



LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr PS Russo MP—Chair
Ms SL Bolton MP
Ms JM Bush MP
Mrs LJ Gerber MP
Mr JE Hunt MP
Mr AC Powell MP

Staff present:

Ms R Easten—Committee Secretary
Ms M Telford—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—QUEENSLAND FAMILY AND CHILD COMMISSIONER

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 14 JUNE 2021

Brisbane

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The committee met at 8.44 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open the public hearing for the committee's oversight of the Queensland Family and Child Commission. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share.

My name is Peter Russo, the member for Toohey and chair of the committee. The other committee members here with me today are: Laura Gerber, the member for Currumbin and deputy chair; Sandy Bolton, the member for Noosa; Jonty Bush, the member for Cooper; Jason Hunt, the member for Caloundra; and Andrew Powell, the member for Glass House.

Under the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001 and the standing rules and orders of the Legislative Assembly, the committee has oversight responsibility for the Queensland Family and Child Commission. 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 Assembly on any matter concerning the QFCC that the committee considers should be drawn to the Legislative Assembly's attention; 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 2014.

The purpose of today's public hearing is to hear evidence from representatives of the QFCC as part of the committee's oversight. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings today. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, but 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, the public may be admitted to, or excluded from, the hearing at the discretion 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 you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings by media, and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone present to turn mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

LEWIS, Ms Natalie, 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: Good morning, Chair and committee members. I appreciate being invited to present the work of the Queensland Family and Child Commission to the committee once again. I, too, would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, particularly the children, the young ones, for whom we work. I am very pleased to be accompanied today by Commissioner Natalie Lewis, who has been with us for 12 months and whose work is key to the work of the commission, particularly around the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.

In the last 12 months we have worked through COVID-19. I am happy to say that the QFCC has continued to produce very meaningful and influential work to protect the rights of children and young people in Queensland. At the moment—and this is a key issue—we are going through our statutory review of the commission. That has been held up because of the pandemic, but we are working our way through that now with consultants and our host agency, the Department of Justice and Attorney-General. I understand that I will receive that in June and it will be tabled at some stage after that.

I would like to touch briefly on some of highlights of the year—some of our achievements. First of all, I mention our report on the Growing Up in Queensland project, which is our very important way of engaging with children and young people and hearing the voices of children in Queensland. That is part of our remit. During what was a very unusual year, I am happy to say that we engaged with 8,000 young people right across Queensland who told us a range of things about their communities, how they were feeling during the pandemic and what their big concerns were.

They are, of course, hopeful, and it is up to us to nurture that hope and to keep their optimism going. They hope for further education and employment. They have some concerns there. They particularly call for more action from leaders on mental health, education and the environment. The mental health of children and young people post COVID—I cannot really say post COVID just yet, but as that time unfolds—is something we should all have some concern about.

I am very proud of that work. It has been transferred to the State Library and recorded as part of Queensland's memory, which is a lovely thing. It is the second one we have done now. It is used for both economic and social policy in Queensland.

A key function—very key, in fact—that we took on over the year is the independent Child Death Review Board. That moved to us on 1 July. At our last review meeting I spoke about how that was beginning to impact on the agency. I now hold the position of Chair of the Child Death Review Board, in addition to being the Principal Commissioner of the QFCC.

The external Child Death Review Board puts out reviews following the death of a child known to the child protection system. It has a range of members on it who represent health, family law, social work, mental health, policing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. To this point, we have considered the deaths of 55 children and young people known to the child protection system. The death of every child is a tragedy, and we treat our work with great respect and care for those children who have given their lives, if you like, for system reforms to take place and to be carried out. Our job is not to investigate the deaths but rather look at the systems failures that have brought about those deaths and what we can do to improve that. It is sad work but important work in terms of the child death prevention work of the QFCC.

In May this year we tabled the QFCC's report titled *Counting lives, changing patterns: findings from the Queensland child death register*, which covers the 16 years or so that we have kept the child death register for the deaths of all children in Queensland. I commend that to you as an important document to read. Overall, I cannot say I am pleased to see this, but I would like the committee to note that there has been a significant reduction in child deaths in Queensland since 2004, with mortality rates decreasing by an average of three per cent each year. As we know, two things are key. Suicide continues to be one of the leading external factors of child death in Queensland. It is very important to keep up that awareness, particularly as employment and education disruption unfolds in the lives of children. As we know—and this is a tragedy—the deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Queensland continue to be over-represented.

In terms of our oversight program, I am very proud of this work because it demonstrates how we are looking closely at the child protection system, including youth justice, and bringing up ideas for systems reforms. We point out where there is good work going on and where there is room for improvement. Our work so far has been changing the sentence, measuring what matters and seeing they are safe. Commissioner Lewis will speak to our work on over-representation and the child placement principle. I am happy to answer questions in more detail on any of these issues.

In terms of youth justice, I am a member of the senior officers group for youth justice reforms which has all agencies around the table. Interestingly, housing is represented strongly this time, which is great to see. It is led by Assistant Commissioner Cheryl Scanlon. She is doing a magnificent job of evaluating and monitoring the recent reforms in youth justice. We are working closer with former commissioner Bob Atkinson on what we are calling changing the sentence part 2. Our work aligns with his, but it looks at why children and young people get into the youth justice system in the first place and what we can do better right across all agencies—Health, Education, Police, Housing—to make sure that the numbers of children and young people going into the system is reducing and that we are taking more account of their early years.

The last point I want to make is that the engagement of the QFCC with children and young people is key. We have a wonderful youth advisory council, which is greatly sought after in terms of positions. They work with us in launching our events. They work with us on shaping some of our policies. They certainly have worked with us in being a voice and face in the media.

We have a range of programs for engagement and we do this through partners. We have collaborative working relationships with a range of partners. Talking Families—our parent engagement initiative—continues to flourish. We have over 175 schools working with us on that. That is taking away the stigma of help seeking.

We have Out of the Dark, which is key. Out of the Dark is a partnership with the police and a range of other agencies to actually alert parents, teachers and carers to the predatory behaviour online that some people face and experience. The police and the Australian Centre to Counter Exploitation alerted us to the fact that, during various lockdowns in Queensland and time away from school, predatory behaviour from adults on children online had increased exponentially. That is not something that is happening to children overseas or children elsewhere; it is happening to our children and young people in Queensland.

We are relaunching our campaign called Out of the Dark, which is designed to teach parents, carers and teachers the real-life conversations that predators have with young people and to alert them to the nature of grooming and how insidious it is. That video is worth looking at. It is a bit scary. We had to go through a process to make sure it could be released. It is the actual conversation that predators have with children online.

We are also engaging with the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, which is taking on significant work to reform Queensland's response to domestic and family violence. We see children and young people as being collateral in domestic violence and sometimes we lose sight of them and what is happening to them, particularly as the instances of domestic violence seem to be on the increase still.

We have a lot of work to do. We have good budget support, but there are always challenges with our budget, which I am happy to address. Overall, the important thing for us is that we have excellent relations with non-government organisations and with government agencies and the government generally which helps us to do our work and to call people to account in a way that means that change will happen. There is not an adversarial way of approaching these systems issues. I would like to finish there and hand over to Commissioner Lewis to fill in some of the gaps I may have left.

Ms Lewis: Good morning, Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. I acknowledge the traditional owners of this place, the Jagera and Turrbal people, and pay my respects to elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people across Queensland whose present and future is impacted by the decisions that we all make.

Since commencing in the role of commissioner, I have been particularly focused on supporting the agency to achieve clarity of purpose and optimal impact based on a collective commitment to the rights, safety and wellbeing of children in Queensland. Our new strategic plan is future focused. It articulates a rights based approach to raising awareness of issues that impact upon the lives of children, engaging in strategic, targeted advocacy and promoting system-wide accountability for the rights, safety and wellbeing of our most vulnerable children. Awareness, advocacy and accountability are our core business.

A key priority has been consolidating and extending the critical oversight role of the QFCC. Identifying systemic issues and advocating for improvements, then being able to monitor the impact of those changes, is key to an effective contemporary children's commission. One of the most critical issues that warrants urgent attention and action is the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the statutory child protection system. We are not alone on this issue. It is a pervasive feature of all child protection systems across the country. The issue is identified as a target under the Closing the Gap agreement, a priority reform under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and the focus of Queensland's Our Way strategy.

Queensland remains the first and only jurisdiction to commit to a generational, whole-of-government strategy to eliminate the over-representation of First Nations children in out-of-home care. There have been significant reforms and investment, but until now there has been no clear mechanism of accountability or capacity to examine the impact of those reforms at a local level. The principal focus program of work seeks to deconstruct that formula of over-representation, accepting that to comprehensively address the issue means that we not only have to reduce the rates of entry but also have to be mindful of the duration of time in care and also move towards increasing safe reunification as a form of exit from the care system.

Through the powers to acquire data under section 35 of our legislation, the QFCC has been provided data relating to the entry, duration and exit of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children involved in the system, not only at a statewide level but also regionally and down to a local level.

Examining that disaggregated data and evaluating the standard of implementation of all five elements of the child placement principle will provide us with a clear indication of what is working well and what needs urgent improvement.

We have the capacity to also consider the investment profile in each location to determine the impact of government investment on reducing the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care. We will also seek to clarify the improvements that are required to redress the drivers of over-representation that exist in other areas of social policy beyond that locus of control of the child protection system. This includes the experience of poverty, housing instability and homelessness, mental health and substance misuse. I am confident that this work will deliver a comprehensive analysis of the issue and promote clear accountability with regard to addressing this critical systemic problem.

The findings and ongoing monitoring will assist the state in meeting its performance reporting obligations under Closing the Gap and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children but also, importantly, provide clear advice to government as to what additional efforts and potential reforms are required to achieve the intended outcome of the Our Way strategy.

As you are aware, the QFCC has previously undertaken significant systemic reviews in response to tragic events involving the deaths of children. As the principal commissioner has identified, the establishment of the Child Death Review Board has enabled this function to be comprehensively and independently undertaken. This is a significant achievement. While this function is performed under the auspice of the QFCC rather than by the QFCC itself, I believe that the agency is now very well positioned to take a more proactive stance to identify systemic issues as they emerge through our engagement and our oversight activities to bring awareness to these issues and to actively advocate solutions to bring about change and safeguard kids.

In closing, I acknowledge the depth of experience, expertise and the commitment of QFCC staff. Across the organisation there is an eagerness and a preparedness to deliver a high-impact strategic agenda applying a rights based approach to systemic oversight in the interests of children in Queensland. We are very much looking forward to the commencement of the legislative review and the opportunity that that presents. With a strengthened legislative framework I am confident that we can make the QFCC the gold standard of children's commissions in Australia, demonstrating the Queensland government's commitment to transparency, accountability and, most importantly, our children. Thank you very much.

Mr POWELL: Thank you, Ms Vardon and Ms Lewis, for your introduction. If I can focus on the Growing Up in Queensland report, the 2020 edition, I note that some 81 per cent of respondents come from that 13- to 18-year-old bracket. Do you have readily available the breakdown of the age groups within that 13- to 18-year-old bracket? I am interested to know whether it is predominantly 16- to 18-year-olds or there is a spread across those age groups.

Ms Vardon: Growing Up in Queensland is a piece of work that we are very proud of. The spread of ages was reasonably even across that age range you have mentioned. We tried to keep an eye on that as much as we could. The age range we surveyed, spoke to and had contact with, of course, was from four to 18. With the four-year-olds it was drawing a picture with a little story on the back and collecting their views. It is interesting to see how the views of children and young people broaden and develop as they get older. It is the older age group, beginning at 13, who are more able, of course, to comment on and take on board what they hear through the news, what they hear from their peers and what their concerns really are about their futures.

Mr POWELL: I also note—and I am interested to know if there is going to be some efforts to try to balance this up a bit more—that 64 per cent of respondents were female as opposed to 32 per cent who were male—two to one in favour of the girls, which is great—but also that 68 per cent of respondents came from within what we would call South-East Queensland. I am wondering if there are going to be some strategies for next time round to balance up the gender representation and also the regional representation.

Ms Vardon: I am happy to say that we have made great strides in balancing the gender representation. We are getting the boys to talk. We cannot take them all for a drive in the car to get inside their heads—the best way to get a boy to talk.

Mr POWELL: Can you come and work with my 13-year-old? That would be great!

Ms Vardon: We have made great strides in that. Girls do like to talk. One of the joys has been sitting down with some of the boys and listening to them. Of course, the mental health of both boys— young men—and young women is of great concern to us and we will certainly continue to chip away at encouraging the boys to talk. In the COVID time we did get a lot of help—we did this through schools, Brisbane

of course—from parents encouraging their children to respond. I think they saw it as a great thing to do as an activity. In terms of South-East Queensland, partly that is population spread, I think. We do have some good, strong strategies to contact schools and young people through regional offices, through existing networks, and those numbers are increasing as well. Of course, we were not able to pay visits as much as we had in the previous year.

Growing Up in Queensland is gathering traction with its second time around and we are being increasingly asked to brief people and agencies. The Brisbane City Council recently asked us to brief it with the Lord Mayor present. We are getting recognition that not only is this about social policy; it is increasingly about where we spend our dollars. Where is the investment on economic policy that listens to and takes into account the voices of children?

Ms BUSH: Good morning, commissioners. Members of my community speak to me about their concerns around some of the narrative around young people, in the public domain particularly, in relation to youth crime. I am interested in your interactions with young people and whether they express concerns about that stigmatisation of them as a cohort. Is that something that was coming through in the work you were doing?

Ms Lewis: I think that narrative is certainly problematic. It is what gets attention. I think one of the challenges around youth participation is that sometimes young people are characterised in the way they are represented in the media. What we found through our engagement is that young people are strong and resilient, are incredibly insightful and really are best placed to provide us with those suggestions and recommendations about what needs to happen within their communities. I think we just have to be incredibly cautious that we are not underestimating the capacity of young people to speak up and be positive and to have a really clear idea about what makes a difference in their lives. I think the more we do that and be very deliberate about engaging those young people from whom we do not often hear, that enriches our work and positions us better to provide strong advocacy.

Ms Vardon: We are certainly going to look more closely at the engagement of young people with the youth justice system and how they feel about it. At the end of this month, early next month, the commissioner and I will undertake a round table in Townsville so that community leaders in Townsville can actually hear what young people are saying about their particular region—not just the location of the town but that particular region. There are some positive messages there. Young people love their communities and want the best for their communities.

CHAIR: Does the round table in Townsville have a set date?

Ms Vardon: It does not have a set date yet. We are collecting names for it.

CHAIR: Once you have had the round table, will that information be available somewhere or will it end up in your report?

Ms Vardon: It is certainly available. We try to get out as much as possible to those areas that have contributed strongly to Growing Up in Queensland. That information will be available. One of the good things about Growing Up in Queensland is that, as our approach to the data becomes more sophisticated, we are able to prepare presentations that relate to particular regions. It is still fairly broad. There will be a presentation that is not exactly tailor-made for Townsville but relates to Townsville and the region around it.

Ms BOLTON: Ms Lewis, you were speaking about the over-representation of our First Nations children. Within the function of the commissioner and reviews undertaken, what is the involvement of our First Nations elders and their communities in that process of attaining greater accountability?

Ms Lewis: I think that is absolutely critical. That is one of the points of difference in the way we are approaching the work. Yes, there is the first phase of understanding the data, the metrics and what is happening with that, but we can only really test the implementation of the child placement principle by engaging with those most impacted—talking to young people and family members involved in the system, talking to elders and community leaders around the solutions that they see would make a difference, and then understanding whether that is visible in the context of the reforms that are happening. It is also really important for us to engage with the NGO sector to actually understand the intent of the reforms. There has obviously been lots of new investment in service delivery, but has that been located at the right point to make the biggest difference possible? The other thing I am particularly interested in around the service provision is that idea of accountability back to community. It is really important that our elders and our young people alike are engaged in setting those terms of accountability, about what those services need to provide in order for children and young people to be safe in their communities.

Ms BOLTON: Within your work, does it include looking at the funding models and the criteria around, for example, domestic violence shelters for those children who are there with their mother? From my understanding, there have been some difficulties in that, in the levels and the criteria not being met. Often they are then sent back home or back out because they do not hit that level of need.

Ms Lewis: Absolutely. That criteria is absolutely important. We see that not just in the child and family wellbeing services space but certainly in the domestic and family violence space. One of the challenges we have is that children are not necessarily, within that framework, recognised as victims in their own right. A lot of the services are oriented towards the adults. The criteria actually omits seeing those issues and the impacts of domestic and family violence and responding to them for children and young people. There is obviously some significant discussion and imminent reforms in that space. We see our role—and that's one of the reasons we are really trying to reach out and involve ourselves more in the domestic and family violence space is to make sure that children are kept visible, that their needs are identified and that their trauma is recognised as their own and responded to appropriately.

Ms BUSH: I am interested in the experience of young people as victims of domestic and family violence. I was interested to hear your point, Cheryl, about the work you are doing with the women's justice task force. That is excellent. I agree that they are collateral damage in terms of being in a house and observing DV going on in the home, but they can also be victims in their own right. We know that young people as young as 12 sometimes are in relationships that are subject to violence. Are you picking up that work, or who is actually picking up that work and feeding that into the women's justice task force?

Ms Vardon: We are certainly very aware of that—the impact of traumatic relationships on some very young children and the outcomes of that, which we see particularly through some of our child death prevention work, I am sad to say. There are two issues. One is, as the commissioner has said, the trauma that young people experience themselves being witness to or part of domestic and family violence. There are also those who are vulnerable, who may be homeless, who may be subject to predatory approaches and who experience domestic violence or assault as a result of that. That is certainly one of the issues we will be picking up in our submissions.

Ms Lewis: We have engaged very recently with the task force chair and we are coordinating a direct engagement with a group of young people to ensure there is direct input into the considerations of the task force. We will also be putting forward as part of our submission a youth participation strategy to inform the development and implementation of any subsequent reforms.

Ms BUSH: That is great, thank you.

CHAIR: Ms Vardon, you referred to *Out of the Dark*. How is that distributed or how does it find its way into the general population?

Ms Vardon: It is distributed through schools in particular so that school principals are able to make a judgement, in consultation with their P&Cs and their parent community, about the age range of children and young people able to see that video. It is distributed also through a range of other networks that we have. I am happy to make that video available to the committee if you would like to see it.

CHAIR: Everything has a cost impact. How many copies can we get, or is it just the one for the committee?

Ms Vardon: I will certainly look into that and be as generous as we possibly can be.

CHAIR: Could you send us a link?

Ms Vardon: I think that will be the answer.

CHAIR: The first thing that occurred to me is that it would probably be helpful for electorate offices to have that information. We have a vast number of people coming to us for assistance, and it just occurred to me that that type of information—

Ms Vardon: Certainly, we will take that on board. It will make you jump at the end of it. That's all I can say.

Mr POWELL: Ms Vardon, I turn to your comments regarding your role in the Child Death Review Board. You made mention that since you have taken over as chair you have looked into the deaths of 55 children. It is a sad number. My time in child safety tells me, though, that that number is not indicative of, as you use the term, children necessarily who have given up their lives for systems reform, that suicide continues to be highly prevalent in those numbers. Also, a lot of children known to the department often have health issues which also lead to early deaths. Are you able to break down that number of 55 in any way and give us some idea of how many were actually at the hands of an abuser?

Ms Vardon: I certainly can. It is a relatively small number, I am pleased to say. I believe it to be around six, but I will just double-check that for you. I will go through the list. I want to do this with great respect. The circumstances of each child or young person's death are, for those reading, of course sad and traumatic, but we can only imagine the impact on extended family, siblings and so forth. We dislike, intensely sometimes, the run in the media that some of these very sad and tragic events get, because it does not just traumatise the community to some extent but also re-traumatise those close to that child. With that proviso, I will go through—

Mr POWELL: I do not need specifics on all 55, for that exact reason.

Ms Vardon: No, they are bunched together. The Child Death Review Board is about systems change but, as I said earlier, every suite of reforms has a child's name on it as the beginning of that. The numbers are: fatal assault and neglect, 10 children; drowning, two children; natural causes—and across the population that is the largest number—10 children; other non-intentional injuries—these are standard criteria—two children; transport accidents, nine children; suicide, six children; unknown causes of death—pending perhaps as a result of police investigations or further investigations—seven children; and unknown causes, under the heading of 'sudden unexplained death', nine children, which is a quite significant number. That is something the Child Death Review Board wants to look at more closely, because that is different from SIDS. These are children, who are generally very young, whose deaths simply cannot be explained. We think it warrants further close examination and further work with police on some of those deaths. It is sad to say that, of that total number I have given you, 23 children have Indigenous status. That is very significant. That is the range. This will be available in our annual report, due out in a few months.

Mr POWELL: In your previous annual report you referred to the idea of using red flags to help identify where children may be at risk. Can you provide the committee with an update on the progress of that red flag project?

Ms Vardon: Yes, I can. Thank you for that question, which is really focused on the research coming out of the Child Death Review Board. We are required to conduct research into where we think people are not alert enough or aware enough—because people can become complacent—of what some events actually mean. We are progressing our red flag research, to be completed soon. We are also completing some research on systems thinking: what does it mean to apply systems thinking to work such as child death prevention and child protection more generally?

In terms of red flags, with the help of the University of Queensland and a range of people who know about these areas of research, we have identified—everybody thinks they know what a red flag is but we kind of get used to, 'This is a red flag'—super-red flags. Perhaps we need another name for them. One is threat to kill a child. Quite often people threaten to kill themselves, but if someone threatens to kill a child that is a super-red flag: you go and get that child immediately, no questions asked. You go and find that child and take that child to a safe place. Sometimes that is not, I am sorry to say, entirely recognised by systems. Another one that comes to mind which I would call a super-red flag is when the number of child concern reports suddenly escalates around a particular child. A closer examination of the sources of those child concern reports, for example, would point to a super-red flag so that you know something is escalating and you really do need to intervene in that child's life as soon as possible.

They are the things that, working with all the agencies, we are seeking to identify and to break down some of the complacency that sometimes comes up, some of the thinking that can be biased that sometimes arises in people's work and some of the ways in which we go about our business, just being more alert and going that extra mile: 'This confluence of events or these things mean that we need to go and find that child right away.'

Mr POWELL: When will that research be finalised?

Ms Vardon: Hopefully before the end of August. There will be significant progress by then anyway.

Mrs GERBER: My question is in relation to the Youth Participation Strategy. Is the Youth Participation Strategy feeding into the red flag identification process that you are doing? Just by comparison, I note in the domestic violence space that engaging more with victims of domestic violence has changed the narrative around how police respond to it and how the community sees it. Engaging with children in relation to identification of super-red flags, as you talk about, may also help to change the narrative around that and inform that process. I am keen to understand that.

Ms Vardon: Definitely. Our Youth Advisory Council—there are 25 young people on that—is being well engaged in our red flags work. We will continue to engage with young people, because they have insights into why this was not picked up earlier or, 'I had to do this and I had to do this and Brisbane

eventually I burnt the shed down,' as one young person said to me one occasion. Certainly being alert to what young people are saying is beneficial. Very sadly, some of the red flags that can be missed have already led to the deaths of children. Of course, we are only doing that in retrospect because their voices are silenced forever.

Mrs GERBER: How is the Youth Participation Strategy working in practical terms? What is involved in the process?

Ms Vardon: We can both answer that. The commissioner and I attend regular meetings of the Youth Advisory Council and have a free-for-all session, if you like, where we are able to talk about many things. We consult with them individually and in groups as well. We certainly listened to the voices of children and young people through CREATE, which is, as you know, an agency that looks after children who have left the care system. Our Youth Participation Strategy is multifaceted. It goes beyond Growing Up in Queensland.

Ms Lewis: With regard to the one that I mentioned previously, that is something we are developing as part of our submission to the task force. Just to be clear, in all of the work that the QFCC does, part of that initiation process around how a piece of work comes to be has to consider who are the young people who are most impacted by this type of work or by the issue that we are seeking to develop a program of work around. We have become very deliberate about identifying who is most impacted and ensuring there is direct engagement with those cohorts of young people to inform the work as it progresses in the QFCC.

The Youth Participation Strategy for the Domestic and Family Violence Strategy is actually to inform further work of the task force and any of their subsequent recommendations to make sure that a youth participation strategy is embedded within those recommendations and the reform agenda. It is specific to that area of domestic and family violence.

Ms Vardon: Right across the QFCC, as the commissioner has said, we consult with young people along the way.

Ms BUSH: Natalie, you mentioned the strategic plan and that you have taken another look at that, which is fantastic. I am interested in whether you teased out the new opportunities for children and young people with the Human Rights Act now in Queensland and how that would inform the systems work that you do.

Ms Lewis: Young people have a right to participate in all of the things that impact upon their lives. The Human Rights Act and the obligations that it infers on us as an agency are deeply embedded in our approach. The inclusion of very specific references to the guiding principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child means that that is the lens we will apply to every piece of work we do. Certainly participation is one of those rights and principles that is referenced in our strategic plan. The paramount principle around the safety and wellbeing of children is as significant for us in our work as it is in the Child Protection Act. It is that paramount principle; it is our primary consideration.

Across all of the work that we do we have to consider what is the impact on the rights of children and how we then position in our advocacy role to safeguard those rights. Regardless of the bill that is being considered or how relevant it seems to children at first glance, I think we need to do better at engaging with young people, creating space for them to participate and also for taking forward the things they have said to us that matter in their lives and then using the influence that we have across the system to actually have better laws and better program responses that directly meet the needs of children, rather than them being an afterthought.

CHAIR: Does the work that you do in talking to children across Queensland deal with bullying and racism?

Ms Vardon: Yes, it certainly does. I have not gone into the detailed findings of the Voices of Hope, which is on our website—the second iteration of Growing Up in Queensland. Certainly bullying is still a key issue for young people and bullying face-to-face is still just as serious an issue as cyberbullying is. I think that is something we need to recognise, that bullying the old-fashioned way certainly is still very prevalent among young people and something they are concerned about, as they are deeply concerned about cyberbullying and, as I mentioned, predatory behaviour.

Young people are concerned about all forms of discrimination. Perhaps they do not express it as saying, 'This is about me,' but they express it in terms of impact of discrimination on their peers, their families, their friends and those around them.

Ms BOLTON: To go back to the red flags, at a grassroots level, firstly, does that include those that are not under a welfare or protection agency? For example, does somebody who has suicidal tendencies come up as a red flag and is then able to connect to counselling or a psychiatrist? Then is that data collected as to where a failing may have occurred, including delays in access to those supports?

Ms Vardon: I can answer that question in several parts. The Queensland Family and Child Commission has responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of all children in Queensland—around 1.2 million of them, 20 per cent of the population. We focus particularly, of course, on those children who are most vulnerable because that is our priority. Where we see issues to do with suicide emerging is certainly through the Child Death Review Board, and we look at the circumstances that may have led to that. That is one aspect of our work.

Suicide and risk factors for the general population of children and young people certainly comes up in the red flag research that we are doing. I think we place too much emphasis on risk factors. One of the most important or chilling things that one of our state's leading psychiatrists has ever said to me is that for many children and young people who sadly take their own lives there are no risk factors that are apparent. We need to take that into account.

Certainly across the state we also have good connections and networks with mental health agencies and the Mental Health Commission. We are working with them on their suicide prevention work and we link with schools, which have a good network of identifying those who may be most at risk. Through our partnerships with government agencies and non-government agencies we are very aware of what seems to be working and what seems to be developing as clusters, if you like, of children who are either attempting to take their lives or who have taken their lives. One of the most difficult areas from which to gather data is around those who have attempted suicide but who have recovered. We work through that and we work with the ambulance agency to make sure we have some insights into that.

I am happy to say that at the beginning of this year we covered the state with 60 young people through a webinar in co-designing a response to the mental health of young Queenslanders. Our approach to it is multifaceted. In the end, my message is that it is for all of us to watch out, for all of us to be alert to young people in the community in terms of what they are saying and what they are feeling. Listen to them beyond just hearing what they are saying but actively listen to them, remembering that by far most of them do have hope and resilience about their future and it is up to us to nurture that and to show as role models that we are interested in care for their mental health and wellbeing. The future of the nation depends on it.

CHAIR: I have a couple of questions, but I am conscious that we only have about four minutes left. The committee is also conducting an inquiry into serious vilification and hate crime. I was trying to understand if the Youth Advisory Council is a separate one to the one in the Department of Education.

Ms Vardon: Yes. I am pleased to say that I think we set the beginning for youth advisory councils, which is great. We have a very strong Youth Advisory Council which is particular to the QFCC, but it is quite separate from—Minister Linard, for example, has a youth advisory council in her electorate which is an important source of information. The education department through Minister Grace also has a youth advisory council.

CHAIR: As a committee, how do we reach out to make them aware of what is happening so that we can get information from these people for the inquiry?

Ms Vardon: I think the best way, if I may suggest, would be to perhaps ask ministers themselves and members for their knowledge of youth advisory councils around the state. Mapping them all is a time-consuming exercise and you will not capture them all, but there are some key ones. I would recommend and commend the youth parliaments as well, because they are a valuable source of advice.

CHAIR: You said mapping them is a bit of a nightmare. Are you able to provide us with perhaps the key ones you believe are important?

Ms Vardon: We can certainly do that. We can provide that. I go to a meeting called the youth alliance for children and young people, which is attempting to map all consultation with young people across the state. I will not send you that, no.

CHAIR: Sorry I did not mean to cut you off but we have one more question.

Mr POWELL: We cannot let an oversight hearing go without asking some financial questions. I notice in 2019-20 there was a deficit of \$611,000 that coincided with an increase in contractors and consultants by \$243,000 as well as a staff increase from 58 to 65. Is there a short explanation for the deficit and the increases?

Ms Vardon: I am sure there is a short answer that we could provide quite quickly. Overall, the QFCC is project driven, if you like. Our numbers go up and down but we certainly stay within our SDS. Sometimes we have an underspend and sometimes we have an overspend, depending on how the projects are tracking. I am told here that you may be talking about the relocation. The important thing for the QFCC that happened during COVID is we relocated offices in order to reduce costs overall. We relocated from 53 Albert Street to 63 George Street.

Mr POWELL: In the long term there will be a saving but in the short term it was—

Ms Vardon: In the long time there will be savings. In the short term there were some bumps, yes.

Mr POWELL: That is sufficient at this stage.

CHAIR: It was not really a question on notice, but could the information about contacting the youth advisory councils be provided by Monday, 21 June?

Ms Vardon: Certainly.

CHAIR: Thank you for coming to the committee and thank you for the valuable information you have provided today. Keep up the good work.

Ms Vardon: Thank you, committee.

CHAIR: That concludes the hearing with the Queensland Family and Child Commission. Thank you to the secretariat and Hansard staff. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's parliamentary webpage in due course. I declare the public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 9.47 am.