

Politics WA [Child protection](#)

# WA opposition calls for 'full time' Child Protection Minister in wake of damning report



By [Hamish Hastie](#)

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The opposition has called on the McGowan government to appoint a “full-time” Child Protection Minister after a damning report revealed the Department of Communities placed children with harmful sexual behaviours alongside other vulnerable children in state care.

The report, released last week, focused on the story of Macie\* who in 2017 was sexually assaulted when she was 13 after she was placed in residential care with a teenage boy who was a known sexual offender. Both children’s pleas to the department to be removed from the home fell on deaf ears.



The whereabouts of two children under the care of the Department of Communities are unknown. JOHN DONEGAN

Opposition child protection spokesman Nick Goiran blasted his government counterpart, Simone McGurk, who was unable to provide figures to an estimates hearing on Tuesday about how many times reportable offenders had been placed in department care homes with other vulnerable children since 2017.

“For three years I have been calling for victims of sexual abuse to be kept safe from their attackers, whether at school or at home, and these revelations that the department kept those housed with known perpetrators despite repeated pleas for help beggars belief,” Mr Goiran said.

“The time has long passed for the McGowan government to start treating this matter as a priority.

“It is inconceivable that, given just how serious this is, that the minister is incapable or unwilling to come clean to the Parliament and advise precisely how common this practice has been over the last four years.”

Ms McGurk is also minister for Women’s Interests, Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, and Community Services. The former child protection department was amalgamated into Communities during the McGowan government’s machinery of government changes in 2017.

Mr Goiran claimed Ms McGurk was a “part-time Child Protection Minister” overseeing a mega-department that had a part-time focus on child protection.

During the estimates hearing, Ms McGurk said the question from Vasse MLA Libby Mettam about the number of times offenders had been placed with other children was too broad, and suggested she put it on notice despite also stating similar questions had been asked in the upper house in the past.

“Look, with all due respect, that is such a broad question at the moment there are 5300 children in CEO’s care,” she said.

“I can’t answer that question here. I can’t answer that question at all, and I would suggest that you place that question on notice.”

Facing questions about the report and its findings during estimates, Ms McGurk said the policies that allowed children to live with reportable offenders were “inherited” by her government, but they had since changed.

She said no reportable offender was currently living with other children and the department had committed to not knowingly placing a reportable offender in a residential care setting with other young people.

“So there is a change of policy that has been taken by the department as a result of that particular case.”

Last week Ms McGurk said since Macie’s experience the government had made significant changes in residential care including extra training for residential care workers, development of a child-friendly complaints policy, and resources to support children to speak up.

Commissioner for Children and Young People Colin Pettit said in his report that the young girl’s placement in a residential care home with another child with a history of sexual assaults was not a unique event or even an isolated practice in WA.

“Case records, department policies and the experiences of department and [community sector organisation] staff demonstrated that other children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours have resided in out-of-home care settings with other children,” he said.

Mr Pettit found the management systems of the department were not fit for purpose, and impeded decision-making for children and young people and organisational accountability.

The report urged the state government to implement all recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse.

Mr Goiran has in the past railed against one key recommendation from that royal commission, which called for mandatory reporting requirements for priests.

Speaking last week after tabling the report Ms McGurk said the state government was committed to implementing all relevant recommendations from the royal commission.

## Communities lose track of two children for months

In the estimates hearing it was also revealed the whereabouts of one child under the care of the department has been unknown for at least 100 days while another has been missing for more than 50 days.

Earlier this month, the WA government admitted that, as of August 31, the living arrangements of 11 children aged between 13 and 17 who should be under the care of the department were unknown.

East Metropolitan Labor MLC Samantha Rowe told Parliament’s upper house last week that WA Police were helping in the search for the two children and were in regular contact with their family and friends.

Ms McGurk was unable to say whether the children had since been found, despite getting regular briefings from the department.

“I don’t have an update as of today, I’m sorry, in respect to those two young people,” she said.

WA Police directed questions to the department, which has been approached for comment.

Ms McGurk was approached for further comment.

*\*Not her real name.*



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