

St Andrew's Hostel

1964 – 2009

Other Names: • Katanning Residential College

Details

St Andrew's Hostel was established by the Anglican Diocese of Bunbury in 1964 as a hostel for students going to school in Katanning. It was one of the Country High School Hostels Authority hostels. From 1975, some students were subject to sexual abuse and their advocacy as adults resulted in a Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel in 2011. The hostel, which was known as the Katanning Residential College by the 1990s, struggled to overcome the damage to its reputation. It closed in 2009.

Overview

St Andrew's Hostel was established by the Anglican Diocese of Bunbury in 1964 as a hostel for students going to school in Katanning. It was governed by the Country High School Hostels Authority ('the Authority'), and built with government funds, but was administered by the Bunbury Diocese until 1971 when a board was appointed to run the Hostel under a 'letter of arrangement' between the church and the Authority. The hostel grew until 1970, when it experienced a period of instability and falling numbers.

In September 1975, the board appointed a new housemaster, Dennis McKenna. By February 1976, McKenna had been made warden. He remained in that position until arrested for sexual abuse of children in 1990. Dennis McKenna had recruited six members of his family into staff positions in the Hostel and when he was arrested the board upgraded his brother Neil McKenna from supervisor to acting warden.

Dennis McKenna was convicted of 19 offences against five victims in 1991, released from prison in 1993 and convicted of an additional 10 offences against another six victims in 2010. In 2012 he had a further 66 charges pending. In March 2012, Neil McKenna was convicted of three charges of sexual abuse of a 15 year old girl.

The first allegations of sexual abuse by Dennis McKenna surfaced in 1976 but no action was taken against him for 14 years. In November 2011, the Premier of Western Australia announced that a Special Inquiry would be held to examine why public officers had not acted on reports of abuse at St Andrew's Hostel. The report from this Inquiry was tabled in parliament on 19 September 2012 with all recommendations accepted by the government. The Government and Opposition offered apologies to victims and their families.

The Hostel, which was known as the Katanning Residential College by the 1990s, struggled to overcome the damage to its reputation. It closed in 2009.

Background

St Andrew's Hostel was established with 48 students in 1964. New buildings in 1968 saw the Hostel population rise and by 1970 there were 100 boarders. However, by 1975 after a period of instability on the board and a high number of staff turnovers, numbers had fallen to 50 students. The appointment of staff had always been the responsibility of the Hostel's administrator (the Anglican Diocese of Bunbury until 1970 and the Hostel board from 1971). In 1975, the board appointed a new housemaster, Dennis McKenna, who was 29 years old and had been

‘working temporarily as an Assistant Manager at the Freecorns store in Narrogin.’ With no experience in this type of role, but a glowing reference from a Catholic youth group, McKenna was employed. The warden and matron left within a few months and McKenna was appointed to the acting warden position in December 1975 and then appointed to the warden’s position in February 1976. During his period as warden, Dennis McKenna appointed two of his brothers and four of his brothers’ wives to fill vacant positions at the Hostel. When Dennis McKenna was arrested for sexual abuse of children in 1990, the board upgraded his brother Neil from supervisor to acting warden.

In two trials (1991 and 2010), Dennis McKenna has been convicted of 29 offences against 11 people who were 14-16 years old at the time the offences occurred. All but one of the offences occurred in his flat in the Hostel. His convictions include:

- unlawful and indecent assault (three offences)
- gross indecency (21 offences)
- carnal knowledge against the order of nature (five offences)

The ‘Katanning Residential College’, the name St Andrew’s was known by in later years, was one of the facilities listed as eligible for the State Government’s scheme to acknowledge abuse in out of home care, Redress WA. Eighteen people who were at St Andrew’s Hostel as children applied to Redress WA, with 12 people alleging sexual abuse by Dennis McKenna. Three people chose not to have their cases referred to the WA Police.

When the report of the Special Inquiry was tabled in parliament, there had been an additional 66 charges of sexual abuse from 15 new claimants laid against Dennis McKenna, investigations into claims made by three other people against him, and a further charge against another (unnamed) staff member.

In March 2012, Neil McKenna was convicted of unlawful and indecent assault (two offences) and sexual penetration without consent (one offence) of a girl under the age of 16 years and was committed to a term of six years and three months imprisonment, with parole.

In 1976 the first allegations of sexual abuse by Dennis McKenna had surfaced but no action was taken against him then, nor yet for another 14 years. In November 2011, the Premier of Western Australia announced that a Special Inquiry would be held to examine why public officers had not acted on reports of abuse at St Andrew’s Hostel. The Special Inquiry found that:

- In 1976, the local scoutmaster had told three ministers of religion and a police officer that boys had told him they were being ‘molested’ by Dennis McKenna but the scoutmaster was not able to convince people in authority to take action (p.65-67).
- Boys at the hostel had confided in the laundress who had raised the issues with other people who did not act on the information. The warden banned the boys from the laundry until after she finished work, and discharged her in 1978 (p.69-70).
- The son of the Chairman of the St Andrew’s Hostel board told his father that the warden was sexually abusing him in 1977. When the Chairman raised the matter with the warden, he believed the warden and disbelieved his son. The Chairman failed in his duty as a public officer in not reporting the abuse to the Country High School Hostels Authority and to the Police (p.71-79).
- In 1977, a primary school teacher who stayed rent-free at the Hostel in return for tutoring boarders reported her concerns about the warden’s inappropriate conduct and relationships with children to her school principal. The primary school principal failed in his duty as a public officer by not passing this information to the high school principal (p.81-82).
- In 1979 or 1980, a parent reported what his children had told him about the warden’s behaviour with boys to a member of the Hostel board. This board member apparently made unspecified enquiries and reassured the parent that all was well (p.83-85).
- In 1980, a parent of two sons at the Hostel was required to take one of them to Perth for a psychological assessment and was advised by the clinician to remove his son from the Hostel. He believed this was because the warden had been ‘interfering’ with his son and took the boy immediately to the Authority’s head office to make a complaint. The parent also informed the Katanning Police, a number of Hostel board members, and other parents. The Authority failed to implement its own policy of referring such allegations to the Education Department. Rather, it referred the allegations to the Hostel board via the warden ‘thus ensuring it would not be

properly dealt with'. The Hostel board and the Authority both thereby failed in their duty to protect children at the Hostel and contributed to the warden's ongoing ability to abuse children (p.87-94).

- In 1983 a Department for Community Welfare officer received a complaint from a child who was a Ward of the State who was placed at St Andrew's Hostel. Before the complaint could be investigated, McKenna ('by some unknown means') was able to halt the investigation (p.95-107).
- In 1983 a parent whose daughter and son were boarding at the Hostel was told by another parent that abuse was happening. Rather than pass this information along to the Authority or the Hostel board, he instigated a series of unannounced visits and made a number of attempts to discover sufficient 'concrete evidence' to support the allegations (p.109-111).
- In 1985 a teacher who boarded rent-free at Kartanup in return for tutoring St Andrew's Hostel boarders reported his feeling that there were inappropriate relationships between the warden and young boys to the Principal of the Katanning Primary School. However, this was not the focus of the discussion and it was not clear whether the teacher's description was 'sufficiently vivid' to warrant further action (p.115-117).
- In 1985 a barmaid at a Katanning hotel informed an officer from the Katanning police that she had overheard rumours about sexual abuse of children at St Andrew's Hostel. The officer was 'dismissive' of her report and took no action (p.119-124).
- In 1984, three students told their parents that they felt uncomfortable about the warden's behaviour. Eventually (and not solely because of their children's complaints), they withdrew their children from the hostel but the lateness of withdrawal resulted in an invoice for a term's fees. One family was determined to resist the demand for fees. During the process of seeking to have the invoice reversed, they also raised allegations of inappropriate behaviour and rumours of abuse with the Authority and the Hostel board. Neither the Hostel board nor the Authority investigated these allegations, and the Authority supported the Board in issuing defamation proceedings against the parents who made the accusations. These failures in public duty contributed to the warden's ability to continue to abuse students at the Hostel (p.125-136).
- In 1985 the Department of Education and Training (DET) established a Westrek program at Kartanup in Katanning. (Westrek was a pre-employment program). A former boarder told a group leader on the Westrek program that he had been sexually abused by the warden during his time at St Andrew's Hostel. He asked the group leader if she could have the warden's activities investigated. The group leader asked the local Police Sergeant how she should proceed and was advised to obtain a statement with names, dates and other details. The group leader then reported the matter to her manager at the Department for Employment and Training (DET) who advised her to raise it with a Hostel board member who was also involved with the Westrek program. The Hostel board member 'rebuffed and berated' the group leader for raising the allegations, so the group leader confronted the warden directly. The warden did not deny the allegations, but 'laughed at her and told her that he would have her sacked'. Within two days, the group worker was transferred from Katanning at the warden's insistence. The senior manager who organised the transfer did not take any other action on the allegations as he understood the Katanning police had been informed. The warden continued with a campaign to have the group leader sacked and she was asked by the DET superiors to resign, but refused. She remained in her employment on the basis of an understanding that the allegations about McKenna would be 'raised with the appropriate authorities' and meanwhile she was 'sworn to secrecy'. DET officials did not take the matter further because they understood the allegations were already in the hands of the police. A serving Police Inspector (Inspector Todd) and Hostel board member (Anslie Evans, who in 2012 was a Shire Councillor at Katanning) had 'adverse findings' made against them 'because of the impact that their conduct had on the actions of public officers' (p.137-171).
- In 1986, a female boarder at the Hostel spoke openly to her peers about the warden's inappropriate behaviour with some male boarders. After walking into McKenna's room and finding him with a group of male students she swore directly at McKenna. She rang her mother to report what she had seen and express her belief that she would be expelled. The boarder's mother was called to a meeting with the Chairman of the Hostel board and told her daughter would be expelled. The mother then said she would take the matter to the Minister for Education, who was a family friend, and the threat of expulsion was withdrawn. The Chair of the Hostel board failed in his public duty to investigate the allegation and by deferring the proposed expulsion so as to avoid Education Department investigating the matter (p.173-177).
- In 1987, a Katanning High School student (non-boarder) handed a school official a note from a boarder about the warden's behaviour towards boys at the hostel. The identity of the school official who received the note was not established by the Inquiry, but whoever received it failed in their public duty. The school officer immediately informed the warden of the allegations, berated the student informer and threatened her with defamation and intimidated her into apologising to the warden. These actions contributed to the ability of the warden to continue to offend (p.183-191).

- In August 1990, a male boarder who had experienced 'a long period of grooming' by the warden was subjected to an attempted sexual assault. He telephoned his mother and arranged to be removed from the Hostel. After his mother arrived they went straight to the High School Principal, who was also the Secretary of the Hostel board. A series of meetings between the boy's family and Hostel board members followed. The warden circulated a story that the boy had been expelled from the Hostel for stealing and that these allegations were an attempt to discredit the warden. On 27 September 1990, the warden was arrested and charged with three offences of gross indecency against another boarder whose identity was not known at the time, but the Principal assumed (incorrectly) that it related to the August allegation. The boy was 'rebuked' by the Principal, 'vilified and ostracised' by his peers and received a letter in November 1990 from the warden's solicitors threatening defamation proceedings. The Principal failed in his public duty by rejecting the allegation as a lie, and responding 'in a partisan way' by providing the warden with a significant amount of support and actively rallying the community against the student. The Hostel board as a whole also failed in its public duty by failing to investigate the allegation and providing 'active and public support' of the warden (p.211-225).
- After Dennis McKenna's arrest, his brother Neil was upgraded to acting warden until a new warden was appointed in September 1991. The new supervisor soon advised the board of behavioural and supervision problems at the Hostel. In October 1991 a male boarder was suspended for alleged stealing. He reported to his father that the real reason for the expulsion was that he saw Neil McKenna acting inappropriately with a female boarder. The father raised the matter with the Chairman of the Hostel board and was invited to a meeting of the board to discuss it. The board did not accept the allegation against Neil McKenna. However, the new High School Principal and Hostel warden decided to investigate the matter outside the board. They found the allegations against Neil McKenna were true but the girls involved did not want to press charges. While the Hostel board failed in its public duty to investigate the allegations against Neil McKenna, the warden and the Principal fulfilled their duty and brought about Neil McKenna's removal from the Hostel (p.227-232).

Gallery



Kartanup

Description: This is a picture of the property called Reidy House, which was known as Kartanup and St Rita's Hostel during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985, it became an annexe of St Andrew's Hostel at Katanning. This photograph was taken by Helen Munt.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Country High School Hostels Authority, State of Western Australia \(1960 - current\)](#)
The Country High School Hostels Authority was required by s7(1)(b) of its Act to 'supervise and maintain' this residential college.

Related Events

- [Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel \[Katanning\], Western Australia \(December 2011 - August 2012\)](#)
- [Apology to the victims of abuse at St Andrew's Hostel, Katanning, Government of Western Australia \(19 September 2012\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Anglican Diocese of Bunbury \(1904 - current\)](#)
The Anglican Diocese of Bunbury no longer administered the hostel after 1970. However, the Diocese remained on the hostel Board until 1974.
Date: 1971 - 1974

- [Kartanup \(1987 - 1990\)](#)

Kartanup was an annexe of St Andrew's Hostel.

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