngest member at the time of joining the Council was 12 years old, and our oldest member is 25. We have four young women, including myself, who are First Nations peoples. We have two YAC members who are young carers, four young people from western Sydney—one from Lake Cargelligo, one from Cowra, one who is boarding interstate, and one who was homeschooled. I think that ACYP does a fantastic job to try to cover a broad range of perspectives and situations that young people might be facing.

For me, as a chairperson, I'm very conscious of what everybody's background is, and what their interests are, and as a chairperson I try to make sure that, when I facilitate conversation on the issues that matter to certain members of the Council, they are given the opportunity to have their voices heard on those particular issues. I know that the ACYP support me in doing so, and, as an office, they choose to do a similar thing as well. For example, we just had some of our young people from the Youth Advisory Council head off to the bullying roundtable, who are school-aged children, and then we had some of our regional young people attend the Regional Youth Taskforce meeting. We also have some of our LGBTQIA+ members who are part of the LGBTQIA+ consultations.

I think that the Office does a fantastic job of making sure that a wide range of perspectives are heard, but also that expert knowledge is given to the topics that affect children and young people. As Julie was saying, she regularly consults with other young people with disabilities. As a young carer, I have the opportunity to extend my reach and talk to other young carers about issues and impacts that are important to them. For our regional members, they have the same thing in their own communities. It is almost like each of us have the opportunity to come forward and bring across such a diverse range of perspectives that we actually end up covering quite a bit.

MOHMD ALSOMAY: I believe there are two ways to approach this question. The first one is to look at the whole picture, as a YAC. As the Chairperson has said here, we have people from all walks of life, and this is one of the remarkable things about the YAC. We have so much diversity. People have different experiences from different cultures and different belief systems. It was amazing to see how this is truly a good example of how we can exist as a multicultural nation. Through the hard work of the team in the ACYP, I believe all types of views and ideas that different young people in New South Wales would have were actually represented through the diverse 12 young members on the YAC. It was truly impressive to see that.

However, the other way to approach this question is, how I can ensure that—When I was on the YAC, I was the vice-captain of the largest senior high school in New South Wales—one of the largest—St Marys Senior, and the leader of the Muslim Students Association. I was exposed to so many young people, and I was interacting

with them on a regular, daily basis, which allowed me to hear their voices, and make sure that I am fulfilling the responsibility of conveying their voices to the team in the YAC.

The Hon. CHRIS RATH: Thank you so much for coming and for all the information you've provided to us so far. As I have flagged previously with Ms Robinson—she said it would be a good question ask you as well—what work have you been doing in terms of looking at the dangerous impacts of vapes at schools?

MOHMD ALSOMAY: On 15 November 2020, we had a YAC meeting, and we asked for our policy brief regarding vaping and e-cigarettes, because young people are more likely to have used e-cigarettes than other age groups. Those aged between 18 to 24 years old are the highest proportion of e-cigarette users—5.3 per cent—followed by those aged 25 to 29—4.8 per cent. It is actually growing. There is more research to be done in this area. There isn't enough research regarding vaping in young people, and there is definitely more research to be done.

LUA PELLEGRINI: I think often one of the barriers is that there is such limited research in this area. For young people, when they've constantly heard, "We don't know the long-term effects of vaping", it's not a stern warning against vaping. We do know things like, they contain heavy metals and nicotine, which are highly addictive carcinogens, but I feel like it's about framing it in a way that young people are able to have a say in what is happening in their own life, and making sure that young people are given a chance to be able to be involved in consultation about vaping campaigns.

We actually had NSW Health come in to chat with my YAC about the anti-vaping campaign that they are currently running, and that was a really good opportunity for us to provide feedback. A lot of the feedback that we gave was about their wantingness to put the posters in schools, and we gave a lot of feedback around the location of posters, and where we thought that they would be best located in schools, for young people to actually get the most out of those posters. The feedback that we have gotten as a YAC from other young people that we know is that, yes, they vape and, yes, they are addicted to it but, no, they don't know how to stop, nor do they really want to. I actually know a young person who has resorted to using nicotine patches, because he doesn't know what else to do, because there are not really many resources or support systems available to support a young person who wants to quit vaping.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: I have a follow-up question on that. You mentioned giving advice to Health about where posters should go. Did they have any idea in the first place?

LUA PELLEGRINI: No. Health was pretty passionate that they wanted them kind of just like, sprawled around the school, and asked our perspective on putting them in bathrooms, but obviously, putting them in bathrooms comes with the very high chance that they will be graffitied. One thing that we, as a YAC, had recommended was putting them actually in the bathroom stalls, on the back door, because then young people, when they are in there—hopefully by themselves—will be there looking at the posters, and can have that opportunity, if there is information on them, to reflect and potentially think about it. We also spoke about using laminated posters, instead of paper posters that are likely just to be ripped down.

The CHAIR: Ms Charlton, do you have any comments around vaping in schools in general?

JULIE CHARLTON: Yes. Vaping was a major issue that my Council brought up. They were incredibly concerned about the ongoing health effects of vaping. When we were speaking about it, it was mid-2020, so there wasn't a lot going around in terms of research, or really a lot of focus on it, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But once the pandemic, and the sort of hype and scared aspects of that died down, young people on my Council started to realise, "Oh gosh, what happens if I get COVID, and I'm vaping at the same time? What's going to happen to my lungs?" That was an ongoing conversation for our Council. It remains, obviously, to be a major issue going into Lua's Council as well.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: I have a brief question. You have dealt with so many issues over your times on the YAC, what's the one where you feel your voice has been heard the greatest?

JULIE CHARLTON: I definitely think it was the sexual consent consultations that we did, and also we did some consultations with NESAs. Those two consultations have flourished into something that we never thought would become so big, and such a reality. I remember, when we first started doing consultations with NESAs, and it was about putting Aboriginal studies into the curriculum, and whether that was an idea that young people thought was good. Obviously, we said, "Of course." Now it has become a reality. When we did our sexual consent consultations, now New South Wales is having reforms to our consent laws, and making sure that they're even safer, for people to be able to not feel as scared when partaking in those kinds of activities. I feel very privileged to have been a part of something that has made such a massive change.

LUA PELLEGRINI: I think, for my YAC, we would also probably have to say NESAs, as that's one of our permanent standing agenda items. They come in pretty much every YAC meeting to talk to us about various aspects of the curriculum reform. I know that that's a space that a lot of the young people on the YAC are really passionate about—education—and the curriculum reform has been such a good opportunity for us to really have the voices of children and young people heard in the curriculum. As Julie was saying, involving Aboriginal perspectives into subjects has been something that young people have been really passionate about, and that's something that NESAs have really taken on, and they have tried to embed Aboriginal perspectives across curriculum, which I really appreciate.

I'd say that another thing that we have had a lot of involvement with is, obviously, anything ACYP does internally. Obviously, with Youth Week, we were really lucky that one of our amazing YAC members, David, actually came up with the Youth Week theme, which was *It's up to YOUth*—which I thought was fabulous. That's something we were all very proud of, and happy to be involved with. Obviously, the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024*, we were consulted on, and I believe Julie and Mohmd's YAC were also consulted on that plan.

MOHMD ALSOMAY: Yes. The most influential consultation was with the NSW Department of Education and NESAs regarding the curriculum reform. It was really good to know that young people are being consulted when it comes to curriculum reform. I was just finishing my HSC at that time, so I was able to articulate what must be reformed, alongside other members on the YAC. The good thing about the consultation, it wasn't one-off. It even continued to the next year's YAC, so we can see the reason effort is being put into that area.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: I have lots of questions, but I think I will save them and put them in writing.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS: That is such great feedback on the work you guys do. It must be such a joy to get to make change like that. Thank you for all the hours you guys put in. That's amazing. Good luck on day two, Ms Charlton. Day two is not a nice day with COVID, so all the best.

The CHAIR: I would like to thank each of you for joining us and appearing before the Committee today. The Committee may wish to send you some additional questions in writing, replies to which will form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to further questions, which it appears to me that there will be?

MOHMD ALSOMAY: Yes, of course.

LUA PELLEGRINI: Yes, I would.

JULIE CHARLTON: Yes, I would.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you again for attending today. Your voice has been very much well heard, and it is much appreciated.

ZOE ROBINSON: Can I just acknowledge, because I'm sure the Committee would like to, that Julie is off to represent Australia in the Commonwealth Games. We are obviously very proud and we wish her luck.

The CHAIR: Congratulations. Thank you, everyone.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

JANET SCHORER, Children's Guardian, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

SHARMINIE NILES, General Counsel, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

STEVE GHOLAB, Director, Working with Children Check, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome representatives from the Office of the Children's Guardian. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. Would you like to make an opening statement?

JANET SCHORER: Thank you very much. I would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of the land we're on today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. I'd also like to extend that respect to any Aboriginal people joining us today, and anyone who is watching the proceedings via the webcast. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk to you about some of the important work that the Office of the Children's Guardian does to keep children safe. I'd like to congratulate Mr Sidgreaves on his appointment as Chair, Ms Gibbons as Deputy Chair, and to all the new members of the Committee. When I sat before you this time last year, I spoke about the effects of COVID on our staff and on our stakeholders. Unfortunately, the themes of the pandemic still remain very much front of mind for us.

But despite all of that, after yet another year of major change and of significant challenges, the Office of the Children's Guardian has continued its work as a strong, modern regulator, committed to keeping children safe from abuse and harm in New South Wales. We regulate more than 30,000 organisations and more than 1.8 million workers and volunteers who work with children and young people across New South Wales. Since the Children's Guardian Act 2019 commenced in March 2020, we have been responsible for three pillars of child protection in New South Wales: the Child Safe Standards, the Working with Children Check and the Reportable Conduct Scheme. Having these three pillars supporting and informing each other within our organisation has helped to put us in a much stronger position to effect meaningful change.

A major focus for the past year has been the introduction of the Child Safe Scheme in New South Wales. After its passage through Parliament last year, the scheme commenced on 1 February this year, and it's a significant achievement. It's a new and broad regulatory scheme for implementing the 10 Child Safe Standards which were recommended by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The standards were developed to enable organisations to respond to risks inherent in their work with children, helping create a safe environment that prevents child abuse and neglect.

Under the Child Safe Scheme, certain child-related organisations—including those in the health, early childhood, education, community service, and youth justice sectors—must implement the Child Safe Standards. Local councils and religious organisations providing services to children, and sport and recreation organisations providing services to children, also need to implement the standards. The scheme extends our powers to monitor, investigate, and enforce the Standards. But for the first year, our focus is on working with each of those sectors to build their capability in understanding what the standards mean, and to really provide refined and sector-specific resources and training to support the rollout of the scheme.

In addition to preparing organisations for the new scheme, we've also increased our focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, with the appointment in January 2021 of the Deputy Children's Guardian, Mr Richard Weston. Richard has led our response to the Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out-of-home care in New South Wales that was undertaken by Professor Megan Davis. We also have been examining and are continuing to examine our role in improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, particularly the significant role we have as a regulator in out-of-home care. Part of this work has been an ongoing conversation and workshops with Aboriginal out-of-home care providers, as well as Aboriginal workers who are working in non-Aboriginal agencies across New South Wales. We look forward to implementing the recommendations in our response to the *Family is Culture* report, as we continually reflect on and improve our work as a regulator.

In conclusion, I just want to make a comment that I continue to be inspired by the commitment, dedication and resilience of my staff. We've been able to manage and adapt to the COVID challenge, in continuing to support organisations that we regulate so that they can continue to serve children and young people in their care. My thanks go to my colleagues at the Office of the Children's Guardian and to the many organisations, the agencies, the carers, and the caseworkers who've found many different creative ways over the past couple of years to make sure that children and young people have positive experiences in what has been a very difficult time. I'm now delighted to take any questions from the Committee about my statement and about our work at the Office of the Children's Guardian. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Schorer. Would Ms Niles or Mr Gholab like to make an opening statement as well?

STEVE GHOLAB: No.

SHARMINIE NILES: No.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Thank you for being here, Ms Schorer, Mr Gholab and Ms Niles. We recently dealt with some legislation in Parliament to amend the Child Protection (Working with Children) Act 2012 and the Children's Guardian Act 2019. What feedback did you have into that? What consultation was done with you on that? What will be the main impacts of that legislation on your work?

JANET SCHORER: Just to clarify, that's the legislation that went through this week?

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Yes, very recently.

JANET SCHORER: Very recently. Yes, we were involved in the discussion about that legislation. Just to take a step back, when the Child Safe Standards and that first amendment to the Children's Guardian Act came through, 18 months ago or thereabouts, we didn't include the out-of-home care agencies at that time, because they'd been operating for some years—decades—under the 23 Standards for Permanent Care. We wanted to do some more work to consult with that sector to determine whether moving them under the same 10 standards was something that would work, but also to acknowledge that out-of-home care agencies obviously carry a different level of risk, and a different level of obligation around children and young people who are in care than you do if you're running the local soccer club, for example. That needed more time to consult, but our opening hypothesis was, it makes sense to have agencies under the same evidence-based standards. Even from a practical perspective, many of these agencies are working nationally, or they're working across different funding programs, and so to have a single unifying set of standards that everyone understands and that is a common language made more sense, practically, and to ease regulatory burden.

The second part was to address some of the history that we had with the voluntary out-of-home care scheme. That had been a registration scheme, effectively, that had been in place to oversee the placement of children and young people voluntarily by their parents into respite care, predominantly—children and young people with disability—and to move that onto the same scheme, but with the same sorts of provisions that would enable a code of practice, that sort of thing, to acknowledge the additional vulnerability of those children and young people.

Many of those organisations are small- to medium-sized operators who don't have the capacity, necessarily, to bear a big regulatory burden. So how could we make things simpler, in a common language that they might be also using, if they've got funding from the NDIS, for example? It's a common language. Those were the main changes, and really to try and move our regulatory practice into a much more simple, unified and—in the case of voluntary out-of-home care—contemporary approach to regulation, given where we are with the NDIS. Those were the two main things. Do you want me to talk a bit about the Working with Children Check amendments as well?

Ms JODIE HARRISON: That would be great.

JANET SCHORER: And I'll ask Ms Niles to speak, too, if I miss anything around those. The main change there was to provide us with the legislative mechanism to connect in with the National Reference System, which will mean that we have a more regular, routine connection with national screening, to enable us to get information about who might be barred from working in other states and territories. At the moment, we'll get that at the five-year mark, but this will mean we get it much more regularly, in communication with the other states and territories. It's an important step towards fulfilling what the Royal Commission intended. Was there anything else I should mention about the Working With Children Act?

SHARMINIE NILES: Yes, there are just two other points, if I might just add to that. We also have brought in a power to require applicants and holders to disclose prescribed criminal offences outside of Australia—overseas offences. There is an obligation now to disclose that, and then we made a number of miscellaneous clarifying amendments as well. In the House, there was an amendment made, in relation to animal cruelty offences, to include an additional offence that has recently been included into the Crimes Act. That offence is section 547E of the Crimes Act, which is about production, dissemination, and possession of bestiality and animal crush material. That's now been included in schedule 2 to the Working With Children Act as an automatic disqualifying offence as well. That amendment was made in the upper House, and it's been included in the legislation.

JANET SCHORER: We were supported of that being amended as well. Is that—

Ms JODIE HARRISON: That's good, thank you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: On the matter of Indigenous children and young people, and enhancements of the work that is being done with regard to them, you referred to an appointment in your opening statement. Could you elucidate on that appointment, the work that is being done, and your observations about how it is all going?

JANET SCHORER: Mr Weston was appointed at the beginning of last year. The first main task for him was to undertake a series of reviews that we were asked to do by a former Minister, that had come out of the Davis report. We looked at a number of bespoke areas within the child protection system around placement principle, the Aboriginal Case Management Policy, the joint protocol, and a few other things, as well as looking into some of our own practices about how we report other things. Mr Weston provided that report to the Minister at the beginning of this year, and it's publicly available.

Now that the work of reporting is done, his focus is really on how can he, in the role that we have, embed the placement principle into our practice, in terms of, when we are regulating against standards, looking at how we understand the primacy of the placement principle and what is wrapped around an Aboriginal child or young person, in terms of their cultural care planning, and understanding connection to family and culture. I think he would also have the view of wanting to be able to influence earlier decisions about when and how children and young people are placed, and how they're connected to family.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we now have legislation that gives us a different frame to move to 10 standards, but we want to look at our own practice to understand how we as a regulator emphasise how important cultural care planning is for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, and the quality of that. For us to understand that, we also have to be a much more culturally competent organisation. We have taken some steps to do that, but Mr Weston also has a view about how he can be a cultural authority within our organisation, so that when we are doing our work we understand the importance of community views and the history of our nation, and how that might impact on decisions that are made, and how we can change our practice over time. His focus is on influencing the sector, particularly within the decisions that are made in the department about care, about the placement principle, and the Aboriginal Case Management Policy, but also a cultural authority within our organisation, so that we can continuously improve our practice as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You also made reference to the Commonwealth and the provision of information on a regular basis, or the availability of information on a more regular basis, with regard to other states and territories from five years—

JANET SCHORER: The Working with Children Check.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: —to a lower threshold. Could you go into that in a bit more detail?

JANET SCHORER: I will start off. Mr Gholab will know the details in more detail. The National Reference System has been designed to sit within the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, and it is a mechanism for us to share information about people who are barred in other jurisdictions. At the moment, that is done irregularly, but this enables that to be done much more frequently. I will ask Mr Gholab to speak to the details, but us connecting with that provides us with that mechanism. Our collective ambition would be that it would be lovely to have a single national Working with Children Check that you took with you everywhere. If that happened in my professional or personal lifetime, I would love to see it, because it's a mammoth effort to get all states and territories and the Commonwealth aligned. Mr Gholab is doing some work on that nationally. But, as I have said to him, if that happens in my lifetime I would be a happy woman.

STEVE GHOLAB: As the Guardian touched on, when someone applies for a Working with Children Check, national criminal history checking happens immediately, but also then every five years, when an applicant renews. We also have a really strong connection with the NSW Police, where we have a continuous checking mechanism that occurs throughout the five-year period, but that's only for New South Wales. The National Reference Database allows us to share people who have been barred in other jurisdictions nationally. The Royal Commission flagged that term "forum shopping".

Without the NRS, people are able to be, for example, barred in one state but potentially work in another state and cause risk to the safety of children. This is an exciting chapter in the growth and strengthening of the Working with Children Check scheme in New South Wales, to be able to share that information with other states and territories, but also expanding what that looks like moving forward, and collectively working in partnership with the National Office for Child Safety, and with other jurisdictions to strengthen that child safety mechanism and the Royal Commission Recommendations as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I will ask a follow-up question. In terms of the situation in New South Wales and your reference to working with the NSW Police Force on updating, is that done on an ongoing, rolling basis? I will let you explain. How does that work?

STEVE GHOLAB: With the continuous checking mechanism, in New South Wales, once someone applies for a Working With Children Check, we will do a national criminal history check through the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, as a one-off. But then we have a real-time live feed connection with the New South Wales Police. So, someone could potentially be charged with an offence in New South Wales and the Working with Children Check scheme would be aware of that charge. If it's relevant to our schedules, we would obviously risk assess it, but there are also other discretionary factors under the Child Protection (Working with Children) Act. We can use the powers in that legislation to risk assess someone. But it gives us a real-time feed of offences that might be relevant to child safety in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: Obviously, during COVID the Working With Children Check clearances, particularly, may have been a problem. Did that create a backlog of applications or renewals? Does this create any potential risks or safety issues for children in organisations?

JANET SCHORER: I might start, and then whatever I don't get to I will ask Mr Gholab to jump in on. Thanks for the question. I was thinking of that issue whilst Mr Gholab was answering the last question. During the peak couple of seasons of lockdown, I was given the legislative capacity to extend clearances. That enabled us to give people longer without having to go to a service centre to do their renewal. Obviously, that meant there wasn't foot traffic of people having to go and do that, and they could continue working. We did that because it's low risk. As Mr Gholab said, we're always monitoring the 1.8-odd million people all the time, so if something new happened it wasn't like they were without a clearance, and we could continue to monitor them. I don't have that capacity anymore to extend clearances; that was a COVID provision.

There are a couple of issues, but it certainly was the case that during some peak times, over the last couple of years, there have been delays with the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC). Some of that was related to their own workforce, but also to the NDIS worker check coming on board at the same time. So the screening activity nationally, and the requirement on them, had gone up quite a lot. A fair bit of ACIC's process is still quite manual, particularly if your name is reasonably common. Some of the delay that people experience going from "I've applied" to "getting my clearance" is not really delay; it's that sometimes it takes time to make sure that Janet Schorer matches with the person that ACIC has got. The other part of that is—and this is well documented—the tension that we have, particularly for teachers. We know that it's a requirement for teachers to register, under the NES Act, that they can only work with a clearance. Our legislation is that you can work on an application. So you can see that there is a bit of a tension there.

Teachers might apply for their renewal—and technically, under us, they can work on that application and, as Mr Gholab said, we're monitoring them even under application. So it's not as if they're unsafe. If they weren't safe, we would step in on that application. But it does mean there is some frustration for teachers, if there is a delay in them getting to do their renewal, and then they can't work because they don't have a clearance. Our strong encouragement is we give people three months and many prompts to get in early and renew early, so that that three-month period gives you plenty of time to get a renewal. That shouldn't mean that teachers, in particular, have to be taken off classroom duties because they haven't got a clearance.

We work quite closely with the Department of Education, and with NES Act, to try to encourage that as much as we can, but I can't extend people if they don't get their clearance. In general terms, we have seen it's still the case that most people—about 85 per cent, 90 per cent of people—will have their clearance within hours or days. That's still the case. Service NSW would say, "You need to be prepared that this might take two to four weeks for you to get notified of your outcome," and people should be prepared for that. That's just because there's much more volume in the screening system than there was a couple of years ago.

The CHAIR: Mr Gholab, would you like to add anything?

STEVE GHOLAB: Thank you, Ms Schorer. As the Guardian outlined, when someone applies for a Working With Children Check, they can work on an application. There are no restrictions, unless they have been on interim bail or automatically disqualified. We identified or realised during the COVID lockdowns that more people were able to respond to our queries, due to work pressures not being there any more, because of certain sectors shutting down, so we were able to facilitate and assist people with those queries. I guess what we've also noticed is applications in the last financial year was 400,855, which is quite consistent to previous years as well. As the Guardian outlined, 83 per cent of applications are processed within five days, and having the avenue to work on an application allows people to do that until they receive their clearance.

The CHAIR: Does the Children's Guardian communicate with schools around the point of difference being that a school may require their teachers and staff to have a current Working With Children Check, as opposed to what we're hearing is your point of view, that as long as an application or a renewal has been lodged—do you communicate with them to try to reconcile that difference?

JANET SCHORER: We largely communicate through NESAs and through the Department of Education, as the employers. From my perspective, that's a fairly regular communication, but I understand the practicality of it. You might get an email three months out and you go, "Yeah, I'll get to that," and then it's two weeks before and you think, "Oh, I haven't done that yet because I've been busy," particularly during pandemics, and the additional pressures for teachers during lockdowns, and that sort of thing, so I completely understand it. We directly communicate with individuals. We will send them emails and prompts to say, "You need to renew. Have you done it? Have you done it?" without being too painful. We try to work with NESAs as the main communication point with people because it's their requirement, to be honest.

The CHAIR: To follow up on that, does that include day care centres? A lot of day care centres might also take the view that you have to have a current Working With Children Check, but they might have lodged an application or a renewal and that may not satisfy—

JANET SCHORER: Their registration.

The CHAIR: —that day care, for example. Is there any interaction that you guys have with that sector?

JANET SCHORER: We certainly have a good relationship with Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services (QARS), in the Department of Education. As you know, it's a much more diverse private sector. I'm happy to take on notice how we've communicated with them, but, as I said, I think it would largely be directly with the clearance holder, and then the sort of compliance work to the extent we would do that around employers. I'm happy to provide some follow-up advice.

The CHAIR: No, I take what you're saying. That's fine. There's no need to provide a follow-up. What I was talking about is engaging with NESAs or the child and day care sector, for example, and the employers actually understanding that they don't need a current Working With Children Check and that an application or a renewal is satisfactory.

JANET SCHORER: Sufficient, yes. That dovetails into our compliance and what we're trying to do to educate. We have Working With Children Week, and that's geared around employer education around compliance, so employers understanding what their obligations are, who should be screened and how you verify those sorts of things. That's just that. We tie that into that ongoing education program around compliance.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In your opening statement, you made reference to the commencement on 1 February this year of the Child Safe Scheme framework. You explained that, as I understood it, the first year is going to be spent out there engaging and creating awareness of it, and of matters associated with compliance. I am wondering how that's going, what the engagement has been like and what issues have arisen or are arising from that engagement.

JANET SCHORER: Thanks for the question. We really took the view that spending that year was important, to emphasise it's a preventative scheme. We're not out here with the boots on and the big regulatory stick straight away because, in general, organisations are trying to do the right thing, and they largely do. The way we have our team structured is that there's, essentially, a business partner for each sector, to have someone who knows their particular context that they can get on the phone to, and that we're tailoring any resources that we might develop to suit what the sector needs.

We have put a lot of emphasis on the sport and recreation sector, acknowledging that whilst we have an Office of Sport—who does a lot of work, and we have great partnership with them in thinking about their role in leading sport, generally—each code, if you like, has its own unique challenges, and the challenges of having a national body that might sit in another state as well, as trying to develop processes across multiple jurisdictions where expectations might differ, and really trying to understand how these standards come to life in volunteer-heavy organisations where you have that sort of seasonal churn.

We have been doing a lot of work with various codes within that—rugby league, cricket—to really help them understand how they might do this in practice. We see our role as not telling them what to do, but really providing the insight and the resources that we can to enable them. I think what I have observed in the six months since we started that work is the real take-up of processes: how to induct volunteers to help them understand simply what their obligations are, what to do if they see something that doesn't sit right, and how to deal with that. I think there has been some real progress.

We have been doing a lot of work with the faith sector as well, because they are new into the Reportable Conduct Scheme. In my observation of my conversations with leaders in the different faith groups, they're well progressed in terms of their own architecture around the Child Safe Standards. They learned a lot from their experiences in the Royal Commission. In general terms, they have some pretty robust structures in place, and are very willing for a partnership with us. It's about continuous improvement, and I think that's really good. There's much more to do on that, but those have really been our areas of focus.

To the Chair's question about the relationship with early childhood, we are very mindful that some sectors are multiple-regulated. How do we work with other regulators, to make sure that we are not asking a small early childhood provider to do things for us that they're already doing for someone else? What's the primary regulator, essentially, and how do we gather information from them that satisfies our legislative requirements without asking an organisation to jump through multiple hoops? That is what we are trying to do as well.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Are there any challenges with resourcing for the guardian? As legislation has changed and the regulatory environment has changed, how are you seated for resources, now and in the future?

JANET SCHORER: Thank you, I always appreciate that question. I want to thank the Committee last year for its advocacy on our behalf. We are very pleased this year that we've been given additional funds to bring on more staff in the Working With Children Check, in response to demand, and also in the Reportable Conduct Scheme, in acknowledgement of the changed scope and the increased demand on the Reportable Conduct Scheme over the past 12 months, and into the future, as well as funds to support the establishment of the Residential Care Workers Register and its ongoing maintenance. We are thrilled about that, to be honest, because I don't think money is necessarily easy to come by in the current context. That will have a big impact for us.

I will always leave a placeholder for future years. As you quite rightly mentioned, our legislative remit has changed. In the coming years, how big our compliance and audit role needs to be in the Child Safe Scheme will become known. We are starting off small to understand what our role and our posture really might be. I don't ever expect that, in terms of regulating the Child Safe Scheme, it would be wise or the right thing to do to have an army of people out there in organisations telling people what to do. That's not our role. We always want to be capacity focused, but there may be a time where we do need to expand that a bit. But I think, at the moment, it's right to be more modest whilst we explore what that role is. We are very pleased that we've got some new resources for the coming financial year that will make a big difference for us.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: On the matter of employment of children and young people in the gig economy—this is one of the questions we have been provided with on notice to prompt some discussion, so I will read it out, if you don't mind. It says, "Have the recent changes to the Children's Guardian Act 2019 in relation to third-party employers and their reportable conduct obligations had the desired effect?" With the leading question, "Can you update the Committee on any emerging considerations in the regulation of child-related employment in the gig economy?"

JANET SCHORER: That's a great question.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If you need to take part of that on notice, so be it.

JANET SCHORER: I may do, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I don't mean to ambush you. Obviously, this is an expanding part of the economy. It's quite highly deregulated, if I could use that phrase. It's obviously attractive to people for a range of reasons—being able to dip in and dip out of it—and available to people of all ages. You can take it on notice.

JANET SCHORER: I'm very happy to. It would probably be a question that we would be able to answer from the Working With Children Check compliance side of things, who have a fairly broad reach, but also within the contractor side of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. I'm not aware that that particular sector has emerged through that contractor mechanism, because it is tied to organisations that sit under the scheme. It is an interesting question about what our role is in overseeing those people, individuals, if they are sole traders—which often, I imagine, they would be, in a gig economy. But also, where are the obligations around if something happens. I am happy to provide some more information on those for that, absolutely.

The CHAIR: On page 26 of your annual report you talk about process improvements. With regards to encouraging First Nations people's engagement, do you have any feedback from the Aboriginal communities or organisations about these efforts?

JANET SCHORER: Thanks so much for the question. I will hand over to Mr Gholab to speak a little bit more about that. This work that we have been doing for a few years now to acknowledge that, for Aboriginal people applying for a Working with Children Check, it can be a pretty terrifying experience. And the retelling of

your history that might represent much more contact with the criminal justice system than for others, and the sense that you might be setting yourself up to fail and get a bar.

It has been a journey for us to understand what is the different experience of Aboriginal people in our community, of having much more contact with the criminal justice system, and how do we understand more of the protective factors that are associated with culture and community, and to give our staff practice wisdom, if you like, about how to interact in a different way. It's a much more culturally appropriate way to have those conversations, but also to build up relationships with community leaders, so that we can build our understanding of what protective factors there are in culture and community connection. That is the overarching work. Mr Gholab can talk a little bit more about the detail, because we've made some significant progress on that in the past 12 months. He can talk some more about that.

STEVE GHOLAB: Thank you, Ms Schorer, and thank you for the question. If I can provide a bit of context, from the past several years we have undertaken an extensive amount of community engagement with the broader community—that was through the feedback we were receiving—mainly focused towards the far western region, and the northern areas, such as Dubbo, Brewarrina and so on. We listened really closely about the impacts it has on First Nations people, when they engage with the Working With Children Check, and what are some of the changes we can make to that. But also it was a process, coming back to your formal question, around educating and engaging with communities, about what does a check mean—can they work on an application, for example. There is an element of education around the need for a Working With Children Check, when you can work with the Working With Children Check, and what is an employee and an employer responsibility. So, it contained those number of elements.

Over the years we have undertaken a couple of refinement processes in how we conduct our work and our phone calls and our dialogues. One of the changes, as an example, is the initial contact letter. Rather than a cold call or a letter being sent out to individuals—we identified there was a lot of disengagement from the First Nations people in relation to those documentations. Through a soft entry approach, or an engagement of, "We've received your Working With Children Check", for example, "we've got some information we want to speak with you about, can you please give us a call on this number to have a discussion." And that is through a dedicated staff member, rather than the general population of risk assessors who might have carriage of a number of cases. So we've established a dedicated staff member who can manage that.

What we have identified is an increased engagement through First Nations people in that process. Through the ongoing conversation and listening, what we've identified, as well—unfortunately, through a government process, we have an over-policing of First Nations communities. There was a lot of information about their criminal records, or information that police hold on a certain individual, or other records, and what we were missing is the story of the individual. What have they done since? What were the factors that were occurring at that time for them? How have they engaged in community? What does their connection to community look like now? That was missing. But now we've seen, through that engagement, they are able to share their story with us through those discussions, building rapport, and that has seen a positive impact on community, but also engagement of First Nations people in community to deliver services for children and young people, and strengthen that community.

That has also expanded to a development of a Your Story guide, which we're very proud of, that we've implemented just recently. That was developed in collaboration with an organisation called Yamurrah. Yamurrah is a First Nations professional service that is trauma informed and guided by Aboriginal worldviews and Aboriginal healing frameworks. That tool assists our risk assessment staff in the way to engage with First Nations individuals, to consider trauma-informed care principles around care, empowerments, and other trauma-informed practices there.

But also, what support mechanisms do people need when they engage with us? And understand that a level of disengagement does not mean someone is guilty, or does not mean they don't want to engage with us at all; it means that there's other elements that might be going around. Fear, for example—fear of engagement with government services. That has just been recently implemented, but we're working on developing that information-sharing initial contact letter process that I've spoken about. The Your Story guide now broadens that, but also that complements our cultural competency that we've rolled out across the agency. There's a number of elements and strategies that we're employing, and I think these are the first and will continue to grow into the future.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: Mr Gholab, you mentioned Yamurrah as an organisation that you consult with and work with, in ensuring that the work that you do recognises the history and the culture. What other First Nations organisations have you worked with in the past 12 or so months? I work quite a bit in the domestic violence space, and one of the things that I consistently hear from First Nations women is that we do not recognise

culture properly, in the way that we are approaching issues in relation to domestic violence in this state, recognising the difficulties that they have in their cultures and making sure that our responses are culturally appropriate. What is happening in the Children's Guardian space to ensure that there is recognition?

JANET SCHORER: Thank you, it's a great question. That's one example in one functional area, if you like, to try and bring that voice in much more. Across the board, as Mr Gholab mentioned, what we've asked all staff to do is to understand where they are in their experience and understanding of Aboriginal or First Nations culture. Just to mention, what we ask the majority of our staff to do is a 10-hour course that talks through some of the main issues around the policy of this country, historically, and what white Australia means to our First Nations people—and to get our staff to reflect on and think about, "How do I, as an individual and a community member, commit to knowing more about where I live and the people who have been here for thousands and thousands of years?"—so just to do that one little thing, as a start, so that people in the organisation have something of an awareness, when they do their work, that there's a question to ask first.

I think what we have seen over the past couple of years is we have more Aboriginal staff in our organisation. What that helps you to do is say, rather than we—the general "we"—thinking, "I know what I'm doing," I need to go talk to people whose children this is we're talking about, whose organisation this is, whose community this represents, first, rather than assuming I know the answer. I hope that what the sector is seeing, particularly in our out-of-home care workers—we went to the Aboriginal community-controlled sector first to say, "We need to change our practice. How do we do that? What matters to you, in terms of how do we serve Aboriginal children and young people better with what our part in the system is? Acknowledging that we're part of a system that wouldn't be how our First Nations people would design it, how can we do better? What would be the way to acknowledge and represent and understand quality for First Nations children in the system, primarily?" In doing that, all children are served better—and so designing how we work from their perspective first and then continuing to honour that.

Certainly, for us, having a senior leader at the executive table, in Mr Weston, gives a different perspective on who we listen to. Talking to community first—that's been tricky in the past couple of years, but we've still undertaken to understand, and to get out and listen to, community's voices first. It's also part of our legislation now; that we take that into account was part of the amendment that was made last year. The note that Ms Niles has just given me is that we do also have a First Nations policy, which is on our website, which sort of informed and guided the practice change that Mr Gholab has mentioned. We've got a ways to go, but what we're trying to do, in terms of our relationship as an organisation with First Nations people, is to listen first, design with, and be willing to continuously improve. We do have a ways to go yet, but that's what we're trying to do as an organisation.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Targeted sector audits—could you provide us with some information about the auditing process and what that process is throwing up?

JANET SCHORER: Thanks for the question. Can I just clarify, do you mean in terms of out-of-home care or in terms of compliance for the Working With Children Check?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Compliance.

JANET SCHORER: Compliance, yes. In the last couple of years we have done—in the year that we are talking about, just under 2½ thousand compliance checks. That really spans thinking about and looking at registrations for employers who register to say that they are a child-related organisation, and then never employ anyone. We do particular targeted audits, around particular sectors or organisations that we might have a worry about, and then we also go where we might get intelligence about organisations employing non-verified people. That's really the mechanism that we go through.

In the financial year we're talking about, we targeted 243 employers. Many of them were no longer operating, so that helped to clarify that. But we also found a number who were not complying with the legislation—that was 90 in the financial year—and issued either warning letters, or penalty infringements notices, and in a couple of instances, referred matters to police, where action was taken, and criminal proceedings were undertaken. That program of work, as you'd imagine, took a different flavour over the past couple of years, but has really ramped up again now, in terms of compliance, and us being able to get out and about. It actually does matter to just go and be able to see how a community works, where the organisations are, and kind of knock on the door, which we try and do as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is the knocking on the door done without notice? Are people hearing that there is a check going on, so to speak, and it gets around? Obviously the more random ones, the better, in terms of approach.

JANET SCHORER: Yes, but a bit of both. We try not to be the sort of, "We're here with the badge and the truncheon." We're not that sort of—but we do try and understand. It might just be a simple, "I didn't know

I had to do it." So you've got to assume the best first, which we try to do. But it is going into a community or looking online and seeing, "Oh, that organisation's operating. We'll see if they're connected up." But I would never want to say that we're getting to everyone when there's so many small organisations, when there's 30,000-plus entities. We're not in every door; we're not in every community. But it's really trying to take a risk-based approach. We know which areas or which sectors and the pattern of how we gather intelligence and focus our energy there. But we also just rely on people telling us stuff, either via email or we hear things. That's a good source of intelligence for any regulator as well, the complaint or the worry that sometimes comes in, and we follow that up.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: The state is obviously a big state geographically, and population centres are well known along the coast. With your current resourcing, how do you find the ability to move inland and deal with some of the regional and remote parts of the state?

JANET SCHORER: It is easier now that we can travel.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sorry, of course, post-COVID—

JANET SCHORER: Yes. It is still the case that we can do lots and lots of intelligence gathering online, and that does provide us with a lot of information. More and more, I think the staffing in that part of the organisation do like just going and being somewhere, and being able to see how things work. That might be—which we've done—you go into a community and do an information session about the Working With Children Check, or whatever it might be, and while you're there you kind of have a bit of a look around and see. But certainly, whatever resources we need to commit to people getting out and about, we do that. But we try and tie it into doing some information and training while we're there, as well as seeing how things are working.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: As far as compliance, are there any particular sectors or geographical areas where you think that there is a considerable amount more work to be done?

JANET SCHORER: That's a great question. I think Mr Donnelly has probably picked up on one of them, in terms of the gig economy and startup organisations. For organisations that are either small or sole traders, with their understanding—obviously, they don't have to fulfil standards and policies and all that sort of thing, but understanding basic obligations and requirements, and how they run their business well, and are transparent for parents. I think there is always more we can do to inform parents about how you make a good choice. We've got the capacity for parents to digitally check that the person who is working with their children has been cleared, but that shouldn't be everything that parents look at. So there is a lot more to do to inform parents, and that's something we are working on. But those small-to-medium organisations, and how you make compliance—it is blunter than what I mean—how do you make it easy to do business, acknowledging that most people just want to serve children and young people well and run their business, but don't realise that they fall under some sort regulatory obligation at all. I think that is a lot of businesses.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: I remember a couple of years ago we were talking about tutors and the tutoring industry.

JANET SCHORER: Yes, that's a good example.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: So that's still an area where there's a need for further education.

JANET SCHORER: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: I have a question with regard to the implementation of the Residential Care Workers Register. Do you anticipate any challenges in ensuring that organisations record and share information contained on the register effectively?

JANET SCHORER: Thanks for the question. Yes, we are in the final stages of preparing for the register to go live. It goes live from the eighteenth of next month. We've done a lot of work over the past couple of years, but particularly over these last few months, with the sector, to really inform how we design the practice guide and make the system as usable and as user-friendly as possible. We are very mindful that organisations that are now asking to use and input into this register are already pretty busy people, so we are trying to make the system easy to use, and for us, to give as simple and clear guidance as we can. Obviously, one of the challenges we have in the residential care sector is the workforce, in terms of it how hard it is to get and retain people permanently in this sector.

We are very mindful that some agencies are using a lot of temporary contract staff—labour hire—and that creates a unique challenge. So we are very mindful of that. There are provisions within how the register can be used that give some leeway for organisations. For example, if they have to get staff on because there's an emergency and they need to accommodate a young person somewhere else for a period of time. From our perspective, the point and the intent is to prevent the issue of a person who shouldn't be working in residential

care moving from one provider to the other, when there are concerns about their conduct. That is the point; it is not to make a provider's life miserable. There will be implementation bumps. With the issues that have come to me, we have spoken to people and tried to remedy and support as much as we can. That will continue to be how we try to work with the sector and its implementation in the coming months.

The CHAIR: For those members who have been on it for some time—and I won't name them—this Committee has heard before of very poor sharing of information. I think that register would definitely benefit from the sharing of information.

JANET SCHORER: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Do you anticipate any problems with that, or do you have any strategies to ensure that the information on the register does in fact get shared?

JANET SCHORER: The legal requirement now is that agencies that are using it have to ask. It is not an option anymore. If you're employing someone, you have to check the register. That's your legal requirement. Our role is to make sure that agencies are doing that, in terms of their accreditation. If it emerges that someone is employing someone who they haven't sourced information from the register about to make sure that there isn't something that has been flagged, then there are obviously other mechanisms to say, "You haven't done the right thing", which is currently what we do with the carers register; it's the same sort of model. It's never where we go first, coming down hard on an agency, but they have a legal obligation. I think all the obligations that provide residential care want to be employing the right kind of people to work with the most vulnerable of our children and young people. I think once you get over the initial "I've got to do something extra", it will just become part of habit and how an organisation works.

Ms JODIE HARRISON: I have a follow-up question on that angle. Ms Schorer, one of the things you said was that it is hard to get and retain staff in the residential care workers sector. I know that this might not be your remit, but do you have any observations on how that might be improved?

JANET SCHORER: Yes, it's a great question. It's certainly not in my remit to influence it, but we see the impacts of it. I know—and you're probably aware as well—that the Association of Child Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is doing a fair bit of work with the sector to try to build a workforce strategy and a pipeline for people working in this sector. Certainly, as the regulator, our observation would be that it is a very transitory sector—either people moving between organisations or not wanting to commit to long-term employment. The impact that has on organisations—some organisations have told us that they have to have ongoing recruitment because they need to replace 12 to 15 staff a month. That obviously has a flow-on impact on the quality of what you can provide, if you're always inducting someone new. I think it's a very challenging time for workforces in general, particularly this one.

Working in residential care with really traumatised young people is hard work. How do you make it attractive as a career? The ACWA is doing work thinking about learning and professional development around staff, and to see a career path through multiple agencies. I know some of the bigger organisations are thinking about, how you value continuing to stay in the residential part of an organisation rather than—as people want to do—progressing up the line, how there is a lot of value staying on the front line, and the experience, support, and expertise that you put around people who are doing that work. I think there is a lot to think about. But certainly, from our perspective as the regulator, we would absolutely support anything that is done by the sector and the department to value and invest in that workforce.

The CHAIR: Are there any last members from Committee members? Is there anything further that any of the witnesses would like to add?

JANET SCHORER: Nothing from me, no. Thanks for the opportunity, though.

The CHAIR: I thank Ms Schorer, Ms Niles and Mr Gholab for appearing before the Committee. The Committee may wish to send you some additional questions in writing, the replies to which will form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

JANET SCHORER: Absolutely, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for attending. Your feedback and answers to questions have been very helpful. That concludes the public hearing for today. I place on the record my thanks to all the witnesses who appeared today. I would also like to thank Committee members, Committee staff and Hansard for their assistance in the conduct of today's hearing.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 13:15.