

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**REVIEW OF THE 2015 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ADVOCATE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

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**At Sydney on Wednesday 18 November 2015**

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**The Committee met at 1.40 p.m.**

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**PRESENT**

Ms M. R. Gibbons (Chair)

**Legislative Council**

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly  
The Hon. B. Taylor

**Legislative Assembly**

Mr M. J. Johnsen  
Ms J. E. Harrison

**ANDREW JOHNSON**, Children's Advocate, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I note that Mr Macfie is here in an observer role. Mr Johnson, do you wish to make an opening statement?

**Mr JOHNSON:** We appreciate the members of the Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting with the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People again before the end of the year. I also thank the many individuals and organisations that have assisted us, particularly with the development of the plan, all the children and young people who have taken part, the organisations that have assisted us in reaching so many children across the State, non-government organisations, civil society organisations and government agencies that have been so enthusiastic and considered at the regional consultations, members of the interdepartmental advisory group, department heads and Minister Ajaka for their ongoing support and engagement.

Part of our practice across government is to hear the voices of children and young people across the State. We have held consultations in the Illawarra, the Hunter-New England area, on the mid-coast and the North Coast, and recently in Broken Hill and the Far West. We have a short collation of what people wanted to say to the Committee and also to the Government.

[*On-screen presentation*]

We have been very lucky. Until this point we have had feedback on the strategic plan from more than 4,000 young people across the State. In advance of the regional consultations, we meet with a primary school, a secondary school and a youth group. We film what they want to say and that is played at the beginning of the regional consultations for both government agencies and non-government organisations and civil society groups for a response.

We have been continuing to update our participation resources, both for government and outside government, and presenting information in a new way. Some members are aware that we have turned the picture into information graphics. There will be a series of about 30 of them. We recently ran a participation showcase. Essential to our role is to ensure that we are gathering together all the good practice across the State. We had a group of 60 people come into the office and we produced film content featuring examples from youth parliaments. Coonamble High School is doing great engagement with its students. UnitingCare is also working with children. The young children members we saw on the presentation were from that example. "Touched by Olivia" involved engaging young children in designing parks at local council level. We will continue to film and update those resources to show that New South Wales is, as it always has been historically, ahead of the rest of the country on children's participation and young people's engagement. This is an example that demonstrates that it is not only government that is doing it but also non-government organisations, which are doing innovative practice.

Members may have seen that we recently launched a report. It was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday. We provided some of the statistics last time. It was clear to us from speaking to all 4,000 young people—and I personally was able listen to about 2,000—that this was a different generation. Certainly, they were not consistent with the stereotypes that I think many people had about them. We are talking about it being "generation compassion". You saw the topics that they see or the qualities that they believe represent a good society for children and young people: respect, equality, safety, and supportive environments. But we wanted to dig a little deeper. The research showed that most people named their parents and guardians as their heroes. Only 10 per cent named celebrities or TV personalities, which is a bit of a change. The important thing, and certainly the Committee has been at the forefront of this, is volunteering, particularly for children and young people. Three out of five young people said that they did volunteering or community work. When asked why, they said they wanted to pay it forward or to act morally within their community. When asked what their hopes and desires were for their own generation, they said they were to make the world a better place and to get a good education.

We have talked before about how we are getting feedback in many different ways and trialling different methods across government. We are showing the Committee a map of where we are seeking feedback. Members can see that it is all across the State. We presented the figures at our last meeting, so I will not go through them in detail. These are the actual numbers. What is working well is education, access to sports, social activities and transport. What is not working well is education, transport, drugs and alcohol abuse. What are their top three

priorities? To be consistent: education, transport and unemployment. We have already spoken about the qualities of a good society.

Last time we met we discussed what kids who are doing it tough are saying to us. We have gone out and spoken to young people cycling in and out of homelessness, and we have spoken to many young people in residential care. We have been able to seek feedback from more than 400 young Aboriginal people across the State. Children who are doing it tough are looking—in bureaucratic-speak—for individualised service delivery, which they say is breaking the rules. What they are looking for is supportive environments. They raised the issue of telling their story multiple times. Mental health is also coming up quite strongly in that group.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** When they talk about telling their story multiple times, does that mean talking to multiple agencies when they are seeking help?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Yes, it is multiple agencies, but it is also multiple services. If you are experiencing homelessness and you are bumping around to different services—

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** The Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues has just done an inquiry on that issue and that was a resounding theme. I am pleased to see it come up here as well. Hopefully we will be able to fix it.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Emergency housing was another big issue. Members saw in the presentation how many young people are raising homelessness as an issue. We are here to seek the Committee's feedback about what members would like see in the plan and what should be the next steps. We have now had a lot of young people engage in the process and that has been fed back at the regional consultations. In the regional consultations and forums we have met with more than 400 people across the State. We have set up the interdepartmental advisory group and it has had its first meeting. We have been very pleased with the engagement across different government departments. Whether it is agencies and non-government organisations getting together at the regional level or here in Sydney with the advisory group, a lot of people are looking at how we can work better across government to improve the lives of children and young people.

The feedback from the consultations has been very positive and voluminous. I have put that information in the papers we have provided. There is a lot of enthusiasm for extending support for children in out-of-home care beyond the age of 18 and greater support for parents with young children. Transitions are an issue that comes up in consultations across the age groups. They include from newborn, from preschool to primary school, from primary school to secondary school, and from secondary school to work, university or further study. The idea that keeps coming up is the need to enable young people to connect better to the community around them, whether through services or activities. Young people consistently bring up with us that they want more activities to engage in after school hours. That is certainly the case in regional New South Wales. For example, in the Far West, young people talked about whether there could be an activities centre or whether the pool could open in winter so that there would be things for young people to do.

The other big thing we learned from the consultations was the importance of embedding participation across government, engaging children and young people. That engagement needs to be embedded in government contracts to ensure that young people have a say in the services that are provided for them. Employment was also an issue. A lot of young people want information about the jobs of the future. Young people talk about this when they are choosing subjects at school. Children as young as 10, 11 and 12 are saying, "What will be the jobs in my region? What do I need to think about studying for?" It is also important to think innovatively about how we can embed in existing government projects the need to prioritise employment opportunities for young people. We know that is happening in different pilots now.

We seek the Committee's feedback on the structure of the plan. Children and young people have resoundingly expressed the themes they want to look at. We thought that might be the best starting point for the themes of the plan. This was suggested at all the regional consultations and by the advisory group. The themes for plans involving young people are as follows: that they are respected, treated fairly, safe, supported, heard, connected and included. Currently we are working with the interdepartmental advisory group on indicators so that we will have a framework.

I turn to the issues for the future. We want to work with existing structures and ongoing plans within the clusters. We have been talking to different government departments, at the central level in Sydney and in the regions, about what is going on, what is working and what we need to consider. It is very clear from the regional

consultations that this needs to work at the regional level. It must be meaningful and add value to the good work that is going on in the regions already. One of the suggestions is to use the regional leadership group under the Department of Premier and Cabinet as the focal point for monitoring the plan.

Obviously, the plan has to capture what the Government is doing already. One of the good things about bringing different government departments together is that everyone is more aware of what is going on. Whether in agencies or in non-government organisations, it is important that more people are aware of what is available. For the plan, it is important to highlight a few new cross-governmental initiatives to make a difference. We need to consider how young people will be included in the monitoring of the plan. We are here today to find out what the members of the Committee would like to see in the plan or see the plan address, given the expertise of Committee members. We also want to find out what the Committee perceives as its role in monitoring the plan in the future.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** How far south did you go with your consultations?

**Mr JOHNSON:** We are consulting with the middle of the State and down south. We have received feedback from Albury. In the next round we will go out to consult with people in Tamworth and Wagga Wagga. We have consulted in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** Did you get the Snowy Mountains area?

**Mr JOHNSON:** We have not yet.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** Are you planning to cover the region? Sorry; I am a bit parochial.

**Mr JOHNSON:** We will get there.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** There are no dots there on the map, and I want to see dots.

**Mr JOHNSON:** That is great. We ask the Committee for input on that. If members know of things that are going on in particular areas that we can piggyback on, or can suggest people we can talk to, let us know. We wanted to ensure that we covered the five regions as set out with the Department of Premier and Cabinet. This consultation process is ongoing. Certainly, the consultation with children does not end.

**CHAIR:** What is the time frame for the plan? How long before it is finalised?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Our hope is that it will be quite efficient and quick for a governmental process. We are hoping to have a draft early next year, and we will work through the different processes that need to be undertaken. Given that it is a whole-of-government plan, it involves working with the many different departments and agencies across the State. The engagement so far has been really pleasing. It is our hope and our aim that before the end of the financial year there will be a plan.

**CHAIR:** Excellent.

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN:** I have a question on the interdepartmental advisory group. I notice that you said in your document that you have met with senior executives of the public service to discuss their priorities and so forth. The interdepartmental advisory group had its first meeting in October. I am going to be blunt: Has the attitude been practical or simply platitudes?

**Mr JOHNSON:** As I said before, it has been very practical. We have met within each department individually to understand better what the Government is doing. We wrote to all the secretaries asking them to nominate someone to sit on the advisory group, and people were very quick in their response. We are now seeking feedback from the departments about what their big initiatives are and the indicators that each government department or cluster is using. Thus far, the engagement has been very encouraging.

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN:** Do you foresee any barriers to the success of the advisory group at this point in time?

**Mr JOHNSON:** I do not really foresee any barriers. We have asked each cluster to engage, and they have. They have attended the first meeting and they are now feeding back to us what was requested to move the

plan forward. I have a great example of how that is moving at the regional level. We undertook consultation in Coffs Harbour, or the northern region. The regional leadership group met six weeks later and we were asked to present to the entire regional leadership group in Coffs Harbour. We have been very encouraged by the engagement of different departments and clusters, particularly at the regional level.

**CHAIR:** It has been a while since the change from commission to advocate. Are there still changes, noticeable differences or teething problems that the Committee should be aware of, or has the organisation settled in now?

**Mr JOHNSON:** I think we are moving through it. One of the things about the new mandate or new position is that it was new. The good news is that the plan has been a very important project for us to work on. We are looking across government, across agencies, at how children and young people are affected. The good news is that the demand is high; the bad news is that the demand is high. We are working through the teething problems now, thanks to Family and Community Services. Now that we have come through the early period, the ever-increasing demand may place some strain on resources. We are getting up to speed now and we will be in a better position to talk about that in the New Year.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you both for coming along this afternoon. Mr Johnson, on page 9 of the annual report, the number of full-time equivalents as at 30 June is 9.2, against a staff establishment of 16 positions. Do you think the 16 positions will be warranted to support the needs that the office of the advocate will generate? If the answer to that is yes, is there a timetable that will lead to the filling of those gaps and the achievement of 16 presumably full-time equivalent staff?

**Mr JOHNSON:** In relation to the first question about whether there will be enough work to do: Yes. The great thing is many different parts of Government are coming to us, seeking advice or asking us to assist them in different processes, whether that is the Board of Studies, Sport and Recreation or non-government organisations [NGOs]—working together about engaging with children. So I think there is a big demand there. We see that as engagement from the Government in the process of the plan as well. In relation to a timetable of filling the positions, I recently got my full human resources [HR] delegations to move forward in this process. We are moving through that now. We are hoping to have all the full-time equivalent positions filled within the next month or so.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** What is your budget for the 2015-16 financial year?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Currently it is \$2.77 million.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** And is there a forward estimate projection beyond that for funding or is your budget just going from a 12-month period to a 12-month period?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Yes, we are going from a 12-month period to a 12-month period. Also about understanding the resources that we need, as I spoke about earlier, this is a new office with a new mandate. Some of the things that have changed, obviously, are that zero to 18 is now zero to 24, there is the engagement of different government departments in relation to the plan, there are the regional consultations—there is an increased engagement with children and young people across the State. We are still working through those things. I do not think anyone knew at the beginning of this process how it would necessarily work out, but I think we are in a stronger position now to understand what is needed.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Since you have taken on the role, how many times have you met with Minister Ajaka?

**Mr JOHNSON:** We meet with Minister Ajaka on a regular basis, so it is worked out at least once a month. We are also present together at many events about children and young people so there will be informal meetings, but there is a regular meeting scheduled at least once a month between us and Minister Ajaka.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** And do you meet at least as regularly or more regularly with staff of his office to discuss matters?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Yes. If issues are raised then we raise them directly with his office.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** For argument's sake, what sorts of issues would you be raising with those staff?

**Mr JOHNSON:** One of the issues I should have mentioned earlier is we have gone through the process and the recruitment of the Youth Advisory Council—that was one of the big things to work through. The good news is we got the largest number ever to apply for the Youth Advisory Council. We wanted to ensure that the Minister was more engaged in the recruitment process and how we would be selecting those. That is not something I would necessarily be trying to bother the Minister with but we will work through those issues—such as what our criteria are—with the staff and certainly get the direction from the Minister. As you know, the Youth Advisory Council is set up under the Act to advise both Minister Ajaka, as the relevant Minister, and me. We have narrowed that down to 60 young people and we are going to do the recruitment process on 4 December at the mint.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I have one final question. At the back of the annual report on page 18 was a list of the members of the expert advisory committee on participation. Could you inform the Committee of any fees, payments or reimbursements that those individuals receive for those roles?

**Mr JOHNSON:** For those roles there were no reimbursements or payments.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Are they honorary positions? Do they receive reimbursement for travel expenses, for example?

**Mr JOHNSON:** We actually utilised Skype for that meeting, so instead of bringing people into the room together we brought two of the members of that committee in via Skype.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** So all of these roles—Ms Calvert, Ms Giles, Professor Graham, Ms Michael, Dr Moore, Mr Nicholas, Ms Searle and Ms Monroe-Miller—they are all filling those positions on an honorary basis and receive no payments at all?

**Mr JOHNSON:** That is correct.

**Ms JODIE HARRISON:** Mr Johnson, I have spoken to some of the children that have been part of the consultations and they have been really quite keen and enthralled to be part of the process. My question is particularly in relation to the regional leadership groups. Which regional leadership groups have you met with and spoken to? What challenges and difficulties do you see in keeping those regional leadership groups driving the plan or process?

**Mr JOHNSON:** During the regional consultations we sought assistance and got great assistance from the Department of Premier and Cabinet and from the Department of Family and Community Services to bring organisations together. So in some ways we were drawing upon those structures in place just to run the consultations. The consultations were co-designed—that is the way to explain it—which is both government and non-government agencies in the room talking about ideas together. We are just about to do another meeting in south-western Sydney. Official meetings we have had with regional leadership groups include, as I said, the North Coast. In terms of also meeting with the leadership groups in Sydney, we have met with the south-western and northern—and, once again, both very open to invitations for us to talk about what we have been up to. But every meeting we have gone to we have nearly always asked, "How do we move this forward? Let's have the next meeting."

So in terms of the issues, I think it is very important when you are looking at children and young people that you take the whole-of-government approach, because you hear from young people themselves. They are thinking about roads and transport and jobs. So I think it is important that when we are looking at both the plan and at monitoring or when we are looking at making New South Wales a better State for children and young people that we continue to have that whole-of-government approach, given that so many parts of what Government does affect children and young people.

**CHAIR:** I am keeping an eye on the time as I want to make sure everyone gets a final question in.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** Mr Johnson, I sit on quite a few committees within the Parliament. I am really keen that when we look at inquiries we are going to get some good recommendations that will lead to good results and good outcomes. From my point of view, being new on this Committee, I would like to hear

from you. You have the plan, which we have seen, and there is obviously some really wonderful work going on. Are there any consistent themes that you are hearing about during consultation? What sorts of projects do you think would be good for us as a Committee in this Parliament and in this term to achieve to look towards some outcomes?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Part of what we have been trying to do with the strategic plan is provide some of the issues that are being raised consistently with children and young people. Obviously certainly in the regional consultations Aboriginal disadvantage comes across and is spoken about a lot. The process that we use in the regional consultations is the adults in the room vote on which of the issues they want to talk about or focus on, and Aboriginal disadvantage either comes up often as its own topic that needs discussion and attention or as part of another topic that needs attention. The other issue that often comes up is transitions, as we spoke about before. But specifically, if you are looking at the older cohort that is part of our mandate, we are ensuring that they have got all the information that they need and that they are prepared for the changes in the workplace that have happened over time. Children and young people are really seeking guidance and information.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** You talked about subject choosing. Is that something that we could come up with recommendations on to allow people to make, say, better subject choices that are actually going to see them into the future? I am trying to tease it out of you.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Young people are saying that they want access to information, so one of the things we briefly talked about before was having a digital platform or a digital space where young people could get a whole lot of information. How do you connect into your local activities? How do you connect into the services? How do you connect into the jobs of the future? So young people are saying to us that they are up for engagement, and they are not coming from an entitled space, but we need to get better collectively at giving them information in a way that is digestible, and digestible given that the commercial world does very well about giving young people their information in two clicks. I think we need to get better about ensuring that when young people are trying to connect—whether that is to the labour force, to education, to activities—that we are providing that information in a way that they are going to absorb and use.

**CHAIR:** Noting that it is six minutes to question time and the Advocate would like a photo as well, we can have one final question.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** In the annual report on page 9, just under "Our structure and staff", it says, "The Advocate is an independent statutory officer supported by a small team of staff within the Department of Education and Communities." This is during the reporting period, so that is 30 June. In the actual summary document, which is headed "Update", in the second paragraph beneath "Office establishment", it talks about "support work to transfer corporate services from the Department of Education and now to commence with the Department of Family and Community Services".

Just so I understand, the support work was, in the first instance, coming out of the Department of Education and Communities, is that right? And that is now being moved across, that is the support work, to the Department of Family and Community Services?

**Mr JOHNSON:** It is a bit more complicated.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I am just trying to understand it.

**Mr JOHNSON:** From my understanding, in setting up the mandate and the office there was the separation of some of the mandates between the Office of the Guardian and the new Advocate—it was that process. We were then put into the cluster of education, the Department of Education and Communities. At that time there were then machinery government changes which then placed us in another cluster. So in some senses we have been moving through different areas. We are kind of getting to the end of that now, which is great.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** So you are domiciled where? Where are you currently sitting?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Physically sitting? FACS. Right now the cluster that we are getting our support from is Family and Community Services.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you.

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN:** I will just bring to your attention a quick typo, and I fully understand why there is a typo. My name is spelt "Johnsen" not "Johnson".

**Mr JOHNSON:** I very much apologise.

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN:** That is fine; I have been explaining that all of my life.

**The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR:** Thank you, Mr Johnson, for all of that, it has been great.

**Mr JOHNSON:** We are really keen to hear ongoing engagement: Are there some things missing from the plan; are you satisfied with the key areas that we are talking about and looking at?

**CHAIR:** We thank you for your time in coming in. I suggest to the Committee members that we take up your offer to continue to think about how we can work well with each other and provide information to each other.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 2.12 p.m.)**