

Who's looking after the children?

Nelson Mandela once said, *"Safety and security don't just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear."*

With Mandela's words etched in my mind I was very proud to submit the Council's first Issues Papers to the Royal Commission, Working With Children Check, last week. The Council really wants to be part of this important information sharing process including making submissions to the Royal Commission's Issues Papers of which we are expecting 24 over the coming year or so.

In preparing our submission, the Council consulted widely with experts across Catholic congregations and dioceses and Catholic welfare and education sectors. Our submission was meticulously researched and calls for a streamlined, national approach to the protection and safeguarding of children.

Our approach is a great example of the concerted effort by the Catholic Church to not only ask the community for higher standards, but to demand even higher standards for our own institutions. We are certainly not pointing the finger at others; we are setting the bar even higher for ourselves.

In our Issues Paper we have highlighted some of the loopholes in the current Working With Children Check and we have made numerous recommendations for a more robust and stringent system.

We believe that all volunteers must have a Working With Children Check. It will be a challenge for the Government to develop a process that is not so onerous that it dissuades people from volunteering, but detailed enough to prevent the wrong people slipping through the net and putting children at risk. The balance must always be in the interest of child protection, not the convenience of organisations.

Our submission went further with the recommendation for all organisations and institutions to ensure employees receive a Working With Children Check before starting work. Previously, some employees have worked for up to six months before it was apparent there was a problem with their Working With Children Check.

Other interest groups working in this area may want us to take a more pragmatic approach, but we want the Working With Children Check to be absolutely watertight. It is interesting to note that Tasmania has no specific legislation today on Working With Children Check, although I understand this is now a work in progress.

Further to this, the Council discovered another very disturbing loophole in the current system. If a person has been officially barred from a Working With Children Check, they may still volunteer and work with children. This comes about if they can prove they are a distant relative to a child involved in the activity. This is extremely worrying and something that must change.

We also find it extraordinary that people under the age of 18 years are not subject to the Working With Children Check. People of this age are very likely to be assisting at school camps and sporting and community events, and must also be subject to the same stringent safeguards.

For our recommendations to be successful there must be complete co-operation between the Commonwealth and the States. There is always the danger that the Royal Commission's recommendations will fall foul of the inevitable dynamics and co-operation of Commonwealth and State Governments.

The Working With Children Check will be a great litmus test to see whether all governments can work together in the interests of child protection.

As Mandela said, we need to all work together to protect and safeguard our children. A streamlined, national approach to the Working With Children Check will go a long way to achieving this.

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