

# Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel [Katanning], Western Australia

December 2011 – August 2012

URL: <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/document-collections/st-andrews-hostel-inquiry>

## Details

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A Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel in Katanning began in December 2011. The government appointed the Hon. Peter Blaxell, a former Supreme Court Judge, as Special Inquirer to examine the conduct and response of relevant public officials and government agencies to allegations of sexual abuse at St Andrew's Hostel in Katanning, and related organisations. The Inquiry finished in August 2012 and the Government responded in parliament on 19 September 2012. The Inquiry found that there had been systemic failings in the way the Country High Schools Hostel Authority governed hostels between 1975 and 1990 and that the inaction of a number of other individuals contributed to ongoing sexual and other abuse against students at St Andrew's Hostel, Katanning and St Christopher's Hostel in Northam. The Government accepted all recommendations made by the Special Inquirer and gave 'in principle support' to closing the Country High Schools Hostel Authority and bringing its hostels within the Department of Education. An ex gratia scheme 'to assist victims' for the 'suffering they endured' would begin from 30 November 2012 for 'four to six months', with a maximum payment of \$45,000.

On 19 September 2012, the Premier praised 'all those people who bravely brought their distressing experiences' to the Inquiry, and the 'families and other concerned community members' who assisted people through that process, and issued a formal apology.

## Background

The Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel was established under Section 24H(2) of the Public Sector Management Act 1994, because its purpose was to examine the conduct and response of public officials and government agencies to allegations of sexual abuse at St Andrew's and related organisations.

The Warden of St Andrew's Hostel from 1975 to 1990 was Dennis McKenna. His brother Neil McKenna was the senior male supervisor for the final five years of that time. In 1991, Dennis McKenna was convicted of 19 offences and in 2011 he pleaded guilty to a further 10 offences relating to sexual abuse of students at St Andrew's. In 2012, Neil McKenna was convicted of three offences against a female student. After Dennis McKenna's guilty pleas in August 2011, questions were raised in the media and in parliament about why his offending had been able to continue. 'Concerned people' came forward and alleged that authorities had in fact been informed about these offences over a period of many years, but nothing was done. The Premier, the Hon. Colin Barnett MLA directed the Public Sector Commissioner to establish a Special Inquiry. The report, *St Andrew's Hostel Katanning: How the system and society failed our children* was handed to the Public Sector Commissioner on 3 August 2012 and tabled by the Premier in parliament on 19 September 2012.

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry, which was announced on 17 November 2011 were:

- Examine when any allegations were made, who they were made to, what action was taken in response to those allegations, and the appropriateness of any action taken.

- Consider any evidence of allegations of sexual abuse by any person at or connected with the hostel or related organisations.
- Report with findings about why the behaviour of staff the subject of allegations at St Andrews Hostel was able to continue for an extended period; and
- Make recommendations on any disciplinary action that should be taken against any public official as a consequence of the findings; and any changes that should be made to the policies, procedures or operations of relevant government agencies as a consequence of the findings.

A Special Inquirer, former Supreme Court Judge the Hon. Peter Blaxell was appointed on 22 November 2011.

## The Inquiry

The Inquiry used media coverage, a dedicated email address and website and freecall 1800 hotline to stimulate submissions. Public sector agencies were also strongly encouraged to provide information. Crisis care counsellors from the Department for Child Protection and Family Support were made available to any people who gave information to the Inquiry. Public hearings started in February 2012. The Investigation Unit attached to the Inquiry made contact with 319 people, received 127 signed statements, made 146 file notes and conducted 25 formal interviews (please see pages 16-17 of the report for more details). Around 180 police searches relating to addresses, criminal offences and vehicle record checks were made by the WA Police during the Inquiry. In 40 days of public hearings, the Inquiry heard from 85 witnesses in person and took 64 written statements. Transcripts were made available through the Public Sector Commission website within one working day of each hearing.

Because the Inquiry was held under the Public Sector Management Act, it was not bound by the rules of evidence as it would be in a court case, for example. So the Special Inquirer was able to make some choices about the methods that would be used to gather information. Along with examining records made at the time the events took place, he also decided to hear as much oral testimony as possible and to hear that evidence in public. In his report, the Special Inquirer commented on the challenges in taking and giving oral evidence in the Inquiry:

- lapse of time and the need to seek documentary records to support witness statements
- availability of witnesses when the events occurred nearly 40 years ago
- reluctance of witnesses, particularly victims of sexual abuse, to be publicly identified
- the trauma of 'remembering (and reliving)'.

The Special Inquirer acknowledged media cooperation in preserving the anonymity of victims who did not want their identities made public. He also acknowledged that all witnesses (even those who were not victims) may have been at risk of significant psychological trauma and non-victims 'were also at risk of unfair reputational damage simply as a result of the evidence of their alleged conduct being given in public and being subject to media commentary'. The methods the Inquiry established to achieve procedural fairness are discussed in the report (pages 12-13).

The importance of records was also acknowledged in the report (p.15):

*Locating and examining pertinent documentary evidence was critical in identifying lines of inquiry, and in supporting, clarifying or challenging the evidence and recollections of witnesses. These records also provided context in relation to the environment at various hostels, community values and attitudes, and the government policies and processes which applied at the material time.*

The Inquiry was not set up to examine the extent of sexual abuse and so where matters arose that might have led to criminal charges they were referred to the WA Police and not investigated by the Inquiry. In all, 11 matters were referred: 9 people disclosed allegations of abuse at a Hostel operated by the Country High Schools Hostel Authority; 1 person alleged abused at a non-Government organisation; and evidence of an 'inappropriate

relationship by a person in authority' (p.5).

## The Report

In tabling the report in parliament on 19 September 2012, the Hon Colin Barnett MLA, Premier of Western Australia, highlighted the following findings:

- A number of 'brave individuals' tried to alert authorities to Dennis McKenna's sexual abuse of boys at St Andrew's Hostel but they were either 'not listened to' or 'actively diverted.' The report 'documents in detail' 20 unsuccessful attempts by victims, other hostel residents, parents and teachers to disclose the abuse to authorities.
- At least 48 individuals alleged sexual abuse at St Andrew's Hostel: 41 against Dennis and 7 against Neil McKenna.
- A significant factor in McKenna's ability to continue his abuse was the 'regimented manner' and 'veil of secrecy' at the hostel, using 'a mixture of favouritism, intimidation, threats and tight control of the behaviour of hostel residents'.
- McKenna successfully 'groomed' the Katanning community 'into accepting him in a positive light' even though 'from about 1980 there was an increasing awareness' within that community about rumours that McKenna was sexually abusing boys at the hostel.
- Sexual abuse by either the warden or supervisor was alleged at four other Country High Schools Hostel Authority hostels prior to 1990. This included allegations from 18 people who had been at St Christopher's Hostel in Northam between 1963 and 1977.
- Findings were made against a number of public officials who are now deceased or retired, and also against two currently-serving public officials.
- There have been marked improvements in the awareness, reporting and management of child sexual abuse in public sector agencies and the community generally.
- The sexual abuse of children in the hostels has had a 'devastating impact' on victims and their families.

### Grooming

In the Special Inquiry into abuse at St Andrew's Hostel, Katanning, evidence was given about the type of grooming behaviours used by the warden who was convicted of sexual abuse of children in his care. These grooming behaviours included establishing a regime of fear and favour among the children:

*Special treats, or rewards, for students the warden decided to favour, such as:*

- staying up late
- watching TV and movies in the warden's flat
- being given alcohol, soft drink or lollies
- going on special trips
- being appointed to 'positions of authority over other students' such as being made a hostel prefect.

*Real or implied threats from the warden of the consequences of falling out of favour or disclosing abuse or suspicions of misconduct, such as:*

- being put on unpopular duties (cleaning toilets, for example)
- 'scraggings' (squeezing boys' genitals in order to cause pain)
- being subject to a campaign of humiliation in front of other boarders
- being threatened that parents would be told about a child's smoking
- allegations of stealing, threats of suspension or expulsion and dire warnings that the student's bad reputation would spread to every other hostel in the State
- constant reinforcement about the warden's influence with people in authority
- warnings about prosecution for defamation.

*Activities designed to sexually arouse boys, such as showing them pornographic movies.*

The warden also groomed the community, so that he presented himself in a positive light:

*He lifted the reputation of the Hostel by increasing enrolments, involving the students in community service, and organising fundraising activities for facilities at the Hostel which brought accolades upon himself. St Andrew's Hostel, report p.59*

## Recommendations

The Inquiry made five recommendations to ensure that 'the public sector continues to evolve and operate' so as to protect children. The Premier tabled these recommendations as follows:

1. Implement a comprehensive child-focused complaint system for the Country High School Hostels Authority.
2. Establish a central child-focused complaint system which would be a 'one -stop shop, to encourage and protect the disclosure of child abuse'.
3. Designate Country High Schools Hostel Authority staff as 'mandatory reporters' under the Children and Community Services Act 2004.
4. Review the Department of Education's child abuse prevention curriculum.
5. Develop a 'comprehensive training program for hostel board members' so that they were better able to understand and exercise their 'duty of care, complaint handling and protective behaviours' responsibilities.

The Government accepted all recommendations made by the Special Inquirer and gave 'in principle support' to closing the Country High Schools Hostel Authority and bringing its hostels within the Department of Education. The Premier also announced that an ex gratia scheme 'to assist victims' for the 'suffering they endured' would begin on 30 November 2012 and operate for 'four to six months', administered by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet who would also oversee the implementation of the recommendations. A maximum payment of \$45,000 would be available under the ex-gratia scheme and the 1800 Crisis Care support hotline would be in place until 30 January 2013.

The Premier also said the Government would implement a 'comprehensive child-friendly complaints system' operated by the Commissioner for Children and Young People by 15 December 2012. This would be a one-stop shop to complement rather than 'replace or duplicate' existing reporting options and would 'provide a mechanism to support children or young people in making such a complaint'. All changes that would not require legislative amendment would be implemented by 15 December 2012 and any necessary legislative changes would be subject to implementation after legislation had been reviewed.

Where findings were made against public officials who were deceased or retired, no further action could be taken against them under the Public Sector Management Act. Where findings were made against two serving individuals, these matters were referred by the Public Service Commissioner to the relevant agencies.

In a message to those reading his report, *St Andrew's Hostel Katanning: How the system and society failed our children*, the Special Inquirer said:

*The Inquiry would not have been able to make the headway that it has without the assistance of many members of the public who came forward with information pertinent to my terms of reference. I also acknowledge all of those people still deeply affected by the unimaginable events that this Inquiry has had to examine, and express my gratitude for their support.*

The Premier quoted from the report in the speech he gave when tabling the report in parliament:

*Hopefully the lessons learned from what happened at St Andrew's will help ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again.*

## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Related Events

- [Apology to the victims of abuse at St Andrew's Hostel, Katanning, Government of Western Australia \(19 September 2012\)](#)
- [Country High School Hostels Ex-Gratia Scheme, Western Australia \(30 November 2012 - December 2013\)](#)  
An ex gratia scheme was established by the Government of Western Australia as a result of the St Andrew's Hostel inquiry.

#### Related Organisations

- [Anglican Diocese of Bunbury \(1904 - current\)](#)
- [St Christopher's Hostel, Northam \(1941 - 2002\)](#)
- [Craig House \(1949 - 1978\)](#)  
The abuse of some students at Craig House was mentioned during the St Andrew's Hostel inquiry.
- [Merredin Residential College \(1954 - current\)](#)
- [Country High School Hostels Authority, State of Western Australia \(1960 - current\)](#)
- [Narrogin Residential College \(1963 - current\)](#)
- [St Andrew's Hostel \(1964 - 2009\)](#)
- [Carnarvon High School Hostel \(1964 - 1980s\)](#)
- [Dellahale House \(1964 - 2001\)](#)
- [Hardie House, South Hedland \(1964? - 1990?\)](#)
- [John Frewer House \(1968 - 2001\)](#)
- [Albany Residential College \(1974? - current\)](#)  
Staffing at the Albany Residential College (Amity House) was raised as a matter of concern at the Inquiry.

### Resources

- Public Sector Commission, Western Australia, [Transcripts \[St Andrew's Hostel Inquiry\]](#), 19 September 2012
- *Victims respond to the Blaxell report into abuse at Katanning Hostel*, ABC News online, 20 September 2012
- Herft, Rev. Roger, *Statement by the Most Reverend Roger Herft Archbishop of Perth*, 20 September 2012

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