



Climate Health WA Inquiry

Inquiry into the impacts of climate change on health in Western Australia

Inquiry Lead:
Dr Tarun Weeramanthri

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Pettit
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Mr Lynton Bennett
Manager Legal and Legislation

Thursday, 17 October 2019, 2.00 pm

HEARING COMMENCED

5 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Mr Pettit, Mr Bennett, I'd like to thank
you both for your interest in the Inquiry and for your appearance at today's
hearing. The purpose of this hearing is to assist me in gathering evidence for
the Climate Health WA Inquiry into the impacts of climate change on health in
Western Australia. My name is Tarun Weeramanthri and I've been appointed
10 by the Chief Health Officer to undertake the Inquiry. Beside me is Dr Sarah
Joyce, the Inquiry's Project Director. If everyone could please be aware that
the use of mobile phones and other recording devices is not permitted in this
room, and so please make sure that your phone is on silent or switched off.

15 This hearing is a formal procedure convened under section 231 of the Public
Health Act 2016. While you are not being asked to give your evidence under
oath or affirmation, it is important you understand that there are penalties under
the Act for knowingly providing a response or information that is false or
misleading. This is a public hearing and a transcript of your evidence will be
20 made for the public record. If you wish to make a confidential statement
during today's proceedings, you should request that that part of your evidence
be taken in private. You have previously been provided with the Inquiry's
terms of reference and information on giving evidence to the Inquiry. Before
we begin, do you have any questions about today's hearing?

25 MR PETTIT: No, thank you.

MR BENNETT: No.

30 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: For the transcript, could I ask each of you
to state your name and the capacity in which you are here today, and also
through the hearing if you could briefly state your name prior to speaking just
so we can get the audio transcript correctly made.

35 MR PETTIT: Colin Pettit, I'm the Commissioner for
Children and Young People.

MR BENNETT: Lynton Bennett, Manager of Legal and
Legislation at the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

40 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you. And I apologise for
misstating your name, Mr Pettit, at the beginning. Would you like to make a
brief opening statement?

45 MR PETTIT: No, thank you.

50 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you for your submission. We just
heard from Dr Hall from the Telethon Kids Institute. And in that hearing, he
spoke about the voices of children with intellectual disability and the value
they place on nature and the environment. In your experience, how have other
groups of children been speaking about the environment and climate change

and how it impacts their lives, and do they draw any connections to their health?

MR PETTIT: Yes. Thank you for that question. It's
5 Colin Pettit. In terms of their response, climate change and the environment
generally don't apply to any particular group of children or young people. In
fact, children and young people, broadly, raise the issue of particularly their
environment. Not so much climate change, but certainly their environment,
10 more broadly, around just about every issue that we talk to them about, and I
can give you some demonstration about that down the track. But certainly
there is an interest in climate and climate change across the board from
children and young people that needs to be addressed. And I congratulate this
Inquiry for doing that.

15 In terms of what we've found is that we've run a series of consultations with
children and young people across many years. And in each of those
consultations, we've had a series of responses that have always intrigued us
about the way children raise the issue around their environment. For example,
20 in 2017, we asked children who were turning 10, so they were year four in
school, what was important to them. And we expected several hundred
responses, we had over 4000 responses from children in that age group from
right across the state in all eight regions. And in all eight regions, the
environment was in the top three of every region. And what was intriguing to
25 us, is that if you're a child in the Pilbara, you rated the environment as the most
significant issue affecting you. So there is certainly a view from children and
young people that the environment does impact on them.

And when I've done regional visits – and recently I went out to Merredin and
Southern Cross and Northam and so forth – the environment, and particularly
30 the built environment locally, was very much front and centre to conversations
that I had with children and young people. So they didn't talk a lot about that
in terms of how they feel about their community, how they feel about their
personal well-being, but they don't always draw the line to it.

35 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you. So we've been also
consulting in the different regions, and this is a West Australian Inquiry, and so
needs to be particularly attuned to regional difference. And we're keen to
provide a picture of the particular impact of climate change on the environment
and health in different regions of Western Australia. So your statement about
40 children across all different regions identifying this in their top three - - -

MR PETTIT: Yes.

45 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: - - - is of note. Were there any
differences, or have you picked up any differences, in the way Metropolitan
kids talk about this compared to kids in other parts of the state?

MR PETTIT: We have – Colin Pettit again – we haven't specifically gone to that within each region. We allow children and young people to bring that issue to us. However, there are differences. And certainly, farming children in particular will talk very much about the impact of the environment on their immediate township and farm, and they acknowledge that that affects the way that they feel, but not only about how they feel, but how their families feel, et cetera. The other thing is that Aboriginal children are very much strongly of the view that their environment dictates for them how they feel and how they interact with their community, and what they can actually achieve and not achieve.

In terms of Metropolitan children and young people, it varies very much, depending on the topics that have been raised. But there's some generic things around the availability of green space. Transport becomes a real issue for them, so they linked the availability of transport to their environment and how that impacts on them and the way they feel. And so being able to get around is one of the things that particularly older children start to express as a key factor that starts to influence their health and well-being. So there are differences, but we haven't actually specifically gone out and sought views on that. However, oddly enough, we're in the throes of having what we call advisory committees, of which we have two every year, and we set topics for them. Prior to knowing about this Inquiry, we had set – because of the feedback – the built environment as a standard that will be looked at for this year.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: When will that - - -

MR PETTIT: We're hoping to have a report out by the end of – about this time next year.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: I sense from what you said – I asked you a question about drawing connections to health, and I'm wondering if that's the right question. Do children, in general, talk about health as a separate issue, or do they just talk about how they're feeling and don't actually explicitly talk about health?

MR PETTIT: Yes. Again, we've had a series of consultations that have not been explicit about asking, does the environment represent anything to health, but they do raise it in a range of ways. And we tend to cast that more as their well-being. And more broadly, because children will actually talk about a range of things, whether it be their health or physical or mental, or whether it be their well-being within a family environment or a community environment, and they often relate the environment to those outcomes. But we've just completed a survey of children and young people called our Speaking Out survey. They were from eight years old to 18-year-olds, almost 5,000 representative schools, selected randomly, within that representative samples of children, run across this state. That data is now being crunched and will be put into Parliament by the end of the first quarter of next year.

5 But the early findings of some of the information that we're looking at is that
the environment is one of those things that children have raised independently
of each other, of how they see their well-being now and into the future. So it is
pretty front and centre to all children and the way they comment about what's
happening to them.

10 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: In your written submission, you
emphasised the psychological impacts of climate change. Can you describe
those in more detail? And are any groups of children particularly vulnerable?

15 MR PETTIT: One of the problems we have is that there
isn't sufficient data to draw very strong conclusions in any of this. And that's
whether we've collected it all or formally from other sources. And it is
something that I think, given the experience that we've had, and others have
had, that it does need attention. And so we are looking at that. As part of that,
we've got an element called a well-being monitoring framework, which we
have all but completed and will be completed by December. And it has three
domains, if you like. They are learning and participation, healthy and
20 connected, and safe and supported. And within that, we've collected hundreds
and hundreds of data sets from across state and federal governments and
non-government sources and analysed each one of those across approximately
24 indicators.

25 And they're starting to show very strongly, there are strong links around mental
health, general well-being of children and a range of factors including the
environment. It is not as conclusive as we'd like, and so as we're unpacking
this, we're starting to make detailed responses to governments to say, "These
are missing data sets that should or could be collected into the future". Added
30 to that, which may be of interest to you, I commissioned a report from
Dr Carmen Lawrence, which unfortunately is not yet published, but it will be
published by the end of next week. And I'm certainly happy to provide you a
copy. The title is, "The effects of physical and social environments on the
health and well-being of children and young people". It is a very detailed
35 literature review of the impact of the built environment, and also the world
environment, on children, and what is being found across the world. So I think
it would probably provide you with many of the answers that you're searching
for at this point in time. And it will probably open up more questions as well.
But I'm more than happy to provide that document as soon as it's published,
40 which hopefully will be next week.

45 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: That would be very welcome, thank you
for that. So I take your points about the lack of sufficient data currently and
your attempts to recommend ways it could be improved. But I'm also hearing
that you do a lot of consultations, which are qualitative in nature, where you go
and talk to kids or children around the state. And there's also then this
quantitative data which comes through surveys, et cetera.

MR PETTIT: Yes.

5 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: And you've been in this area for a long period of time. So I just note that you and I have spoken previously about your level of concern about this issue. So if I could ask you to place that on the record, however you'd like to say it, are you – despite the fact that there's insufficient data for you to be conclusive, are you concerned about this?

10 MR PETTIT: Absolutely concerned about it. And I'm concerned not because of media response in terms of climate change, but more concerned that children and young people are quite freely open to speak about this issue as one of the key issues that is affecting them without prompting. So when we do a lot of our consultations, it's very open-ended. And we do ask them for things like, "What are the three things that are impacting on you?", for
15 example. And the environment becomes a very key thing. And just to give you a couple of examples, in the survey that I talked about, anecdotally, these are just some comments I'm happy to put on record to illustrate how children are thinking. We didn't ask specifically around the environment in the survey. What we did at the end, as part of the survey, "What have we missed, and what
20 would you like to add?" These are just a few of the comments.

"I think it should include how we feel about certain important issues like climate change, as we don't have as many opportunities to have our voices heard in these regards". "I really, really hate climate change". "Something
25 extremely important to me and worries me a lot is climate change". So that was a flavour that came through hundreds of young people's responses. They were independently done, singularly, not in a group. So these are things that are starting to play on their minds, if you like. And whether it's accurate or inaccurate, it's starting to impact on how they feel about their world and their
30 livelihood.

And just to follow up, and to show how deep this runs, last month, I conducted a thing called a book laureate. We had the Australian book laureate –
35 Children's Laureate here. And we talked broadly about reading and about how it engages young people, et cetera. And prior to that, I asked them to do what's called a DigiMe program online, which is just a self-reflective tool. And we asked the question, "Why is reading important to you and what can it lead to?" We were quite staggered by the number of the hundred responses we had. Here are just some examples of what they've said. "Yes, we also need to
40 preserve the environment and stop building houses everywhere". Remember, we asked the question about reading, so they've translated that to not only reading, but these are things that are playing on their mind.

45 "We must keep our world, we are a community". "I would think about how beautiful our planet is and how I can keep it that way". "Save the world" and "Stop destroying the Earth." So even when we're not talking about the environment, children are placing it into conversations about what is affecting them. So there needs to be a narrative, both publicly and privately, about how

this is starting to affect children and young people. So that's the concern I have.

5 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you for sharing that. This Inquiry is quite broad in scope, it's got a limited time frame.

MR PETTIT: Yes.

10 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: We've done our best and we've attempted to consult with a range of different groups, including with young people, but we haven't achieved a high level of engagement with young people so far. Your office has, obviously, done a great deal of consultation over the years with young people. And I think as part of the Inquiry report, we'll want to recommend further engagement consultation with groups we haven't been able to achieve that with, including with young people. Can you advise me what
15 that might look like?

MR PETTIT: Firstly, can I commend you for even
20 having a crack, because many people don't even consider children and young people in this place. And so to even think about children having a voice I think is really, really important. And given that it is front and centre to them, I think it's very timely for you to do that. So thank you on behalf of all children for doing that. In terms of what has been successful for us is we have been really clear about building expertise in our office around people who can engage at
25 all levels, but particularly with a range of different children and their needs, whether it be CALD, whether it be children with disabilities, and then tailoring the actual activity to meet the needs of those children. So, for example, when I talked about the We Are 10, given that they were 10-year old-children we were trying to talk to, we asked them to do two things. One is draw something that reflected their world, and then in less than 25 words, express what were the
30 important things to them.

And because of that, it was a very structured and simple approach. We were overwhelmed by the number of young people that took part in that. And so it's
35 about making sure that the structure of the instrument, whatever instrument you're going to use, is appropriate to the age. That's the first thing. Second thing is we're really clear, at every stage, to talk to young people, to tell them why we need that information and what we've used it for. And what we find, often, is that when we've been very clear about its purpose, its function and how it could be used, including forming a report like yours to report back to
40 parliament to bring about change, we find that children and young people very quickly and honestly engage in a range of ways that they haven't before. And we've had that anecdotally from teachers who have said to us, time and time again, "We can't get the kids to do that, what have you done?" And basically,
45 it's about making sure that you're really clear.

The next thing that we always promise and deliver on is constant feedback. So whenever we've asked children and young people, whether it be for 5,000 or

whether it be for five, we always channel back what it is we think we've heard, test it with them and make sure that they're comfortable with the responses we've interpreted, because sometimes that is not always done. And we've used a whole range of different tools. As I said before, whether it's a pitch or
5 whether it's a few words on the page, whether it's an online survey, whether it's an app of some description, and you just have to try and work through which way it is. The way we test that, is we'll try three or four models, and then we'll get a small team – a small team could be as many as 200 young people of the age we're targeting – to come in and road test it. They are then not part of the
10 process. We don't count their responses, because they will actually help us shape the questions and also shape the way we might interpret some of those questions.

We've used that control group, if you like, often by then – at the end of any
15 surveys or responses we've done, we go back and say, “This is what we heard from a whole range of children and young people, how would you interpret it?”, so that they can help shape the report. And it's really important that they are part of the entire process. Our office has developed participation guidelines for all agencies, and we think – that's available online. I'm happy to leave a
20 copy of that report here. It has the fairly clear stages of what to do and how to do it. Equally, if you feel so inclined as part of your report, I'm more than happy for my office to be used as a reference point for any organisation, but particularly health, if they're going to step this into the future. And more than
25 happy to have my team support it, because it's such an important issue.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you for that offer and also for the participation guidelines, which we will look at. And I'll certainly give you due consideration, Commissioner, as we develop that, kind of, recommendations and way forward part of the reports, so thank you. You've mentioned already
30 your role in monitoring and data collection. Just specifically, is there any WA data that demonstrates any current impact of climate change on health and kids that you know of – and I haven't heard it yet, but – and with respect to monitoring, what needs to be collected to pick up on future trends? And I think I'm hearing that there's a broader framework in which any such collection
35 could fit into.

MR PETTIT: Yes. The short answer, unfortunately, is there isn't direct data on the question that you're asking, that we've been able to locate. We have a number of data sets around mental health and well-being of
40 children at various ages. We can extrapolate some of that information into where that fits in terms of climate change and the environment, but there is no definitive – I think the report from Carmen Lawrence touches on some of those issues. And I'm sure we'll help to provide you, or at least direct you, to some of the studies that have been done internationally, that may have done some of
45 this work that we haven't yet done here. So that's, unfortunately, where we're at with the data collection.

In terms of monitoring, we are monitoring what is missing and we are starting to make, if you like, a definitive list. However, we've got to make sure that it's an appropriate set of data that will make a difference. So while we'll collate a whole range of data sets, or data we'd like to collect, we have yet to reside on one or two of them that will make the biggest difference. And that bit of work won't be done until probably about March of next year.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Just going back a bit to what could broadly be termed the psychological impacts of climate change, however you're seeing them, have you thought about the terminology and the categorisation of that for children? Because on the one hand, there's a, kind of, very disease-focused mental illness kind of framing of any kind of psychological impact, and then on the other side, there's a, kind of, broader impact on well-being or something. And you hear lots of terms thrown into this space, eco-anxiety and this and that. And I'm not quite sure that I've got a good grasp of the categories of impact, from health through well-being through illness.

MR PETTIT: Yes. I think you've sat on a problem that we're facing at the moment, in that many of the data sets, because they don't speak to each other, in part because their definitions are often different and they're often collecting for different age groups and for a different purpose. So we're struggling with that as well. And that's why we've moved to more of a well-being monitoring framework, because well-being actually encapsulates many of the issues that are thrown around as key topics. So mental health, for example, is bandied around in a range of ways that is not probably explicit to the definition of what we would think mental health is. So by looking at it more around what is the health and well-being of children and young people, you can actually collate and collect much more refined and deeper information without being bogged down by topic or title.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: So we're all struggling with that one.

MR PETTIT: We're all struggling. And as one of the things that, as part of it – and it's not just in this space – but as part of our well-being framework, we're finding major gaps across not just government agencies, but non-government agencies, and we're looking at what data sets would best suit to actually try and find that information. And one of the interesting things we're finding is that the responses we've got from children and young people in the survey, our Speaking Out survey, which is about health and well-being, and had, for older children, in the 200 questions which they answered, they are identifying some of the data gaps for us, because they are raising issues that there is very limited or no data for, and we'll be actually able to use that information to go back and say, "This needs to now be looked at and challenged".

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: One of the Inquiry's terms of reference is to define the role of the Department of Health in leading public policy and

climate change in health. Can you suggest what this leadership role for the Department of Health might look like, and what partnerships might be needed for the Department to fulfil that role?

5 MR PETTIT: Yes. Again – sorry, for the record, Colin Pettit – I think the Department of Health are ideally suited to be the lead agent in this for the State. There obviously needs to be someone to take the lead. Health being one of the largest agencies and having a significant impact not
10 only on the physical health, but also the mental health and well-being of not only children and young people, but our entire population, they need to take a role in this area of climate change. And I think there's a number of reasons for that. One is they're large enough and have the resource to actually put towards implementing such a process. Two, they have the, I suppose, presence and clout amongst other agencies and other non-government agencies to draw the
15 right people to the table, and it needs that leadership. So I really strongly believe Health are probably the best place to do that.

And it does impact on, obviously, a number of outcomes that they're trying to achieve, as well as that health system. So, for me, they would be the logical
20 people to do it. They would need to have, obviously, the Premier to endorse that approach, and actually see it as part of the key priorities leading forward. But I think that is – given it's such a large topic, I think it needs to actually be held by an agency like Health.

25 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: And which other agencies would they need to bring in as a matter of priority, outside the traditional health space?

MR PETTIT: Yes. So I think there are a range of – I think all agencies need to be involved in some way, because we all contribute
30 in some way to climate change. But there are obviously a range of groups that need to be front and centre to it, certainly Premier and Cabinet. The Department of Premier and Cabinet needs to have that from a policy perspective, and how they lightly change that inside of the entire Government. Treasury, I would think, would be another one, given that the impact of climate
35 change, and the impact of policy affecting climate change, needs to be resourced in a way that we hadn't thought of in the past, and Treasury would need to be part of that.

40 Then I think all the other Government agencies, the larger ones like Education, and certainly Communities, where we have large numbers of contact with individuals that we can influence, need to be front and centre to support that. And they're probably a few, and I'm sure there are others, but that's something I think would be one of the key elements that Health would have to address up
45 front.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you. Is there anything – before we close, is there anything further that you'd like to say? I'm particularly – as you think about it, I'll ask you one further question, which is to do with your

consultation with Aboriginal children. So we've got a specific strategy for engaging with Aboriginal organisations as part of this Inquiry. And we had a workshop up in Broome earlier this week, and we'll have one in Perth in a few weeks' time. And it's obviously important to create the right space, listen carefully. But, from our – and we've got some very compelling written submission, as well, from the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia and National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and others. And there's no lack of concern about this issue, and almost ownership of this issue, in terms of that primary relationship to country and being a witness to what's happening in the environment, without wishing to summarise a process that's not complete. Are you confident about your consultations over the years with Aboriginal kids? I presume you've made dedicated efforts in that area. And, if you're reasonably happy with what you're hearing?

MR PETTIT: So under my Act, I have to pay special attention to Aboriginal children, and those of Torres Strait Island descent. And so we go very much out of our way to make sure that the Aboriginal voice, but particularly children's voice, is heard. And my predecessor in 2015 completed a consultation with over 1,300 Aboriginal children and young people – again, it's on the website – and there is a lot in that particular report around how they perceive their world and their local environment, et cetera. So we do do that. With the recent survey of 5,000 children, we over-sampled Aboriginal children to the tune of about 940, again to make sure their voice is heard and to make sure that we had a representative sample and we could do comparative information.

What's been interesting is the vast majority of those Aboriginal children are saying the same as all children about their environment. They do particularly talk about their culture and they do particularly talk about the land and their culture and the importance of it. But, generally, they have the same concerns as most other children about their world and the climate in which they live.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Before I come back to you, Commissioner Pettit, Mr Bennett, is there anything you'd like to say or contribute, or observe?

MR BENNETT: Other than, I suppose, to add to what we've said about the consultation, one of the areas I went [the project] involved the whole office, and I went up to Wyndham and Halls Creek. And the process we undertook there would not have been as successful as it was without linking into organisations who had connections with the kids. So we went through the schools, and there were some time slots where, if it wasn't for the teachers and staff who were able to use their relationship with the kids and help the kids, sort of, see that, "This is someone you can talk to and trust", it wouldn't have been such a successful period of time we had up there.

PROF WEERAMANTHRI: Thank you, Mr Bennett. Mr Pettit?

MR PETTIT:
Thanks for your time.

No, I'm all good, thank you very much.

5 PROF WEERAMANTHRI: That's all right. Thank you both for your
attendance at today's hearing. A transcript of this hearing will be sent to you so
that you can correct minor factual errors before it is placed on the public
record. If you could please return the transcript within 10 working days of the
date of the covering letter or email, otherwise it will be deemed to be correct.
10 While you cannot amend your evidence, if you would like to explain particular
points in more detail or present further information, you can provide this as an
addition to your submission to the Inquiry when you return the transcript, or
simply some of the material you referred to, if you can simply send it to us by
email and we'll look at it carefully, thank you. Thank you both very much for
your evidence today and time.

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MR PETTIT:

Thank you.

HEARING CONCLUDED

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