

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASHLEY, YOUTH JUSTICE AND DETENTION MET IN THE LAUNCESTON TOWN HALL ON TUESDAY 13 MARCH 2007.

Ms LEXIE BRIENT WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Hall) - Lexie, obviously you have taken an interest in what we are doing and have read the terms of reference for Ashley. You have some views you would like to share with us, so I will hand it over to you.

Ms BRIENT - I will talk about Ashley to start with. It used to be a deterrent and boys who escaped would be given a longer detention. When it came close the end of their sentence, they would break out, take a car so they would end up back in there. Apart from the nuisance of cars being taken for a joy-ride the boys were an accepted part of the community; they played cricket and things like that and joined in community activities.

Now, fences are higher, stronger and there is more security. The inmates escape a lot more frequently and they are not highly regarded in the community. It is not a deterrent to local youth. There seems to be no rehabilitation because after they get out and say, 'Right I am out, no problems'. Within a couple of weeks they are doing exactly the same thing and finally they go back in for a while. There are some who have been in and out quite a few times. The first-time offenders seem to become repeat offenders very rapidly.

Now, on the issue of youth justice. To be quite honest, I see it as a joke. It makes sure the youth can do as they like, regardless of the affect on other community members. It is not even justice for the youth. If they continue with this behaviour, as soon as they turn 18 they are going to come to a nasty stop because they will not be able to trot backwards and forwards to Ashley, or be told, 'You are only a youngster, do not worry about it' and get a pat on the head.

At present in Westbury, there is a large population of older people who have retired there. It is a good place to retire and some local youths are having a field day. It is not all of them; the majority is really good. This small group verbally abuses other residents, damages properties by smashing windows, tearing palings of fences and wrecking letterboxes. They are also a nuisance with loud name calling and very late at night they throw rocks on roofs and some of the rocks miss and go through the windows. They persist in visiting although people have told them that they do not want them there. I have been told, 'We can go wherever we like.' I am sorry, not in my backyard you are not. They beat other youths up and demand money from them. Women living alone are favourite targets and there are quite a few they harass on a regular basis.

One group came to my place, demanding to see a young man who was visiting me; they demand money from him on a regular basis. I told them to go away and called the police. They threatened to smash my windows and I know it was no idle threat. It did not stop me, but it was no idle threat because they have done it to others.

Vandalism is a constant problem. Public facilities are regularly broken into, and items stolen or smashed. In the recreation ground I do not think there is one building that has not been broken into in the last 12 months and there are others. The offenders are in a small group which roams the streets at all hours of the night. They seem to have no parental supervision. Most have been charged and convicted on various occasions, but there are no visible negative consequences for them. The only thing that seems to stop them at all is restraining orders.

After constant harassment and visits from these young people, a friend has taken restraining orders out and that involves a fair bit of paperwork, cost money and can take up to three months to put in place. In the meantime they are enjoying themselves. They think, 'We will really play up now because there are going to be restraining orders shortly'. They will stay away when the restraining order is in place, but as soon as it is up, they are back doing exactly the same thing. It is mainly nuisance-type things; like, when you get home at 10 p.m. and you have no power because they stolen the fuse box, the contact breakers, those things. They also slash hoses, slash the screen door and break windows of course, that is just standard. Westbury is not a pleasant place to live at the moment because of this small group.

Mr MARTIN - When you say small group, what number?

Ms BRIENT - I would say about six or seven. There are three pretty constant ones and there are a few hangers-on. Two in particular, a couple of twins, have been in and out of Ashley and they are only 13 or 14; and they have a few little brothers and sisters coming along.

Mr MARTIN - There are similar problems right around the State I think.

Mr WILKINSON - What you are saying is, it is more a police thing and a lack of police presence as opposed to Ashley, isn't it?

Ms BRIENT - Ashley is no use, basically. They may as well let them all go. The police are based at Deloraine. There are only a few. The normal waiting time for police to come is half an hour. There are only, I think, two or three, especially at night. They could be at Mole Creek or somewhere at an accident and of course they are not going to come. A couple of months ago I saw an older fellow with the alcohol meeting up with the young ones and so I knew what was going to happen and I rang the police. By the time they arrived it was an hour or more later and they had all disappeared.

CHAIR - One of the witnesses this morning was concerned that if there was an escape from Ashley, residents did not get sufficient warning. Have you had any warning?

Ms BRIENT - I have never had any warning and I live in Westbury, just at the back of the Council Chambers.

CHAIR - You cannot expect every individual to be alerted obviously, but you would like to see something happen in regard to media, radio?

Ms BRIENT - Something, so at least you would make sure you lock your car.

CHAIR - I am aware that often it is a target for cars that go missing in Westbury.

Ms BRIENT - Yes. There used to be a siren, I think, but that probably made too much noise.

Mr DEAN - We do not want to keep you awake.

Ms BRIENT - There is siren that goes off just down the road at the White House. I do not know whether it is triggered by possums or whether it is somebody trying to break in, but it goes off regularly. You just wake up and think, 'Oh yes, that is such and such' and go back to sleep. It does not necessarily alarm you.

CHAIR - Aside from policing issues at Westbury and a small group of youth do you have anything you would add about Ashley at all? Are you familiar with any of the operations there?

Ms BRIENT - I know of some of the things but in recent years I have lost touch. There does not seem to be anything in the way of rehabilitation. I mean, put them up there for a while and what are they going to do when they get out? Exactly the same. Particularly the ones I am talking about, they have no resources. They did not go to school for very long. The 13 and 14 year-olds should be at school now but they are not at school. Their education is practically nothing, parental control is absolutely useless and even if they could keep them home or something, how are they going to do it? They are not allowed to lock them up and they are not allowed to tie them up. They are not allowed to keep them inside and lock the door; they are now allowed to hit them. How are they going to keep 13 and 14-year-olds at home? I don't know.

Mr DEAN - It's not easy.

Ms BRIENT - No. Perhaps a curfew as they have had in other towns. I would not like a curfew in general because there are a lot of good kids who go out to activities at night. But at least if they were on the street at night and they had already been pulled up by the police or been to Ashley and the police were aware - it is like with a restraining order - if they can see them in the place where they shouldn't be and there is an order they can move them out. But if they are just in there visiting then they can't do anything. If there was some order that, say, 'these ones are not to be out on the street after eight o'clock at night'. It seems to be worse at night; during the day they are not too bad.

Mrs JAMIESON - We have been told that there is no police presence in Westbury all the time, so how do you enforce the curfew?

Ms BRIENT - It is like with a restraining order. How can you enforce a restraining order if there are no police there?

Mrs JAMIESON - Have you been a long-term resident of Westbury?

Ms BRIENT - I was born in Westbury.

Mrs JAMIESON - Have things got worse, do you think?

Ms BRIENT - Yes.

Mrs JAMIESON - Just in the last year or two or over the last six years?

Ms BRIENT - I suppose the last 10 years. My parents live just up the street from me and they never ever locked their door. You just walked in any hour of the day or night, but about 10 years ago my mother started locking the door. She was by herself then. Now there are very few people around Westbury who would go just two minutes around to the shop without locking the door. I know I wouldn't and I am not a terribly nervy person. If I am going around to the shop, I lock the door.

Mrs JAMIESON - In an earlier life had you ever been involved with Ashley at all - committee functions or fundraising?

Ms BRIENT - Community functions. The boys used to play cricket and my father was in the cricket team so we met people from Ashley and had afternoon tea after the cricket. I know there were other functions around the town. They were part of the community and it was, 'Oh well, they are up there for some reason', and nobody ever bothered to find out why they were there. But it wasn't a case of, 'Oh no, those ones from Ashley', or anything like that.

Mrs JAMIESON - Has there been a different element of people move into the Westbury area to live? In other words, maybe bringing in some undesirable characters.

Ms BRIENT - The twins are certainly new to the area. But one of them is not; he and his family have been there for a long time, so it is not just the new ones.

Mr WILKINSON - Are they known as the 'Maccas'? Are they the twins you are talking about?

Ms BRIENT - No, it is the Donovan twins. They have two names, they don't need another one.

Mr DEAN - Maybe those issues want bringing to the attention of the police, if you have not done that.

Ms BRIENT - The police know about it.

Mr DEAN - It is important to keep reinforcing it.

Ms BRIENT - At the moment a fellow has a restraining order on the twins. He was back in court this afternoon to extend the restraining order.

Mrs JAMIESON - Do you know if there has been a community action group set up to try to address the problems within Westbury?

Ms BRIENT - There was a progress committee which was very good to start with. At the first meeting there were 80 people, at the next there were 40 and so on until there were only about three in a very short time. That was one of the things they were talking about. As for a special group other than that, no there has not been anything in recent times.

There has been a lot said and some of the business people don't like them in their shops but unless they actually get a restraining order - and you need something specific to get a restraining order. You can't just say, 'I want a restraining order because I don't like that fellow'.

Mrs JAMIESON - You haven't heard if Andy's 24-hour service has any problems at all? It has a fairly big open area around it, hasn't it.

Ms BRIENT - I don't think so; they may have, but I have not heard of any. One of the worst hits is the recreation ground and the bowls club. At the recreation ground of a night they now have a great big light on top of one of the buildings - and it showed up the neighbour's place beautifully until they rearranged it. The bowls club, which is around the back of a lot of the houses, is an ideal place to get through into the houses that border it.

Mrs JAMIESON - And the elderly day centre hasn't been affected at all?

Ms BRIENT - They have had a few things happen but not a lot. That is used quite a lot now. That seems to have helped in other areas such as Victoria - some of the places that were having a lot of vandalism. The more it was used I suppose the less opportunity.

No, that doesn't seem too bad. At one stage they were having fun because they used to set off the alarms and then wait to see how long before the police arrived. They used that as a lark before they did some other damage, but not recently, I think.

CHAIR - Lexie, thank you very much for your interest. Beverley, the witness who preceded you, had an interest in local and policing issues and we appreciate that there are several issues there. Thank you for coming along.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.