



GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Implementation of child safety officers in local governments

Recommendation 6.12 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Summary of Findings



This initiative is part of the WA Government's action to create a Safer WA for Children by implementing the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.



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Executive Summary

The recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission) emphasised that institutions working with children must be able to provide safe environments where the rights, needs and interests of children are met.

The Royal Commission recognised local government's critical role in community development and community safety, particularly roles that impact on child safety, and identified the opportunity to integrate their direct responsibilities to children with their wider role within the community. Noting that local government's roles encompassed both direct service delivery and broad support for local community organisations with the unique opportunity for the promotion of child safety.

Recommendation 6.12 of the Royal Commission¹ recommended that, with support from governments at the national, state and territory levels, local governments should designate child safety officer positions from existing staff profiles to carry out the following four functions:

- a.** developing child safe messages in local government venues, grounds and facilities;
- b.** assisting local institutions to access online child safe resources;
- c.** providing child safety information and support to local institutions on a needs basis; and
- d.** supporting local institutions to work collaboratively with key services to ensure child safe approaches are culturally safe, disability aware and appropriate for children from diverse backgrounds.

Child safety officers are intended to promote child safety within the organisation and support community organisations providing services to children to create child safe environments.

Acknowledging the existing investment local governments make to promote community safety, including child safety, the Royal Commission stated that local governments do not need to provide additional financial investment into implementing child safety officers and suggested that existing community safety positions within local governments could be expanded to align existing responsibility to strengthen child safety. Noting that available staffing resources vary across the local government sector, including in relation to community safety positions the Royal Commission gave some consideration to the suggestion that local governments with limited resources may potentially be supported by state and territory governments.

The Discussion paper on the implementation of child safety officers in local governments was developed to consult the sector about the designation of child safety officers in local governments. The paper was circulated to 137 Western Australian local governments and accessible online via the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC) website. Submissions were open from 7 December 2020 to 2 April 2021.

¹ The State Government accepts Recommendation 6.2 of the Royal Commission 'in principle' – i.e. the State Government generally supports the intent or merit of the policy underlining the recommendation but does not necessarily support the method for achieving the policy; and/or additional funding will be required to implement the recommendation.

Fifty (50) local government submissions were received, including responses from the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) and Goldfields Voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils.

Submissions received demonstrated vastly contrasting responses throughout the consultation, with some local governments demonstrating positive attitudes towards implementing the functions of the child safety officers or identifying where they have capacity to increase their child safe functions (dependent upon support from State Government). Other submissions expressed opposition to the integration of child safety officers in their councils and argued that this is the responsibility of State Government to implement.

The following key findings were identified in relation to the four key functions:

a. developing child safe messages in local government venues, grounds and facilities

- Local governments are willing to develop and deliver child safe messages in their venues, grounds and facilities with consistent messaging and resources that are developed centrally by the relevant and responsible State Government department.
- Local governments have requested engagement with government bodies such as the Working with Children Screening Unit and National Office for Child Safety as well as the Commissioner for Children and Young People for the provision of training, education and ongoing advice and support.
- Consideration of cost implications of installing physical signage is a key issue and particularly concerning for larger shires and cities.

b. assisting local institutions to access online child safe resources

- Most local governments are, in some capacity, already assisting their local organisations to access online child safe resources. For those that are not, they are comfortable with their ability to increase this.

c. providing child safety information and support to local institutions on a needs basis

- Local governments feel that child safety should be paramount to all local government functions and activities which would be more easily achieved by sharing responsibility and raising awareness across all relevant functions and business areas.
- Designation of a specific child safety officer role within local government is not the preferred way of achieving this function. By making child safety paramount to all functions it would bring it into line with the management of accessibility and inclusion and occupational health and safety.
- Further consideration of, and consultation about child safeguarding within local government should be informed by greater clarification on the specific roles, responsibilities, expectation and outcomes of this type of function.
- Progress towards child safeguarding within local government would be supported by further engagement with the sector, along with dedicated training and resources.

d. supporting local institutions to work collaboratively with key services to ensure child safe approaches are culturally safe, disability aware and appropriate for children from diverse backgrounds

- Some local governments (particularly regionally based) support organisations to deliver accessible, inclusive and culturally appropriate services, tailored to their community's needs.
- Some local governments support the notion that there could be capacity for other roles such as community development officers, community engagement officers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) specific type officers to support engagement and collaboration with local organisations and help to build capacity, and meet the diverse needs of their community.

The following general findings were identified across the four key functions:

- Child safety should not be compromised, with unanimous support that creating child safety is important. While recognising their important role in creating and promoting child safety, further engagement with local government is required to consider opportunities to embed this function within existing functions and work programs



Background

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse² (Royal Commission) defined child safe organisations as those which create cultures, adopt strategies, and take actions to prevent harm to children, including child sexual abuse.

The Royal Commission recommended 10 Child Safe Standards be adopted by organisations undertaking child-related work, as a means of fostering child safety and wellbeing. From these, the 10 National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (National Principles) were developed. The Council of Australian Governments endorsed the National Principles in February 2019.

The National Principles incorporate the proposed Child Safe Standards with a broader scope that goes beyond child sexual abuse to include all forms of abuse or potential harm to children and young people.

The Royal Commission's recommendations raise the bar for child safety within organisations undertaking child related work. Potentially up to 25,000 organisations in Western Australia may be impacted by changes in legislation, regulation, and policy as part of the implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations. These organisations may include community clubs, groups and associations across Western Australia who deliver important services and programs to children and young people.

Having access to child safe information, resources and support is important for community organisations when reflecting upon and improving their child safe practices.

The Western Australia State Government (State Government) is working to implement the National Principles to ensure a nationally consistent and quality assured approach to child safety in all organisations that engage in child-related work.

In Western Australia, the Royal Commission recommendations related to the National Principles are being led by the Department of Communities (Communities) in partnership with key government agencies and the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP). The Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) is leading the development of policy to inform the establishment of an independent oversight system for child safe organisations.

Western Australia currently has a voluntary approach to the implementation of the National Principles focused on capacity building, while options for legally requiring implementation are developed. The CCYP promotes and supports the implementation of child safe principles and practices in organisations in Western Australia and has developed a range of Child Safe Organisations WA resources that align with the National Principles.

The Royal Commission recognised the invaluable role local governments play in developing local communities and promoting community safety. It is for this reason that the Royal Commission identified that local governments should fulfil a range of important functions to promote child safety alongside its existing service delivery.

2 <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>

Recommendation 6.12 of the Royal Commission recommended that, with support from governments at the national, state and territory levels, local governments should designate child safety officer positions from existing staff profiles to carry out the following four key functions:

- a.** developing child safe messages in local government venues, grounds and facilities;
- b.** assisting local institutions to access online child safe resources;
- c.** providing child safety information and support to local institutions on a needs basis; and
- d.** supporting local institutions to work collaboratively with key services to ensure child safe approaches are culturally safe, disability aware and appropriate for children from diverse backgrounds³.

Child safety officers are intended to promote child safety within the organisation and provide support and guidance to smaller community-based organisations delivering services to children to create child safe environments. The role would be expected to support local staff and volunteers to build existing capacity around child safety within their organisations by providing information and assistance.

Acknowledging the existing investment local governments make to promoting community safety, including child safety, the Royal Commission stated that local governments do not need to provide additional financial investment into implementing child safety officers and suggested that existing community safety positions within local governments could be expanded to align existing responsibility to strengthen child safety. Noting that available staffing resources vary across the local government sector, including in relation to community safety positions the Royal Commission gave some consideration to the suggestion that local governments with limited resources may potentially be supported by state and territory governments.

The integration of child safety into local governments, as a function or allocated to an individual role, is not intended to be an investigative channel for child protection matters. Acting as an information source and conduit of information to paid and volunteer staff, child safety officers will be provided with relevant referral pathway information should child protection issues be brought to their attention. The statutory responsibility for protecting children from harm remains with the Department of Communities and will not be shifted to local governments.

³ https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_6_making_institutions_child_safe.pdf

The consultation process

In September 2020, the Department of Communities and the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC) developed a proposed consultation process relating to the designation of child safety officers in local governments. This process was shared, discussed and endorsed with the Local Government Professionals of Western Australia's (LG Professionals WA) Community Development Network.

The Discussion paper on the implementation of child safety officers in local governments was circulated via email to 137 WA local governments on 7 December 2020 and accessible online via the DLGSC website.

The paper sought to:

- inform Western Australian local governments of the Royal Commission and this recommendation relating to child safety officers;
- assist the State Government to develop a better understanding of local government's current role and actions in promoting child safety; and
- assist in developing a State Government policy position on the implementation of this Royal Commission recommendation.

The State Government hosted two information webinars on the discussion paper on 14 December 2020 and 4 February 2021, with 39 attendees taking part from metropolitan and regional local governments.

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) in partnership with the LG Professionals WA Community Development Network hosted four webinars across February and March with 111 attendees from 56 local governments taking part. State Government representatives also attended these webinars to support facilitation and discussion.

Concurrently, the State Government consulted on Recommendation 6.12 and the supporting discussion paper, to 167 elected members at nine WALGA Zone meetings throughout February 2021. The State also promoted the consultation process within the March 2021 edition of the Western Councillor publication and via a DLGSC LG Alert.

Written submissions closed on Friday, 2 April 2021. Respondents were required to:

- name the local government that they were responding on behalf of;
- name their role within the organisation;
- address how they were applying each of the four functions of the proposed child safety officers;
- identify ways their existing work could be built upon across each of the four key functions; and
- identify what supports or training would be needed to achieve full implementation of each of the four key functions.

Forty-eight (48) individual local government submissions were received, as well as responses from the WALGA and Goldfields Voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils. With most local governments taking the item through Council, some provided an extract of their Council's decision. Others provided a full response to the discussion paper questions or a letter notifying the Department of Communities and DLGSC of their position.

The consultation on implementation of child safety officers in local government was undertaken concurrently with the DPC's consultation on the development of a system of independent oversight for child safe organisations, including compliance with the National Principles. Local Governments were encouraged to respond to the consultation on independent oversight, with findings from both consultations to inform one another, where possible.

Findings related to the four functions of child safety officers

a. Developing child safe messages in local government venues, grounds and facilities

Local governments across the state are unanimous in their support for creating child safe environments and building capacity of their organisations and communities to increase child safety. However, they are varied in how child safe messages are developed and used across their venues, grounds and facilities. Most note that this function is not currently being delivered or that it could be delivered in a more structured and consistent manner.

Where local governments are developing child safety messages, some good examples include:

- The use of 'Watch Around Water' signage and messaging at pool and aquatic facilities. Local governments and facilities are issued with resource start packs upon registration with the program, to promote safety around water and prevent drowning. Facility staff training is also provided to support an understanding of the program and guidance on consistent messaging.
- eSafety and eSmart programs in libraries that educate children, young people and parents on cyber safety, and provide them with: resources to reference; library staff training to support these programs; the facilitation of talks and presentations to enable interactive learning; and education on the issue.
- Community partnerships with organisations such as the Constable Care Foundation to promote a culture of child safety and reinforce the local government's commitment to creating child safe environments.

Almost all respondents welcome the central development of a suite of resources, materials and messages that can be accessed by local governments to promote child safety consistently and accurately, and for these to be flexible enough to adapt to their own communities. Whether it be through strategic planning within their own locality; the ability to tailor the resources, materials and messaging according to their local context; and/or accessing training and support on issues most prevalent in their region; there is a general enthusiasm to strengthen their delivery of child safety and meet the needs of their community members.

There was a sample of responses, particularly in regional areas, where local governments develop and deliver child safe messages according to the needs of their communities. Some local governments cited examples where they work closely with Aboriginal organisations, and Elders in the community to ensure their messaging is culturally safe, accessible and relevant to their needs and solutions.

Many responses demonstrated willingness to undertake training to support their understanding and delivery of child safe messages, conditional upon clarification of the officer's roles, responsibilities and expectations and that the training does not shift responsibility of child protection matters to participants. Suggested areas of training to enhance this understanding included mental health, Protective Behaviours, suicide prevention and mandatory reporting.

Further feedback also suggested that local governments would value ongoing access to expert advice, for matters where guidance is sought.

A main concern relating to the delivery of child safe messages across local government infrastructure, as listed in the joint submission by WALGA and several individual councils, was the cost implications of physical signage. Design, production, installation, transportation and maintenance, particularly for larger local governments with numerous venues, and those where activities and venues are located a long distance between, will be of a significant expense to local governments with no reference in the discussion paper to funding being provided for this activity.

Key findings

- Local governments are keen and willing to deliver this function with consistent messaging and resources that are developed centrally by the responsible State Government department.
- By way of training, education and ongoing advice/support, local governments welcome the opportunity to engage with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Working with Children Screening Unit and National Officer for Child Safety to be better equipped to build child safety.
- Particularly in larger shires and cities, the cost implications of installing physical signage is of significant concern.

b. Assisting local institutions to access online child safe resources

Local governments provide a range of online information including community directories, website content, social media, and email communication. Local governments indicated that they were either currently providing access to the identified online child safe resources through their existing content or would be able to do so if consistent messaging and branding was developed for their use.

Reference was made in the webinar discussions and written responses that community members were directed to a range of relevant online information and announcements during the management of COVID-19. A similar approach could be applied to supporting local organisations to access online resources relating to child safety.

Key findings

- Most local governments undertake functions of promoting child safe messages to their communities.
- Local governments are comfortable with their ability to increase their online presence and share information relating to child safety through their online channels. Local governments supported the development of key messaging as a State-led responsibility, for consistency of messaging.

c. Providing child safety information and support to local institutions on a need's basis

There were varied responses as to the level of which local governments provide child safety information and support to local organisations. Those that do deliver this function do so via collaboration with various networks, groups and forums that include representation from other state and non-government agencies, private organisations and some with dedicated staff. Local governments either participate in these or lead them and in many cases, build positive and mutually beneficial relationships and share a range of information on child safety.

Internally, some local governments have formed multi-disciplinary working groups that include staff from community development and engagement, legal, marketing and communications, and facilities and community safety who all play an active role in sharing information to local institutions and inform decisions relating to the creation of safe environments (physical and otherwise) for the community to enjoy.

Some local governments also promote a whole-of-organisation approach to creating child safety and distributing related information, similar to the response to COVID-19, and policies relating to access and inclusion and occupational safety and health, where responsibility and implementation is shared. Recognising that child safety is everyone's responsibility, as a 'function' of local government rather than the responsibility of individual 'officers', means that it can be better integrated into the strategic approach of the local government without the need to create new operational roles.

While acknowledging the importance of child safety and their commitment to keeping their communities safe, many local governments were explicit in their views that the implementation of this function through designating a specific child safety officer role was not the preferred option. Instead making child safety paramount to all functions across local government is favoured.

Information sharing is cited as being a reasonably simple expectation, although there was significant concern across responses that increased activity in this space would incorrectly promote local government officers as points of contact for child protection matters. Noting that local government officers do not have the necessary skills or expertise to address child protection matters, nor was it part of the role description to undertake such duties.

Representatives from the Department of Communities attended the consultation webinars and reaffirmed their shared statutory responsibility with Western Australian Police Force (WA Police) of protecting children from child abuse and neglect. The Department is committed to working with, and supporting, local governments to understand that there is no implication or expectation that these responsibilities will be shifted through implementation of this Royal Commission recommendation.

Throughout the written submissions, there was an understanding across respondents that the Department of Communities and DLGSC had provided assurance that child protection matters would continue to be dealt with by the relevant and appropriate statutory authorities. However, local governments are seeking further clarification and confirmation of the roles and responsibilities of the State Government in relation to child protection, and the limits of local governments role in relation to child safety with a clearer and more concise list of duties and expectations of the proposed child safety officers.

It was noted by some local governments that officers have referred community members and organisations to appropriate agencies and resources (including the Department of Communities and WA Police) when approached about matters outside their remit. However, more broadly, feedback highlighted that for this to occur, State Government would need to provide education and training for local government staff to understand the relevant referral pathways and have access to appropriate resources and contact points where necessary.

Key findings

- Local governments feel that child safety should be paramount to all local government functions and activities which would be more easily achieved by sharing responsibility and raising awareness across all relevant functions and business areas.
- Designation of a specific child safety officer role within local government is not the preferred way of achieving this function. By making child safety paramount to all functions it would bring it into line with the management of accessibility and inclusion and occupational health and safety.
- Further consideration of, and consultation about child safeguarding within local government should be informed by greater clarification on the specific roles, responsibilities, expectation and outcomes of this type of function.
- Progress towards child safeguarding within local government would be supported by further engagement with the sector, along with dedicated training and resources.

d. Supporting local institutions to work collaboratively with key services to ensure child safe approaches are culturally safe, disability aware and appropriate for children from diverse backgrounds

Some local governments provided positive examples of how they are supporting local organisations in this area, and promoting their commitment to providing accessible, safe and inclusive services. This includes their development and implementation of Access and Inclusion Plans and Reconciliation Action Plans.

Of those that deliver support to local organisations in this space, there were positive working relationships noted with local groups and clubs, particularly Aboriginal organisations and those that deliver services to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Participation in, and convening of, working groups and local network groups with representation from Aboriginal elders and community, and engagement with young people in the community who are recognised as emerging leaders were activities that some described as areas of strength in their region.

Key findings

- Several local governments (particularly in regional areas) maintain positive, mutually beneficial relationships with organisations and support them to deliver safe, inclusive and culturally appropriate services.
- Some local governments supported the notion that there could be capacity for other specific roles such as community development officers, community engagement officers and ATSI specific type officers to support engagement and collaboration with local organisations and help to build capacity, inform service delivery and meet the varying needs of their community.

General findings

Capacity and resourcing

Local government feedback was unanimous in the support for child safety and their critical role in achieving this. While local governments vary greatly in terms of their capacity, there is acknowledgement that the implementation of the National Principles, promotion of child safety and capacity building in their communities is important and, at some level, should be undertaken.

However, it was evident in the majority of feedback that in terms of capacity, concerns are held regarding how the roles and or functions of child safety officers could be delivered in accordance with the proposed guidance set out in the Royal Commission recommendation, and the resource implications for the function to be either absorbed into current roles, or the creation of a new role (should financial or resource capacity allow).

As reported in the Royal Commission report, it is recommended that local governments designate child safety officers from existing staff profiles to carry out these functions. Of the feedback that opposed the allocation of child safety to a 'position' or perceived resource, many local governments cited limited to no existing resources to carry out existing functions, without the introduction of this new and seemingly additional role. For full implementation to be possible, some local governments have requested funding and resource allocation, supported by comprehensive training and ongoing mentoring/access to advice.

Key findings:

- Child safety should not be compromised, with unanimous support that creating child safety is important. Recognising their important role in creating and promoting child safety, further engagement with local government is required to consider opportunities to embed this function within existing functions and work programs.

Child protection concerns

Throughout the consultation, there was discussion about the purpose, function and role of a child safety officer, with concerns raised that such a position would be required to provide a role or response similar to the Department of Communities' child protection responsibilities. It was clarified with participants at the time that the role, purpose and scope of a child safety officer (or of child safeguarding more broadly) is about supporting child safe environments both within local government facilities and services, and in the community.

It is not intended that this type of role would replicate or replace Communities current responsibilities to administer the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* and provide child protection services to the community.

It was acknowledged however that part of being a child safe organisation, is ensuring that there are robust processes in place to identify and report child abuse to appropriate authorities, including to identify people who may not be safe to work with children.

Further consultation and engagement about the role and/or function of a child safety officer in local government should provide clarity about the distinction between this role and child protection services more broadly.

Conclusion

The Royal Commission's final report, noted the critical role that local governments have in safeguarding children and young people in their communities. It was a positive finding across the feedback that local governments support the Royal Commission's findings, accept they have an essential role a role in creating child safety and are committed to supporting their organisations to promote this.

There was a strong sense that child safety should be paramount across all local government activity and a shared responsibility across functions and business areas. Embedding child safety across all local government functions would make it consistent with the management of other key responsibilities of local government. While the Royal Commission recommended that local governments should designate child safety officers from existing staff profiles to carry out the related child safe functions, feedback provided both through written submissions and via the webinars is that the allocation of child safety to a 'position' or perceived resource is not favoured. That creating a new position or expecting these functions to be carried out by an already under-resourced individual is untenable.

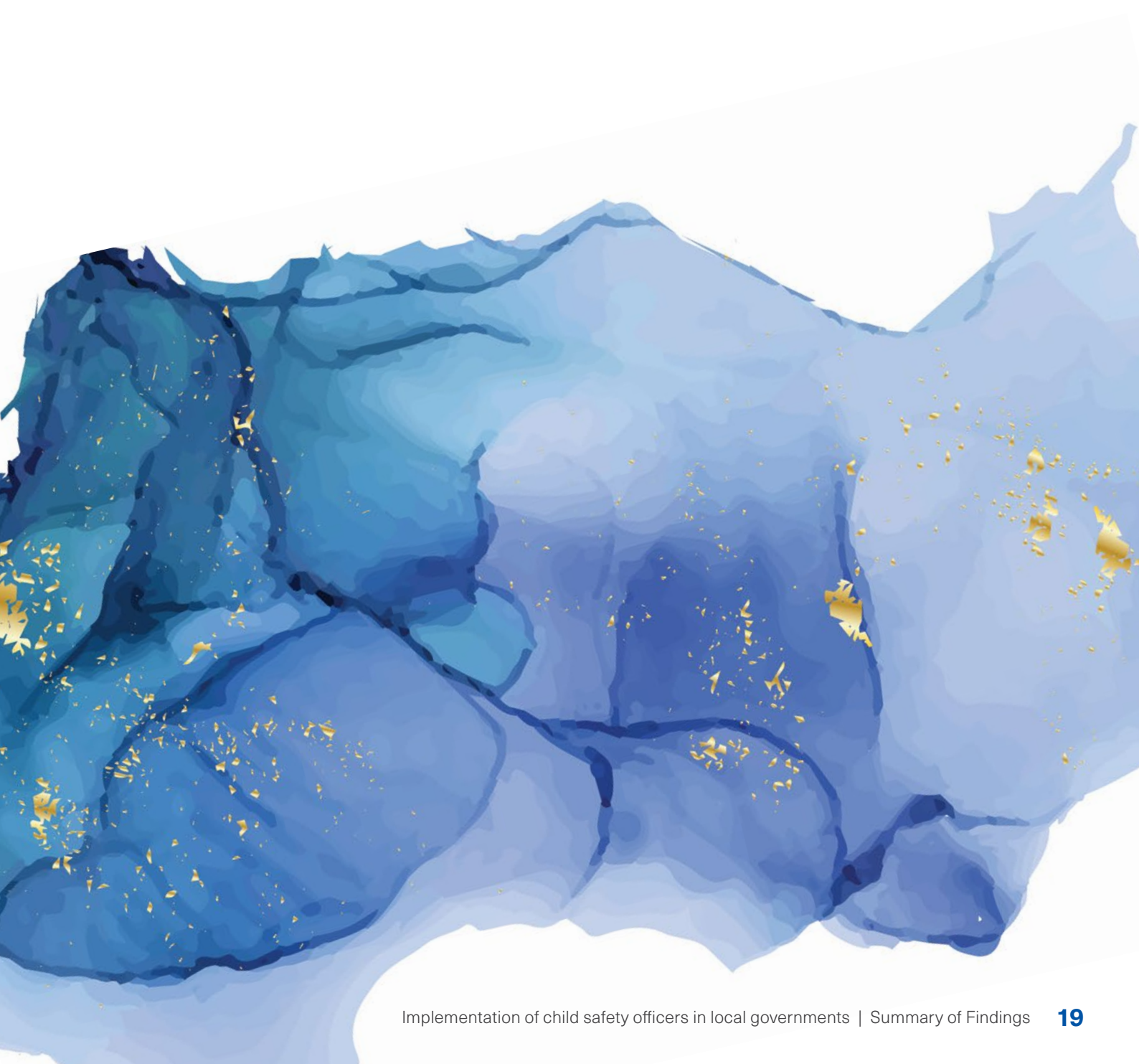
There were vastly contrasting responses provided throughout the consultation. Some local governments demonstrated positive attitudes and willingness to implement the functions and can recognise areas in which they are already delivering the functions of the child safety officers, or where they have capacity to increase their child safe functions (with support from State Government). Others were less sure about their role in this space and feel less equipped to deliver all the functions outlined. However, both metropolitan and regional local governments acknowledged that the positive and collaborative relationships they hold can provide the foundation for development in many areas, and pride themselves on being strong and vibrant communities.

Many indicated further engagement with the sector to strengthen their approach in relation to child safety including supporting their understanding of child safeguarding, clarifying the child safe function and identifying dedicated training and resources, would be mostly welcomed.



Next steps

The State Government thanks all the respondents for contributing to this consultation and acknowledges the significant contributions of WALGA in hosting webinars and providing a consolidated response on behalf of members. Please contact csaroyalcommission@communities.wa.gov.au if you have any questions. Further updates will be available through www.wa.gov.au/government/safer-wa-children-and-young-people



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