

COMMISSIONER'S *Report*

YEAR IN REVIEW

The 2001–2002 financial year has been one of the most challenging years for the Commission for Children and Young People since its establishment as the Children's Commission in 1996. This was the first full financial year of operation under the Commission's new Act – the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000*. The introduction of the Community Visitor program and the implementation of the final two phases of employment screening were significant activities undertaken.

The introduction of employment screening for self-employed people on 1 October 2001, followed by the launch of employment screening for volunteers by the Premier on 14 April 2002, created unprecedented demand for the Working with Children Check.

This resulted in the issue of 19,349 suitability cards to 30 June 2002.

In addition, the Commission's mandate to consult children and young people was enacted through a series of workshops with refugee children and young people, Indigenous children on Palm Island, and in the Cape and Gulf, and through the children's activities organised for the People's Festival in conjunction with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The Commission's ongoing role in promoting the participation of children and young people in decisions which affect them was met through membership of a wide range of local, state and federal government, non-government and community committees.

I am pleased to report that there has been good progress on issues highlighted in last year's Annual Report, including the lack of suitable residential facilities for young people in Queensland and the lack of integrated data about child welfare.

The Commission's Let's Get Loud project, conducted in collaboration with PeakCare and the Queensland Housing Coalition sought the views of young people who access out-of-home residential services across the state. This initiative collected data to help highlight existing gaps in services, and to inform service providers on their clients' needs. A report on the results of the consultation will be finalised in 2002–2003.



“to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queensland children and young people, now and in the future”

The Commission also moved to address the lack of integrated data about child welfare through the research and publication of *Children and Young People in Queensland: a Snapshot*. This report reflects twelve months' work, and draws together data from a range of government departments which provides indicators of the wellbeing of children and young people. This information came from several sources, including the 1996 Census, Department of Families, Queensland Health, Education Queensland, the Department of Justice and Attorney General, Queensland Police Service and the Department of Housing. The Snapshot is a useful first step in understanding the status of children and young people in the state and will be released annually.

The Commission continues to expand avenues for advocating for children and young people. Our progress in this important area can be measured by the way we have drawn matters affecting children and young people to the attention of politicians, policy makers and service providers. Issues addressed included child protection, volatile substance misuse, lack of consistency in data from different departments, and children's suggestions for a child-friendly Commonwealth. Other topics such as fathering, childhood development and the significance of the early years for children's wellbeing were addressed through a number of research forums.

My role as an Expert Assistant Commissioner to the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention Centres for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission also highlighted the needs of refugee children and young people. In February, I convened two forums for service providers and their clients to discuss matters affecting refugee children and young people, including access to education, health services, accommodation and transport. I am committed to highlighting the rights of refugee children and young people as determined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children, young people and adults are demonstrating increasing use of and confidence in the complaints and investigations functions of the Commission. This financial year, there were 2,676 complaints lodged, a rise from 2,375 the previous financial year, or nearly 12%. In October 2001, the Commission completed a major investigation of the services provided by the Department of Families to a child in care under the *Child Protection Act 1999*. The recommendations from the investigation were implemented by the Department, including an apology to the child's parents for the limitations of past practices in relation to the case.

The Commission also supported the findings of the Queensland Ombudsman's report into the death of

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Gold Coast toddler, Brooke Brennan. As a result of the deficiencies highlighted in the report, I called for doctors' discretionary powers to detain children at risk in hospital for up to 96 hours to be made mandatory through the proposed review of the *Health Act 1937*.

This financial year has seen a considerable increase in the budget for the Department of Families to address child protection matters. As the Commission for Children and Young People has advocated widely on the significance of the early years for children's wellbeing and investment in subsequent social capital for our community, it is pleasing to see that a significant proportion of these funds will be spent on early intervention.

EMERGING ISSUES

During the 2001-2002 financial year, our priorities, in line with those vulnerable groups listed

in our legislation, have focussed predominantly on children and young people in the care of the Department of Families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

However, some emerging issues impact on a wide range of children and young people statewide. Volatile substance misuse is one such issue and the Commission advocates a whole of community (including children and young people) approach to address its impact on our youngest citizens.

There are a range of health related issues which are now emerging, ironically as a result of such factors as affluence and lifestyle changes. Increases in juvenile diabetes, binge drinking, obesity, youth depression and smoking need more focus and attention by everyone if we are to truly enact the Commission's vision "to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queensland children and young people, now and for the future".

Robin Sullivan
Commissioner for Children
and Young People