



SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE

CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRES

Overview of Lady Gowrie Tasmania

Lady Gowrie Tasmania (LGT) is a community owned not for profit organisation providing a range of services to children, families, early and middle childhood and allied professionals.

Governed by a skill based voluntary Board of Directors the organisation has continually provided services to the Tasmanian community since 1939. The organisation is viewed by government and non government organisations for the quality of its work and the values that underpin this work.

The range of services provided includes:

- Centre based long care day education and care
- Family day care
- Outside School Hours Care
- Occasional Care
- Preschool
- Professional Development and Support
- Family Support Service
- Inclusion Support Program

Operating state wide the organisation employs over 350 staff, provides education and care to over 4000 children, support 3000 families and delivers professional support and development to 2500 professionals.

Lady Gowrie Tasmania appreciates the opportunity to make a response to this review.

Background to Child and Family Centres in Tasmania

Child and Family Centres in Tasmania (CFC's) was a government initiative in 2009 with the announcement by the then Bartlett lead government that 30 centres were to be established across the state. Despite this number announced, twelve (12) CFC's were established with two funded by the Australian Government and another joint investment by the Australian and Tasmanian Government.

The location of the CFC's was based predominantly in areas of disadvantage and the demographics in terms of number of young children in the area. It was considered that children and families in these locations were vulnerable.

The CFC's were purpose built following a functional design brief that outlined the requirements that were incorporated in each Centre.

The model of service delivery **was** intended to be an integrated model bringing together a range of services to work in a collaborative and holistic manner to support children, families and communities. The model aimed to empower communities to have a level of control in respect of decision making as to which services to be provided from the Centre, the implementation process and governance. The services provided were intended to be a partnership between government and non government organisations.

LGT Response to the Terms of Reference

1. The challenges and benefits of an integrated collaborative model

Integration is the greatest benefit if it is planned and implemented correctly. A "one stop" shop for education and care, specialist services such as speech/hearing assessment, child health, and social worker support can benefit and enhance outcomes for children and their families. This especially important for the birth to four cohort where early detection is paramount to support early intervention.

There are large waiting times for specialist services such as language and speech issues, so early intervention are the key and a proactive approach. Because CFC's do not provide education and care they are unable to access the Australian Government Inclusion Support program that supports children with a disability, language and speech delays, autism and behavioural problems to be included and supported with specialist equipment, specialist health professionals and additional adult support. This results in a group of children not being diagnosed early and services in place to support them.

Integrated – a major omission was not to include an education and care service attached (only a small number have this element) as part of the CFC. The CFC brief was that they were not child care centres. This decision minimised opportunities for engagement and also limited cliental who could be accessing other support services.

Without any Lady Gowrie Tasmania personnel involved with a CFC (this in itself raises issues as LGT is the largest provider of education and care in Tasmania and provides a range of other programs that could have been advantageous to CFC's and highlights the lack of collaboration) our information is based on revisiting the conversations during presentations by an international consultant engaged to support the development of CFC's, during and after the establishment where she believed this was a glaring omission.

Families build trusting relationships with educators at education and care services. With families dropping and picking up children each day there is consistent interaction and conversations between educators and families. This supports the establishment of the partnership mode and builds confidence that is an enabler to direct families to support services without fear of being judged.

Working families, and indeed all families, regardless of postcode, have vulnerabilities which are largely ignored in the current CFC model. It is considered exclusive and not inclusive. There is no doubt that our most vulnerable should be supported but there is a growing need for **all** families to be supported – increasing societal pressure, evidence of more mental health issues, managing behaviours etc.

2. The role of CFC in providing early learning to children

There was a huge potential within this area, if the CFC's worked with the education and care sector. This did not occur, in fact, for the main there is little or no collaboration between the two. In reality, one agency is generously funded and on the other hand a service that is a business model with no funding just a reliance of utilisation and fee for service income. This in itself creates a barrier and feeling of inequity.

As only two CFC's are co located with education and care services the provision of early learning is conditional upon the model of service delivery and qualifications and experience of the staff engaged at the CFC. The key determinant of quality early learning is that the staff holds an early childhood qualification (minimum Diploma) and has experience working in the early childhood field. It is unclear of the requirement for staff engaged in the CFC's in respect of such qualifications, skills and experience.

So the provision of quality early learning is not clear. Regardless given the years prior to school is the critical period of development for young children any programs delivered from CFC's must be delivered by highly skilled and qualified early childhood professionals. The formative years are crucial and all children should have access to quality early learning.

Since the establishment of CFC's, the Tasmanian Education Department implemented the Launch into Learning Program on school sites. This program aims to encourage children and their families to engage with their local school. This

program is facilitated by qualified educators/teachers and may have impacted on any early learning programs being delivered by the CFC.

There is little integration with early childhood education and care services. Because of lack of partnerships with education and care services an opportunity has been lost. Education and care services have the skills, experience and knowledge that could be shared through direct service delivery, shared professional learning and development all that could enhance the outcomes for key stakeholders.

The amount of expenditure provided for professional development and research for CFC's has been significant. The former Early Years Foundation provided a substantial amount of funding for this purpose: \$900,000 by 2015 and a further \$400,000 from 2011-2014 and another \$400,000 since 2010 for action research. (*Department of Education: An overview of Child and Families- page 13*). This together with the in kind and operational support provided by the Department of Education as identified in the above report, it is clear that the current CFC model is expensive.

One key question is what will CFC's look like post 2020 with the lowering of the school starting age. Will they be predominantly providing services to families with children in the under 3 cohort? Or will they be the facility from which Kindergarten will be delivered given there will be additional cohort entering?

In summary the lack of interaction and collaboration with the education and care sector has been a lost opportunity! The divide between education and care services and CFC's is wide and must not be allowed to widen even further. It is time to revisit the intent, evaluate the investment against outcomes (cost/benefit) and develop models that are more inclusive of the wider community and foster collaboration with the early year's sector.

3. The role of CFC in providing education and support to families in their parenting role and participation in early learning programs

To support families it would be expected that qualified allied professionals across a range of disciplines would collaborate to support families participate in programs that would enhance their parenting role. We are unsure as to the qualifications, skills and experience of those working within the CFC's or indeed if there is a multi disciplinary approach.

It is essential that CFC staff hold early childhood qualification and have experience in the early years e.g. child development, how children learn and grow etc. As we know through our own Family Support Services (a government funded program as part of the Gateway) involvement, qualifications relating to social work do not adequately cover critical foundation knowledge such as child development etc.

Our most vulnerable families may not be attending CFC's – falling through the gaps as CFC's are predominantly viewed as a government agency and vulnerable families

feel threatened (in respect of loss of their children) and judged. Some are co located with LINC and Service Tasmania – causing confusion and compromises the integrity of the CFC model. Is it okay to be co located with such services and yet no education and care which has real synergies?

At a couple of Centres visited there were community volunteers working – this raised the issue of confidentiality and privacy as well as suitability of these individuals.

CFC's could play an important role in this area – however, before any program can be accessed, the building of respectful and trusting relationships is required. It is an unreal expectation that families would automatically participate in programs without feeling secure and confident in the environment and with those engaged to facilitate.

4. The outcomes and broader impacts of CFC to communities where they are located

Although reports indicate that CFC's have been successful, there are families and children still falling through the gaps, hence the Governments policy to change to the school starting age. Lady Gowrie Tasmania does not support the lowering of the school starting as it is not considered to be in the best interests of children.

Despite the promise of school environments being appropriate for this young cohort (as young as 3 1/2 years), it is believed that the rituals and routines of a school is not flexible or not based on the needs of individual children.

If Government want to support vulnerable children and families there are a myriad of models that could be developed that are more appropriate in respect of environments, early childhood qualified staff, curriculum and with proven experience in establishing and maintaining relationships with families to support their parenting role.

The impact of CFC's vary greatly and depends upon the leadership of the Co-ordinator. The importance of respectful and non judgemental attitude and a commitment to building relationships in a collaborative manner is a key element.

In three CFC's visited the facilities were under utilised by the community. Conversations with community members indicated that families were nervous and anxious because they saw them as another government agency and a threat. Comments such as *"they will take my children from me"* and *"I am not going to say much about my situation as they will dob me in"* were common.

5. The level of government funding to CFC and if there is a need for more in certain locations –

Integrated service provision model has many benefits if education and care services are directly on site. Working families in a busy society have assistance in one place, may also break down the deficit model view.

The amount of funding to build and equip CFC's was extensive and expensive with ongoing operational costs. It is possibly too early to undertake a cost: benefit analysis re: differences to the community (longitudinal study). Rather than operating in silos, connect with the education and care sector and look at opportunities within existing services to develop a similar model in supporting families and community.

Given the high cost of establishing and maintain CFC's; it is not recommended that the government continue to expand to achieve the original number announced. There is potential for a CFC in one of the fastest growing municipalities in southern Tasmania where there is population growth and a mixed socio economic demographic.

It is also viewed that all children and families are vulnerable regardless of their postcode. Therefore, as opposed to establishing more CFC's to provide pockets of support within distinct community, different models need to be established that broadens the reach and a more effective use of financial resources. Models include:

- An outreach service
- Support professionals located at existing education and care services
- Program of parent/family workshops facilitated within local communities or education and care services

Given the investment it is imperative that the investment is warranted, used to best advantage and continually evaluated to reflect current and emerging needs.

It is often viewed that the non government sector can deliver programs in a more cost effective and efficient manner. Is it time to outsource the program?

Other Matters

An example of how the CFC's are not part of the learning community was evident only this week when a UTAS faculty member met with Lady Gowrie Tasmania representatives to collaborate on the development of an apt to support speech screening. Our team members indicated that CFC's may be relevant agencies to use such a tool. He knew nothing about the existence of CFC's.