



The Hon. Josh Willie MLC
Chair
Legislative Council Select Committee – Tasmanian Child and Family Centres
Parliament House
HOBART Tasmania 7000

22 August 2017

Dear Mr Willie,

Re: Inquiry into Tasmanian Child and Family Centres

The Committee has been appointed to inquire into and report upon the options for Tasmanian Child and Family Centres (CFC), including the challenges and benefits of an integrated collaborative service delivery model, the role of the Centres in early learning and support to families and carers, the outcomes and broader impacts to the communities where CFCs are located, and the level of current and future Government funding.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People my role is to advocate for all children and young people in Tasmania. In performing my functions I am obliged to:

- (a) do so according to the principle that the wellbeing and best interests of children and young people are paramount; and
- (b) observe any relevant provisions of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Background

CFCs were established in Tasmania between 2011 and 2014 by the then Labor Government, with 12 centres established to date. The establishment of CFCs was announced in response to widespread global evidence demonstrating the critical importance of the early years, and the need for a significant change in the way services to children and families were delivered.

This is consistent with the approach that I have advocated, and continue to advocate for, as Commissioner. Providing services to children and families early is more cost effective, and has long term benefits for children, families and broader society.

The vision for CFCs was to ensure that services were delivered through a fully integrated service model. This model aimed to not simply move services to a single location but to deliver services underneath an overarching vision and shared goals.



The sites were chosen after extensive research to identify communities with both the need and capacity to support a centre. The key criteria for selection were:

- A higher than average percentage of children under four years of age;
- Demographic characteristics that exhibit one or more of the following in percentages higher than the state average – Aboriginal families, sole parent families, and young parents (maternal age less than 19);
- A high score on individual measures of social and economic exclusion including, for example, low educational attainment, housing stress, adult unemployment, and family income supplements; and
- High socioeconomic disadvantage.

The intended scope of the centres was to work with children from birth to age five and their families, with the goal of improving the health and educational outcomes of this cohort of children.

A formal and extensive evaluation of CFCs in Tasmania is yet to be undertaken, however a research paper was recently published (Taylor, Jose, van de Lageweg & Christensen, 2017) which provides some insights into how the CFCs have impacted on parent's use and experiences of early childhood education. The authors found that the single entry point for services through the CFC enabled parents to interact with service providers through 'soft contacts' which then enabled them to further engage with more targeted services as required. By having targeted services located at the CFC also enabled some parents to access services without disclosing to family and friends. The authors did however highlight two main challenges the centres face:

- (1) Increasing the reach of supports and services to fathers and male caregivers;
- (2) Developing ways to ensure the positive transition of children and families from CFCs to schools after the child turns five.

General Comment

Over the past couple of years I have visited a number of CFCs and spoken to staff and users of the centres about their experiences at the CFC. Through my own observations and conversations with centre stakeholders, I offer the following key benefits of CFCs:

- The CFCs are clearly popular places for children and families to meet others, share experiences, and interact with service providers in a casual setting;
- The locations of centres provide a space within that community where, in particular, young mothers feel safe to come and seek support;
- The range of programs and services offered through the centres are clearly needed in the community, and provide structured opportunities for learning alongside casual contact;
- Children and caregivers have access to a range of specialist services including psychologists, social workers, antenatal and child health nurses, paediatricians, speech pathologists and occupational therapists.



I have also been advised of a number of challenges to the establishment and operation of the centres:

- Despite efforts to offer coordinated services across Departments, there is often no 'stitching together' of services between different Departments i.e. Family Violence, Education and Antenatal Services.
- Funded staff members are sometimes provided according to a one-size-fits-all model, where, for example, all CFCs are given an Education Officer even though there may be a greater need in some CFCs for a Family Violence worker.
- The overlap between CFCs and Neighbourhood Houses has not been adequately addressed, and greater effort is required to ensure the transition for families between the services provided at the CFC and the Neighbourhood House is encouraged – rather than the CFC providing services beyond its scope.
- Staff at CFCs need to have additional time and support to undertake active outreach activities to ensure that services are available to those who are most vulnerable and hard to reach.
- Staff at the CFCs should be fully qualified and equipped to provide direct service provision to people accessing the centre, rather than being an additional referral pathway to a specialised service. The concept of the centres providing a full range of services needs to be fully realised.
- Consideration may be given to extending the age range of CFCs beyond age five in line with some other states and territories. Child and Parent Centres in Western Australia, for example, have a focus on birth to four years, but also provide services for families with children aged up to eight years. Child and Family Centres in the ACT provide programs for children up to 12 years.

Conclusion

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to express my views on this important issue.

Having read the submissions made to the Committee, it is clear there are a number of views on the effectiveness of CFCs and how the model should be continued in the future.

I look forward to the Committee's Report.

Yours sincerely

Mark Morrissey
Commissioner for Children and Young People