



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

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Dear Ms Alderton

**Developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (A Path Forward)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (A Path Forward) announced in December 2019, by the Hon Ben Wyatt MLA, Treasurer; Minister for Finance; Aboriginal Affairs; Lands.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia I have a statutory responsibility under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 (WA)* to advocate for the views of children and young people to be heard in decision making that affects them. In undertaking these responsibilities I must give priority to Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason. I must also have regard for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UNCRC).

**A Path Forward** outlines six key strategic elements:

1. Putting Culture at the Centre
2. Bringing decisions closer to communities through empowered engagement and agreement-making
3. Enabling Aboriginal-led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant-making
4. Investing more in preventative and early-intervention initiatives
5. Boosting economic opportunities across all areas of Government activity; and
6. Building cultural understanding and respect

These strategic elements encompass themes that I, as Commissioner, have consistently heard from Aboriginal people and their communities.

**A Path Forward** acknowledges the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Aboriginal Forum, held in August 2018. A forum, which provided 72 Aboriginal leaders with an opportunity to discuss Aboriginal-led solutions to improving the well-being of Aboriginal children and young people in WA<sup>1</sup>. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the key themes under which recommendations from the forum were grouped:

1. Aboriginal leadership and self determination
2. Cultural context
3. Roles of Aboriginal community, government and not-for-profits
4. Systems and services

Furthermore, the key recommendations for action relevant to your work are:

- Transfer **power and responsibility** to Aboriginal people and communities to lead the solutions to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and families.
- **Resource Aboriginal community controlled organisations** to deliver services and build community capacity.
- Build policies to drive **Aboriginal economic participation** and development.
- Advocate for an **Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People**.
- Programs and services working in the Aboriginal community must be:
  - **Aboriginal-led** – the right of self-determination
  - **Rights-based** – rights of the child as well as Aboriginal rights
  - **Client centred** – place child at the centre
  - **Place-based** – locally identified issues with local solutions
  - **Evaluated** and appropriately **resourced**'.

While the document discussed above was a result of senior Aboriginal people, children and young people also need to be heard. Consistent with the Commissioner's **Statement of Commitment to WA's children and young people and under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, all children and young people have the right to express their views and to have their opinions taken into account in regard to decisions that affect them.<sup>2</sup>

Children and young people want to:

- feel valued, respected, listened to;
- feel that their ideas are taken seriously; and

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<sup>1</sup> Full report at <https://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/media/3220/summary-report-aboriginal-forum-23-august-2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 12, United Nations, Treaty Series.

- be involved in making decisions and influencing matters that affect them.

They say that these things are important for their wellbeing. This is a consistent message from children and young people whenever they are consulted.<sup>3</sup>

Although my consultation with Aboriginal children and young people does not specifically focus on the six key strategic elements of **A Path Forward**, Aboriginal children and young people do provide feedback, which clearly demonstrates that asking what they want and involving them in decision-making processes will ensure the development of the **Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy** is relevant to meeting their needs. This makes Aboriginal children and young people more likely to engage positively with the outcomes of the empowerment strategy, which can ultimately lead to better outcomes for their health and wellbeing<sup>4</sup>.

The *Listen to us Report, 2015*<sup>5</sup> showed there was a strong focus from children and young people on education and schools as being platforms for empowerment and engagement. In addition, children and young people identified as priority areas, *the supporting role and capacity of families*. These areas are recognised within **A Path Forward**.

In conclusion, I would like to draw your attention to a number of additional publications that discuss the importance of involving Aboriginal children and young people in policy and program development:

- *Aboriginal children and young people speak out about culture and identity*<sup>6</sup>, Policy brief, June 2011
- *Aboriginal children and young people speak out about the importance of education*<sup>7</sup>, Policy brief, April 2011
- *Engaging with Aboriginal Children and Young People Toolkit*<sup>8</sup>, 2016

I was pleased to see the focus on monitoring and data evaluation in the discussion paper. The development of the **Indicators of Wellbeing**<sup>9</sup> for children and young people in Western Australia has revealed a large number of gaps in the data that is available on the wellbeing of children and young people, including Aboriginal children and young people. This makes it difficult to capture a

<sup>3</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Children and young people speak out about being acknowledged and involved in decisions policy brief*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, viewed 21 December 2017, <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/media/1306/policy-brief-wellbeing-research-being-acknowledged-and-involved-in-decisions-participation-may-2011.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/our-work/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander/engaging-with-aboriginal-children-and-young-people-toolkit/section-2-getting-your-organisation-ready/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/our-work/projects/consultation-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/media/1305/policy-brief-wellbeing-research-aboriginal-children-on-culture-and-identity-june-2011.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/media/1304/policy-brief-wellbeing-research-aboriginal-children-and-young-people-speaking-out-about-importance-of-education-april-2011.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/our-work/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander/engaging-with-aboriginal-children-and-young-people-toolkit/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ccpw.gov.au/our-work/indicators-of-wellbeing/>

comprehensive picture on the wellbeing of children and young people, and track how they are faring on different wellbeing measures. The **Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (A Path Forward)** would benefit from including a specific focus on data collection based on the experiences and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people. This would enable monitoring as to whether the strategy is achieving the intended outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

I note, there is little detail provided in the discussion paper on how the **Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy** will be resourced. The inclusion of information on the funding and resourcing that will be allocated to support the implementation of the **Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy**, as well as how this will be distributed to support implementation and coordination across the State would strengthen the document.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to developing the **Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (A Path Forward)**.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Pettit', written over a horizontal line.

**COLIN PETTIT** HonEdD ECowan

Commissioner for Children and Young People

February 2020