



# ***LEGAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE***

## **Members present:**

Mr PS Russo MP (Chair)  
Mr JP Lister MP  
Mr SSJ Andrew MP  
Mr JJ McDonald MP  
Mrs MF McMahon MP  
Ms CP McMillan MP

## **Staff present:**

Ms R Easten (Committee Secretary)  
Ms K Longworth (Assistant Committee Secretary)  
Ms M Westcott (Assistant Committee Secretary)

## **PUBLIC HEARING—OVERSIGHT OF THE QUEENSLAND FAMILY AND CHILD COMMISSION**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**MONDAY, 11 JUNE 2018**

**Brisbane**

## MONDAY, 11 JUNE 2018

---

### **The committee met at 10.48 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public meeting. I am Peter Russo, the member for Toohey and chair of the committee. With me here today are James Lister, the member for Southern Downs and deputy chair; Stephen Andrew, the member for Mirani, appearing via teleconference; Jim McDonald, the member for Lockyer; Melissa McMahan, the member for Macalister; and Corrine McMillan, the member for Mansfield.

Under section 88 of the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001 and schedule 6 of the standing orders, the committee has oversight responsibility for entities including the Queensland Family and Child Commission, the QFCC. The standing orders outline the committee's oversight functions, which include monitoring and reviewing the performance by the QFCC of its functions; reporting to the Legislative Assembly on any matter concerning the QFCC that the committee considers should be drawn to the attention of the Legislative Assembly; examining the QFCC's annual reports; and reporting to the Legislative Assembly any changes to the functions, structures and procedures of the QFCC that the committee considers desirable for the more effective operation of the QFCC or the Family and Child Commission Act.

The public meeting today is part of the committee's oversight of the QFCC. We will hear evidence from the Principal Commissioner of the QFCC. Prior to the meeting, the committee asked the QFCC to respond to a number of questions. I take this opportunity to thank the QFCC for their assistance to the committee in providing their responses. It will soon be uploaded to the committee's web page.

Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings today. I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. These proceedings are similar to parliament and are subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders they may be excluded from this meeting at my discretion or by order of the committee. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and will be subject to my direction at all times. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from committee staff if required. All those present today should note that it is possible that you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings. I ask everyone present to turn their mobile phones off or to silent mode.

### **BROOKS, Mr Phillip, Commissioner, Queensland Family and Child Commission**

### **VARDON, Ms Cheryl, Principal Commissioner, Queensland Family and Child Commission**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

**Ms Vardon:** Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and members and to make an opening statement today. As you can see, I have with me today Commissioner Phillip Brooks, who was not part of the QFCC at the previous hearings. Between us, we should have a whole voice and not just a husky voice.

I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past, present and future, and particularly the young ones emerging, as we see in our many communities around Queensland. One point I would like to set out at the beginning is that the Queensland Family and Child Commission promotes the safety, wellbeing and best interests of all children and young people in Queensland. That is quite significant. Of course, we focus on vulnerable children as a priority and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but our remit is for all children. There are something like over one million children and young people in Queensland aged between zero and 18 years, which is a figure that we hold in our heads on a daily basis. That is our privilege and our responsibility. We do this by identifying and advocating for improvements to the child and family support system. We are quite unique in that. Over recent years, since the machinery-of-government changes in 2014, we have been building a contemporary, sustainable children's commission for Queensland—one that does its very best.

The other unique part about our remit is that we do not deal with concerns about individual children. We focus on systems—how they interact and how children can be harmed if systems fail them. We are quite unique in our evidence based approach and customer focused model. We follow through on collaboration with our stakeholders—children, families, the child and family non-government sector and government departments—and we recommend solutions for some of the most sensitive, critical and complex issues, which no single department could do alone. We do that through the good relationships that we have established right across government. Because of the work of the QFCC over recent years, I think we have had a significant impact on the safety and wellbeing of children in Queensland.

The key areas of focus are improving outcomes for all Queensland children; systemic oversight and evaluation; economic growth through building a strong and sustainable non-government sector and through keeping children safe and well—we know that if children are on a trajectory that takes them through some difficult circumstances for most of their lives it is a great cost to the economy, let alone to themselves and their families; we promote education about parental responsibilities and the responsibilities of the community as a whole to watch out for kids and not to be a bystander, because that is when children can experience harm; and gathering and translating research to inform policy.

I have a quick overview of our oversight and evaluation work. We have delivered five or perhaps six systemic reviews at the Palaszczuk government's request, at the direct request of the Premier and the head of the Premier's department. Over the past two years—that is, 2016 and 2017—we have made 184 recommendations through those reviews and reports, setting a long-term significant reform agenda for the Queensland government to be integrated into and following on from the recommendations of the Queensland commission of inquiry.

All those reviews had a common finding: that information sharing across government and non-government agencies needs improving—share information: you are not going to get into trouble because of it and it helps children—and that operational processes and safeguards for children need to be strengthened. We need to get the policies right. Once the policies are right, all else generally flows. Reforms are a long game, but that does not mean that the QFCC stands by and watches while reforms happen; we intervene and say that these are the priorities and these are the things that need to happen first, so get on with those, please. That is what we say. There needs to be constant oversight and accountability. With that oversight role, sector agencies are then given encouragement to make changes. Over time, the government has accepted all of the recommendations of the various reports and reviews that we have put before it.

I want to share with the committee a practical example of how this is working. I was very encouraged to see this, because sometimes technology solutions take a while to get up and running, as you would know. The second recommendation in our report *When a child is missing*, about the sad death of Tiahleigh Palmer, was about an information-sharing initiative. The 'Our Child' model, as it is called, was developed as an information-sharing portal designed to quickly and easily provide information and details about children in out-of-home care who have been reported missing. Information in this new database—and it sounds prosaic, but actually it is a big breakthrough—has been shared between Child Safety, Education and the Queensland Police Service since March this year. That simply did not happen previously without manual counts and without painstaking work. The effort and understanding of responsibility was there, but the solution was not there easily. I will not quote numbers as it is in the pilot stage, but from our perspective a very large number of children have been able to have information found about them to intervene quickly and to keep them safe. Keep them safer earlier; find them faster, basically. That information sharing will increase to include the Office of the Public Guardian, Queensland Health and Youth Justice early next year. We are also leading an early evaluation of the child protection reforms following Carmody's 2013 commission of inquiry, its oversight and evaluation.

Community education is a significant part of our work, and we are happy to talk about any of these initiatives in more detail. A key one and topical at the moment—although in Queensland it is topical all of the time—is how to keep kids safe around water. We have changed fencing laws around pools. We have done many things. Schools do many things and so do governments. However, we have found our own local hero and conducted our own campaign. Since his recent success I suspect that Mitch Larkin now has an agent and probably costs more money, but he did the work for us pro bono. We ran a significant campaign, which we have shared with lifesaving and swimming teachers across the state, called Seconds Count. It takes 15 seconds for a toddler or a baby to drown. We can talk about that in terms of our Child Death Register. We have reached many thousands of families and individuals about that.

Last week we launched the next phase of our Talking Families campaign, helping parents and carers to seek early support before the pressure of parenting becomes too much. I was much taken that the ABC's New South Wales *Drive* program wanted to talk to me about that. We managed to get the Queensland initiative on that program as he did not cut it out, and also the website address. I thought that was a bit of a tick for us. We took on the mummy bloggers as not being a helpful source of advice. I am sorry: they are not meant to be called 'mummy bloggers'; they are called parenting web sites. They are helpful to an extent.

We have the oneplace Community Services Directory and, finishing off quickly on this, we have what we are calling the 'Travelling the reform roadmap' which, if you look at our website, shows where we are up to on this big reform journey with all its bumps, hills and trees falling across the road and how far we have got. Our website is very engaging with that. We are interviewing people to provide their insights into that. Out of the Dark is significant. It is about our work collaborating with industry to influence policy around online grooming, sexting, sextortion and child exploitation material. We work closely with Task Force Argos on that. That came out of the Byrne report into organised crime in Queensland of a few years ago.

In terms of research and child death prevention, we are happy to talk about our death register. As a result of that, we have held many research functions, some research in the round and some round tables in regional areas where we focus on particular issues where children have been harmed or died or may be harmed. Recently we held one in Sippy Downs on homelessness. We held a big research in the round in Brisbane on suicide prevention. That is very significant, as we look at the figures. That research has been made widely known.

Last week we did something that was very significant. I do not know the actual figures, but we had about 200 people attend in Townsville a research program on issues confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We had a big group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research presenters.

I will talk about future priorities and then finish. One of the big efforts that we are working on at the moment is called Growing up in Queensland. What is it like being a kid these days, growing up in Queensland? We will end up talking to something like 4,000 Queensland children aged between four and 18 about their views on a whole range of lines of inquiry that we are asking them to think about. Children's commissions across the country hear directly from children and young people. Growing up in Queensland will provide a significant base of information. Eventually, it will be placed in the State Library's archive called the Memory of Queensland, which is lovely place for it. In X years time, we will be able to go back and say what it was like then. We are also partnering with the Commonwealth to do a technical paper.

We are focusing on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. There are a couple of great initiatives there. Under Phillip's leadership, the QFCC will deliver many initiatives right across the whole gamut of our activities. I will stop there. I would be very happy to talk further about any of these initiatives and the QFCC's other functions with the committee.

**Ms McMILLAN:** Good morning, Ms Vardon. On behalf of the government, I thank you for the great work that you do in protecting our young people. Could you elaborate on the QFCC's undertaking to support parents in positive parenting practices right across Queensland?

**Ms Vardon:** I would be very happy to do that. I mentioned Talking Families, which is a very significant program for the QFCC to deliver. Talking Families is a campaign that we have delivered face to face. We have delivered in places that you would not think of immediately—or I would not think of, anyway—such as doctors' waiting rooms and Dr TV, cinemas and all of the social media that you can imagine, to actually encourage parents to ask for help. Parenting is very difficult. It is not an easy ride at all. Grandparenting is not necessarily easy, particularly for those grandparents who have the long-term care of their children. Therefore, Talking Families is a help-seeking campaign with a focus on parents of children up to four years of age and all bystanders, as we call them. It says, 'please seek help if you need to, please seek out services and please feel confident in doing that'.

We are also able to work with services to encourage them to be in the community. I think you would be aware of places sometimes where there are many services where people simply do not turn up, because there is no connection and rapport. I am happy to say that we encourage services to go out into the community. If you bump into somebody who is a service provider in the supermarket, as you can in regional areas or any areas, I guess, that is a chance for you to start that connection. Through our early evaluation, that has shown great improvement in giving parents the confidence to seek help. I will ask our commissioner, Mr Brooks, to talk about the way in which he is planning to

extend that to focus more specifically on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through parenting responsibility and parents recognising—and some of them do not, we are sorry to say—that if you have a child that child is yours for life and caring for that child is really important.

Out of the Dark I would like to identify, too. We called it Out of the Dark because we did not think that talking about the darknet was a good way to go. It was not a good name for the program. It is a way of communicating to parents and to young people that exploitation on the internet is a very real thing. See what your kids are doing on their devices, keep an eye on them and get to know the technology yourselves. We all fall behind in that. I am quite guilty of asking a grandchild to sort out various apps and things for me. I am in awe of their capacity to intuitively work the devices. However, we have a responsibility to know what they are up to and what they are looking at. Not only have we worked with parents on that program but we have also worked with young people themselves. They are full of bravado: 'If a predator comes to facetime me or if I talk to someone who seems to be a predator, I will go out and meet them and sort them out.' We have had some very good and blunt conversations about the wisdom of not actually doing that. Seconds Count is important, too. It is about reminding parents that putting a child in a bath and going out for a cigarette or turning your back for a moment is not the way to go. Children can drown quickly.

Lastly, the oneplace directory is simply something that we did not have previously. It is a list by region, nature of service, location and all of those things. It is a list of 48,000 services for families in Queensland. It is a very easy ready reckoner to find those services. I would like to think that all of our work focuses on parents, as well as children and young people. I encourage all of our senior executives, the small number that we have, and our directors to get out and about and talk face to face with the community, which is a part of the great joy of my role. I would now like Phillip to mention something about families as first protectors.

**Mr Brooks:** Thank you, Cheryl and committee. Budabai duru. That means hello and welcome in my traditional language of Bidjara. I joined the QFCC in October last year. One of the things we looked at and Cheryl and I spoke about at length is the priority focus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. When we think about a child protection system, most people are aware of volunteers from foster carers all the way through to the tertiary end of the child protection system employed by government and with statutory functions. I think the area we have not added into that continuum is parenting responsibility and/or families as the first protectors or teachers. That is one of the areas we really want to focus on. What are the tools that parents require to execute their responsibility? It is not just around keeping children more than safe; it is also about allowing them to reach their full potential. What I mean by that is: if my child wants to become a doctor, what does Phillip Brooks have to do for that child between the ages of zero and four? What do I need to do between the ages of four and eight? Simple things would be, of course, understanding what the child's aspirations are first and making sure that they are valued and loved.

In my previous life, when I worked for child protection, I met a young mother in Townsville. I always like to meet with families to understand where we can improve or otherwise and what are some of the things that enable them to be reunified with their family. I will paraphrase the word for 'timeliness'. This young mother's child was around five years old and detached from her. She did not use those words, but I say it for the point of this. She was physically upset one day. Her child, who was five years old, was still poking fun at mum, even though mum was emotionally distraught. In her words, there was absolutely no attachment. As a result of that, she had a chance meeting that led to an understanding of and learning how to go through and have things in place for her children. It culminated at night-time when she kissed her child and said, 'I love you and I am proud of you,' and exited the room. It still gives me goosebumps today. She was so emotionally upset that she could barely talk when she was telling me this story, because she said, 'How can I not know that?' You cannot be what you cannot see.

This goes towards parental responsibility and the removal of child-rearing practices that were never replaced, as *Bring them home* stated. This is some of the baseline that our volunteers and services are facing. Where we are trying to aim at is: what is a world without volunteers and without services? Then, what simple supports are required? For example, I am sure that all of us were able to succeed because we had attachment to our parents and families, we were connected and they actually believed in us. It is very ambitious and we are really keen to learn more and, obviously, be able to share some of the things that we learn along the way.

**Mr LISTER:** Thank you very much for your appearance today. Commissioner Vardon, how is progress going on the implementation of recommendations from the remembering Tiahleigh report and the supplementary report on recommendation 28? Can you tell us about that and the composition of the group that is overseeing that? What progress has been made? Where are they at currently?

**Ms Vardon:** That was an early report of ours with 29 recommendations. I am pleased to say that 29 recommendations have been completed; all of them have been completed. I have to say that our way of working is not to simply wait until the end of a report and then say, 'Here it is and please get on with it.' If we see something that is urgent along the way where an immediate intervention would save a child's life or something could be done to help or where a systems change needs to be made immediately, then we let the participating agencies know as soon as we can. I think that is what has contributed to the changes that have come about as a result of when a child is missing: no-one delayed. The sector agencies—child safety, the education department and the police department—really worked very hard; I cannot praise them too much in terms of the effort they put into getting some of those recommendations implemented.

What sounds like a simple one but in the Queensland context is quite difficult—remember my background is in schools—is when a child does not turn up at school and is not there for what I call in an old-fashioned way 'closing the roll' for that morning at school or the afternoon roll call—and it is done in quite sophisticated ways these days—then the parents, the carers or someone is contacted. That to me is key. It has been key to me in every education system; if the kid is not there, we need to know; parents and carers and the teachers need to know. Are they playing hooky? Are they somewhere in the school where they are not quite where they need to be? What is going on? That was a significant change on which the education department stepped up and was doing things differently because of the different regional challenges here in Queensland, but it is getting on to that. There were several recommendations that the education department had to make. The very big one, which was the No. 2 recommendation, is one I have previously described to you called 'our child', the technology solution to sharing information. Agencies have now begun to share their information in a formal technological way in terms of the information that they hold about children who are missing from out-of-home care. As I said, that has allowed a much earlier and faster intervention in relation to quite a large number of children and we will continue to build on that.

One thing about when a child is missing is that although the recommendations have been ticked off, we are now coming back to the progress, about a year later, to do a more formal evaluation to make sure the intent has been reached. It is one thing to tick the box and say the recommendation is done, but it is a little bit more difficult to make sure the intent has been reached. That is what we are doing because we cannot emphasise too much the risk to children and young people who go missing from out-of-home care for extended periods of time. We think we know where they are sometimes. We think they are off at sports practice or we think they have gone to the shopping centre or gone home to look for mum and dad, but sometimes they are at extreme risk and sometimes worse things can happen to them, as we have seen. That recommendation is absolutely key and we are coming back to make sure that the intent is reached with terrific collaboration with the education department, as we get from all Public Service and non-government agencies.

In terms of the make-up of the oversight committee, we have two oversight committees. One focuses on the recommendations—the 184 recommendations from all of our reviews and reports. That committee meets quite regularly—monthly I believe—and looks at the progress on all recommendations and is starting to look at the intent. We have another oversight committee, which is an external oversight committee, which brings together for the first time all of the external oversight agencies who have some connection with looking after the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The Ombudsman is part of that. The Queensland Audit Office is part of that. The Office of the Public Guardian is part of that and it was one of our questions on notice.

Just finishing off, in terms of recommendation 28, the supplementary review, 17 recommendations were made; 15 are underway and two recommendations have been completed. I would like to remind the committee that the number of recommendations in that report are aligned with the blue card implementation.

**Mr LISTER:** Speaking about the blue card, obviously there is a great deal of focus on the underpinning checks associated with the blue card. Can you point to any particular recommendations there that you feel would have saved Tiahleigh Palmer for instance? On one hand it is easy to implement a scheme where parents are notified if a child is not at school, but where you have a child placed in an environment for care, if those carers are responsible for the abuse or the murder of a child, that is probably just as topical in the eyes of the community.

**Ms Vardon:** I am on record elsewhere as having responded to that question. The way I talk about it is: very sadly hindsight is a fine thing. We cannot tell. We just cannot tell what would have made a difference to that little girl. We would like to think that there was some, 'If they had only done that, if they had only done this, she would still be alive today,' but I have tried to resist doing that. However, in talking about the blue card review which, as you know, was handed over to the justice

department and is underway under their umbrella, then I think the blue card recommendations around seeking an extension and expansion of where criminal history is sought as far as we possibly can are important recommendations. Certainly we are working with the implementation team in Justice on blue card to identify with them some of the key recommendations that we think would need to be looked at first of all.

The other thing about the blue card review is that once it is completed I think I can safely say that there will be a million Queenslanders who will need to have a blue card for their work with children. We have focused on foster care. A lot of the emphasis has been on foster care, but there is a huge number of people who have those working with children checks. They are connected now with the work coming out of the royal commission on child safe standards, child safe organisations and reportable conduct generally, which covers a much wider scope of activity, than mandatory reporting. That is perhaps for another day.

If I may say, your question really goes back to the foster care review as well, which we did at the same time in parallel with the blue card review. The review of the foster care system allied with the blue card changes will make the biggest differences to the choice of foster carers, their assessment and their training. I am pleased to say that some changes have already happened to the assessment, training and choice of foster carers and some of the checks that they are required to take immediately. In terms of the review of the foster care system, there were 42 recommendations with five completed and the rest either commenced or not quite yet commenced. That is a big piece of work.

I think that the scope of the reviews in terms of their recommendations, which were all accepted, has really established a very practical and systems focused and information-sharing focused set of changes to the way we get quickly onto finding out what is happening to kids and keeping them safe, and we talk about keeping them more than safe. It is not just keeping them safe; it is also keeping them happy. As one little kid said to me recently, 'I think I have it sorted out. I think I know what your role is. You're here to bring joy to the lives of children, aren't you?' We have that recorded somewhere.

**Mrs McMAHON:** I was interested to know what role the QFCC plays or has played in relation to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Has that been a space that the QFCC has been involved in?

**Ms Vardon:** Yes. I am happy to answer that question in detail. If I can say at the beginning, we appeared at the hearings of the royal commission. We did provide advice to the commission in a whole range of ways. We are assisting with the implementation recommendations in Queensland. We are supporting the domestic and family violence prevention agenda through submissions to the Queensland and Commonwealth parliaments to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and advocate for everyone's rights to be protected. In terms of specifically working with the royal commission—this is the key one—we are working with lead agencies to provide advice about a model for child safe standards and reportable conduct schemes. That we see as part of our community education responsibilities. What is it like to work in a child safe organisation in Queensland where organisations might have workplace safety standards in legislation, but they do not necessarily affect all the situations that children and young people can find themselves in? We are certainly working on that and then looking at what a reportable conduct scheme might be like and explaining the difference between that and mandatory reporting, which I had to swot up on myself I have to say. It is quite complex. Unless we do the education part properly, people will start to feel a bit surrounded.

We have partnered with the Community Services Industry Alliance, an NGO, to already put in place for the NGO sector, for those who wish to use it, an excellence framework for child safe organisations. We are certainly working hard on strategies, as we have said, for online safety and accessible reporting of child exploitation or other online threats. We have partnered with Bravehearts on that work as well. A lot of our work is done through partnerships. We are certainly involved in the royal commission as far as we can be.

**Mrs McMAHON:** Moving on from a point that you have raised, the issue of cyberbullying is one that has certainly come to the fore quite recently. Can you update the committee on work that is being undertaken by the QFCC with respect to cyberbullying?

**Ms Vardon:** Yes. It is a very complex area. As you know, at the beginning of the year the Premier announced the creation of a cyberbullying task force. The Premier knew at that time that we were heading out to survey children and young people in Queensland about the things that worry them. We do have ethics approval for all of this, I would just quickly add. We expanded the numbers of questions in that survey about cyberbullying specifically and about bullying generally. That survey is still out and we have had an amazing response all over. Once we have had the work analysed and done all of those things that we need to do, it will be made available to the cyberbullying task force for Madonna King to use as part of her report. That is specific information gained from children directly.

A member of our advisory council, Dr James Scott, is a QFCC friend. He is on our advisory council and on the cyberbullying task force as well. He is a suicide expert, and he talks to us about how we can best talk to the community about suicide in a careful way. We have provided submissions and information about cyberbullying and online safety to the Education, Tourism, Innovation and Small Business Committee, to improve respectful relationships and to the standing committee on legal and constitutional affairs about the existing offences in the Commonwealth Criminal Code. We have also been working with Bravehearts, Task Force Argos and the Queensland police. We have also been leading a statewide engagement project that is designed to give children and young people a voice about a range of issues important to them, particularly in relation to cyberbullying and online safety. I have mentioned Out of the Dark. We had a big push for Safer Internet Day, and we have a youth advisory council with youth champions which provides valuable information to us on anti-bullying.

One of the things we ask children and young people when we are out and about talking to them is, 'What do you know about cyberbullying or bullying generally?' We do this work through schools. I am pleased to say that they have really good ideas about how to combat cyberbullying and are really well-informed by their schools in terms of what they can do, how they report and how they do not keep it a secret. Then when we ask, 'But is that going to make it go away?' the answer is no. We have to continue to work hard to give kids that tool kit, if you like, to protect them—that invisible shield to put around them while working with their parents, schools and other service providers.

We also ask if boys and girls cyberbully in different ways. Girls and boys do bully in different ways but we are told that is changing. That is of concern as well, because we come with the notion that boys use violence and girls use words. That is changing, particularly in some of our communities where the young people we are talking about are 17- and 18-year-olds and where boys and girls, young men and young women, are drinking more alcohol than is good for them.

That is an update. We continue to support the plethora of agencies that have amazing resources to combat cyberbullying such as the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, Task Force Argos—which I have mentioned—and the Daniel Morcombe Foundation. There are a whole range of them and we promote their work as well.

**Mr ANDREW:** Commissioner Vardon, I do have one question. Touching on the cyberbullying side of things that you just mentioned, I have been involved with a few principals and chaplains in the schools in my electorate just recently who have bought up a trending issue. When kids go to consultations for suicide there is very little follow-up whatsoever, and they are trying to deal with the aftermath of that first consultation in-house. Has the commission seen that or experienced any of that? Maybe it is more to do with rural areas; I am not sure. We are concerned about it.

**Ms Vardon:** Thank you for that question. If you have any further details which you would be able to make available to us in great confidence, we would be happy to undertake some follow-up. I think that one of the things as a community and a society we find really hard to do, because we are scared, is talk about suicide and its triggers without a contagion effect or without distressing children and their parents. The QFCC is very much guided by experts in that field, but we also know that suicide through cyberbullying is a fairly rare matter. There are a whole range of issues that can trigger suicide. I have to say that—this is purely personal after a long career working with kids—children and young people do not understand the finality of death. Their neurons are not connected fully and that is why we must be very watchful.

I am very sorry to hear that some schools feel they have been left to follow up on the aftermath, and I would think that needs immediate intervention. We would be happy to help with that. I know that schools, through their suicide prevention work through the education department, are very much in tune with sensitive and careful ways of following up and making sure that children and young people are monitored. I suppose one of the most startling things that some of our experts at the QFCC have said to us is that sometimes you cannot pick when a child is going to commit suicide. You just cannot pick it. Keeping close to your children and monitoring their behaviour and just encouraging that two-way conversation is absolutely critical, and that is what we are here to encourage.

**Mr ANDREW:** Thank you very much for that. I will come and talk to you about those incidents if that is okay.

**Ms Vardon:** That would be excellent.

**Mr McDONALD:** I have two questions. The first one is about youth suicide. In your opening remarks I was very heartened to hear that you are making those connections with people. Can you advise the committee about some of the work that you are doing specifically around youth suicide and outreach in the community?



**Ms Vardon:** I certainly could. If I could go back to our role and functions again: we do not specifically deliver services but we encourage service providers and we promote their work in the community. What we have done most recently—and once again I will ask our commissioner, Phillip Brooks, to talk about this specifically from our shared points of view and to pick up things I may have missed—is conduct a research in the round function on youth suicide in Brisbane. We were blown away because we had more people attend that than any other research in the round event we have ever had. That shows the great interest in that area. We had a marvellous array of speakers. We also had psychologists and support ready in the room. Afterwards I had the feeling that we had done something very significant. I will not quote the numbers again because I got it wrong with the Townsville function. It was 131 at the Townsville function. Of the three researchers, two of them were experts in their field, one is a psychiatrist, and the third was someone with lived experience of having been with a partner who committed suicide and the learnings from that. We had that balance of personal life experience, lived experience and the professionals who spoke about suicide.

To put it into context, the suicide of children and young people is quite a rare event. I do not want to say that the numbers in Queensland are quite small, but our experts—quoting James Scott—would say that suicide rates are remaining relatively the same, it is just that we are focusing on them more. That is good. I can say that children of a younger age are starting to think about suicide and commit suicide, which is pretty awful. What we did through that event was to get people better informed and to put it in a context that, while it was not reassuring, people felt less overwhelmed about it. That is important: let's not be overwhelmed about this. Let's get on and do something about it. It started to pick up some of the things that we can do to prevent children and young people from committing suicide, but realising that in the end we do not have a magic wand in this whole area. I wish we did. In each of our community outreach discussions, round tables, whatever we call them, the homelessness one in Sippy Downs at the university, we always touch on youth suicide and the fact that homelessness is something that interacts with that. I will hand over to Phillip to address more points.

**Mr Brooks:** In practical terms and giving you the two elements, growing up in Queensland and then going through the parental responsibilities of families/protectors, I met recently with 13-year-olds, grade 9 students, in Townsville. They advised us both in relation to youth suicide and cyberbullying that the majority of them would not tell their parents. That is very disturbing to us, of course. What are the ways that young people want their parents to respond, or what habits or behaviours should parents be showing in order for their children to advise them of these really important factors they are struggling with? What the young people have told us in relation specifically to youth suicide is that they are more likely to tell their friends. Again, how do we equip young people with those certain skills? Ultimately we want young people to be able to tell others who can help. Two things that were brought out of the research in the round more specifically—and this is Dr James Scott again—that lean towards youth suicide is it is burdensome, so people who feel like they are a burden by telling their problems, and the one that will not surprise you is connected. If young people are connected well to family, kin and community they are much more likely to reach out for help.

**Mr McDONALD:** That is a really great segue to my second question, which was people being connected to their devices but not connected to each other. There is a lot of research around limiting the amount of time that children at specific ages should or should not be using devices in terms of brain development or what have you. Could you comment in relation to any emerging trends with regard to that and what might be able to be done?

**Mr Brooks:** The big part is it is a balance. We do not want to have young people moving away from technology because of either risk. If it is around development and making sure they are connected to communities, absolutely. One of the things that we found with Out of the Dark, where we spoke about young people being exploited online or otherwise, is we do not want to just shut off the internet. Young people are telling us that they just want to have better ways. What ways can they access it safely? Most young people, in their words, are not afraid because—again, to go back to Cheryl's point—they seem to think they know what predators look like. What we are doing through Out of the Dark is to make sure they are well-educated and they are well-connected to family. The part where you do want a reduction in is when the actual conversations stop happening between family and the young person, when all their energy and time and socialising is done on a device versus inside the family home and/or out in the community with sports and other things.

**CHAIR:** Our time has expired. Thank you for your time this morning. That concludes our meeting. Thank you to the parliamentary staff and Hansard. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's parliamentary web page in due course. I declare this public meeting closed.

**The committee adjourned at 11.47 am.**