

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

The Special Inquiry into St Andrew's Hostel in Katanning was undertaken in 2011-12. The Inquiry was established under Section 24H(2) of the Public Sector Management Act 1994, 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 Hon. Peter Blaxell, a former Supreme Court Judge, was appointed as Special Inquirer.

Background

The Country High Schools Hostels Authority governed the operations of education hostels such as St Andrew's across Western Australia. The Warden of St Andrew's Hostel from 1975 to 1990 was Dennis McKenna. His brother, Neil McKenna, was the senior supervisor from 1985-1990. In 1991, Dennis McKenna was convicted of 19 offences and in 2011 he plead 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.

Multiple 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. Premier Colin Barnett directed the Public Sector Commissioner to establish a Special Inquiry.

The Inquiry

The Inquiry was to examine when any allegations were made, who they were made to and what action was taken in response. The Terms of Reference also enabled the Inquiry to investigate why the behaviour of McKenna was able to continue for so long, and to make recommendations about disciplinary action and changes to policies and procedures that should occur as a result of other findings.

The Inquiry called for submissions from November 2011, and public hearings started in February 2012. 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. This meant the Special Inquirer was able to make choices about the methods that would be used to gather information. Along with examining records created at the time of the incidents, the Special Inquirer decided to hear as much oral testimony as possible and to hear that evidence in public.

The Inquiry received 127 statements, made 146 file notes and conducted 25 formal interviews. In 40 days of public hearings, the Inquiry heard from 85 witnesses and took 64 written statements. The Inquiry was not set up to examine the extent of sexual abuse, so where matters arose that might have led to criminal charges, they were referred to the WA Police.

Support was provided in multiple ways and counsellors were available to all witnesses as well as support provided to their family members.

The Inquiry finished in August 2012.

The Report and recommendations

The Inquiry's report, *St Andrew's Hostel Katanning: How the system and society failed our children*, was tabled in WA 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 individuals contributed to ongoing sexual and other abuse against students at St Andrew's Hostel, Katanning and St Christopher's Hostel in Northam.

The report made a number of findings, including that there were a many people who 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. This included at least 48 individuals who had alleged sexual abuse at St Andrew's Hostel.

The report noted that a significant factor in McKenna's ability to continue his abuse was the regimented manner and veil of secrecy at the hostel, and that a mixture of favouritism, intimidation, threats and tight control of the behaviour of hostel residents was used. It found that grooming was used by McKenna to establish a regime of fear and favour among the children. The report also noted that McKenna successfully groomed the Katanning community into thinking of him positively, even as there was increasing awareness about the sexual abuse.

The report also found that 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.

The report made five recommendations focussed on implementing child-focussed complaint systems for the disclosure of child abuse, improved governance for the Country High Schools Hostels Authority, and the development of a training program for hostel board members about their responsibilities regarding duty of care, complaint handling and protective behaviours.

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. This happened in 2016.

The Premier also announced that an ex-gratia payment scheme for victims of sexual abuse at the hostels. A maximum payment of \$45,000 was available. This was administered by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet who also oversaw the implementation of the recommendations.

In tabling the report on 19 September 2012, the Premier also issued an Apology to those who had been abused at St Andrew's Hostel and their families. An apology was also issued by Rev. Roger Herft, then Archbishop of Perth, on behalf of the Anglican Diocese of Perth.

More info

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

- [Albany Residential College \(1974? - current\)](#)

Staffing at the Albany Residential College (Amity House) was raised as a matter of concern at the Inquiry.

- [Country High School Hostels Authority, State of Western Australia \(1960 - 2017\)](#)

- [Craig House \(1949 - 1978\)](#)

The abuse of some students at Craig House was mentioned during the St Andrew's Hostel inquiry.

- [Carnarvon High School Hostel \(1964 - 1980s\)](#)

- [Dellahale House \(1964 - 2001\)](#)

- [John Frewer House \(1968 - 2001\)](#)

- [Hardie House, South Hedland \(1964? - 1990?\)](#)

- [St Andrew's Hostel \(1964 - 2009\)](#)

- [Merredin Residential College \(1954 - current\)](#)

- [Narrogin Residential College \(1963 - current\)](#)

- [St Christopher's Hostel, Northam \(1941 - 2002\)](#)

- [Anglican Diocese of Bunbury \(1904 - current\)](#)

Resources

- *Victims respond to the Blaxell report into abuse at Katanning Hostel*, ABC News online, 20 September 2012
- Swain, Shurlee, [History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children](#), October 2014

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