




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR COOPER

Record of Proceedings, 17 March 2022

LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Ms BUSH** (Cooper—ALP) (3.12 pm): I rise as a member of the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee which has oversight responsibilities for the Queensland Family and Child Commission. Having reviewed their annual report and having been briefed through public hearings on 14 June, it is my pleasure to update the House on the QFCC's activities and performance for this period. In the public hearings we indeed heard from former commissioner Cheryl Vardon and Commissioner Natalie Lewis, and I would like to extend my gratitude to them for attending and being very forthright in the information they provided to the committee. I think it is fair to say that the QFCC has achieved a lot within the reporting period despite the impact of COVID. There are a few areas that I think are worthy of highlighting.

The Growing up in Queensland project is a very important way for the QFCC to engage with children and young people and hear the voices of young people in Queensland, which we know is so important. During what was a really unusual year, we heard that the QFCC engaged with around about 8,000 young people right across Queensland from cities through to regional and remote communities who reported a range of things about their communities, about how they were feeling during the pandemic in particular, and what their big concerns were.

Overwhelmingly, the feedback we received from the QFCC was that children and young people still feel very hopeful, which is fantastic and a testament to their resilience. They hope for further education and employment. They did, however, have some concerns. We heard how young people particularly called for more action from leaders on mental health, education and the environment. The mental health of children and young people as we continue through and beyond this pandemic is something that I know we all deeply care about and ought to care about.

During the reporting period the QFCC also, as mentioned, took over the independent Child Death Review Board. 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 the departments of health, family law, social work, mental health, policing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing. As at the public hearings, the review board had considered the deaths of 55 children and young people known to the child protection system.

As has been widely acknowledged, of course the death of every child is an absolute tragedy. This review board plays such an important role in child death prevention work by identifying systemic opportunities for reform. We did hear there had been a reduction in deaths since 2004, with mortality rates decreasing by an average of three per cent each year. While that is heading in the right direction, the death of every child causes immense pain to their family and their community.

Two things stood out from the reviews: firstly, suicide is the leading cause of death for children and young people in the system, which is absolutely devastating to hear—that is work we need to continue to do; and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people continue to be over-represented in those statistics, which I know is something that we all care about. We all want to see some changes in that space.

One of the most critical issues that warrants urgent attention is the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the child protection system. I was really pleased when Natalie Lewis was appointed QFCC commissioner within this reporting period. I have had the opportunity to work with Natalie in another role. She is an incredible woman, a fierce advocate for her people, and I know she will play a huge role in the transformational work that is going on in the QFCC at the moment.

We heard from the commissioners that 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 and that there has been significant reform 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. We heard that, through the powers to acquire data under section 35 of the 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 regionally, and they can drill down into a local level. We heard that examining that disaggregated data and evaluating the standard of implementation of all five elements of the child placement principles will provide the commission with a clear indication of what is working well and what needs to be urgently improved.

I am looking forward to next briefing with the QFCC to hear of their progress. I thank my fellow parliamentarians, committee members and the secretariat for all of their hard work. I commend the report to the House.