



Submission to the Commission for Children and Young People

Strengthening Advocacy for

NSW Children and Young People (0 – 17 yrs)

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Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS)

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About NCOSS

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) is the peak body for the non-government community services sector in NSW.

NCOSS has a vision of a society where there is social and economic equity, based on cooperation, participation, sustainability and respect. NCOSS works with its members on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving this vision in New South Wales.

Established in 1935, NCOSS is part of a national network of Councils of Social Service, which operate in each State and Territory and at the national level.

NCOSS membership is composed of community organisations and interested individuals. Member organisations are diverse including unfunded self-help groups, children's services, registered training authorities, emergency relief agencies, chronic illness and community care organisations, family support agencies, housing and homelessness services, mental health, alcohol and other drug organisations, local indigenous community organisations, church groups, peak organisations and a range of population-specific consumer advocacy agencies.

Introduction

This short NCOSS submission responds to the Discussion Paper: Strengthening advocacy for NSW children and young people (0-17 years).

In preparing our submission, NCOSS has consulted with a number of our member organisations and attended the Commission's Roundtable discussion with stakeholders. NCOSS has a history of working in the area of children's services and the NCOSS CEO convenes a Children's Services Forum. NCOSS currently works across policy areas of health, transport, disability, community care and homelessness in NSW. Each of the policy areas focus on population groups, including children and young people. For example NCOSS is advocating for: appropriate case worker services for young people at risk of entering the child protection system; young people's access to transport to get home safely after a night out; person-centred planning for young people with an intellectual disability; dental care for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; free contraception for young women at risk and an early intervention and prevention approach to children and their families at risk of homelessness.

NCOSS policy work responds to the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people and population groups living in NSW. This response is thus concerned particularly with children and young people living in poverty and excluded from the life opportunities which others enjoy.

Our submission is structured around the three key questions outlined in the discussion paper:

- What is the need for an advocate for children and young people?
- What work should an advocate for children and young people focus on?
- How should an advocate for children and young people work?

1. What is the need for an advocate for children and young people?

While Australia is a wealthy country, this wealth is not equally shared. Recent research demonstrates increasing levels of poverty, inequality, social exclusion and intergenerational disadvantage. Herein lies the need for an advocate for children and young people.

'Back to Basics'¹ a report just released by ACOSS, shows that child poverty is increasing in Australia. The report argues child poverty is a measure of a country's fairness and an indication of how well the next generation will fare. However one in six children (575,000) are living in poverty, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Of the 575,000 children below the poverty line, half (286,000 children) were in sole parent families. The recent annual report of the longitudinal study of households (HILDA) showed that child poverty has increased by 15% since 2001.

Peter Saunders, in his book 'Down and Out: Poverty and Exclusion in Australia'², outlines key

¹ ACOSS (2013), 'Back to Basics: Simplifying Australia's Family Payments System to tackle child poverty', Sydney

² Saunders (2011), 'Down and Out: Poverty and Exclusion in Australia', UK

areas where children and young people are missing out, on what Saunders calls the essentials of life. These include:

- A safe outdoor space for children to play at or near home
- Children can participate in school activities and outings
- A yearly dental check-up for children
- A hobby or leisure activity for children
- School books and clothes for school-age children
- Childcare for working parents
- A separate bed for each child
- A home computer
- Access to the internet at home³

ARACY's Children's Lived Experience of Poverty Project⁴ provides data and insights into how children are being excluded from neighbourhoods and communities. Children may be excluded from social activities, local services and education, and may experience poor quality housing and financial exclusion due to parental unemployment. The ARACY approach suggests responding to child poverty from the perspective of child well-being and children's rights, based on a strengths-based approach to child poverty. Their current work also suggests that while limited access to economic resources is a defining feature of poverty for children, the impacts of poverty most keenly felt by children lie in their social relationships, ability to participate in social activities and find acceptance in their lives at school and the community. The ARACY report concludes:

Overwhelmingly, the experience of poverty is described by children in terms of its impact on their social relationships. Children living in poverty experience a lot of pressure to keep up with their peers. They describe problems keeping up appearances, instances of shame associated with poverty, and some report bullying (pge 11).

Research studies in Australia and the UK demonstrate the dynamics of intergenerational disadvantage and its impact on children and young people. The AHURI study on intergenerational homelessness⁵ draws from a large literature linking socio-economic disadvantage in childhood to similar outcomes in adulthood. In the UK, the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a longitudinal study of children born throughout Britain in the first week of March 1958, and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) have been used extensively to examine the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Using the NCDS, Hobcraft (1998) identified five key determinants of a child's early years as critical in subsequent disadvantage. They were childhood poverty, family disruption, contact with the police, educational test scores and father's interest in schooling. Using both data sets, Blanden and Gibbons (2006) found that the odds of living in poverty in middle-age for those who were in poverty as children were double those for respondents who had not been in poverty as children.

³ Saunders (2011), 'Down and Out: Poverty and Exclusion in Australia', UK, page 97-99

⁴ ARACY (2013), 'Pulling the threads together-Consultations, conversations and contemplations on child poverty in Australia', Children's Lived Experience of Poverty Project

⁵ AHURI (2009), 'Intergenerational homelessness and the intergenerational use of homelessness services', Positioning Paper

NCOSS considers that a Children's Commissioner is needed to focus attention on, and build strategies around, the prevention of poverty and strengthening of well-being for children and young people, together with building more equal communities and neighbourhoods across NSW. Geographic and locational disadvantage is of particular concern to NCOSS, with many rural and remote areas unable to provide young people with educational and employment opportunities.

2. What work should an advocate for children and young people focus on?

NCOSS argues the need for a strong independent advocate for children and young people in NSW. In keeping with principles of social inclusion the focus should be on those who are disadvantaged and marginalised. We also argue that the advocate should focus on some of the harder and more complex problems faced by children and young people in contemporary times. Some examples could be the sexualisation of girls in advertising and marketing, teenage pregnancy in depressed rural towns, and young men's identity. These would involve a role for the Commissioner in community awareness and education. Use of social media is an excellent way to communicate with children and young people and NCOSS supports the use of you-tube, interactive websites and facebook for use in advocacy campaigns.

NCOSS supports the high level goals within the NSW 2021 State Plan, in relation to providing universal and targeted supports for children and families, as identified in the Commission's discussion paper. We believe that these goals could represent an overarching framework for the advocate to focus on. In particular NCOSS supports the goal of closing the gap in education between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

The ARACY Report Card⁶ on the wellbeing of young Australians identifies a number of key areas where children and young people are experiencing difficulty, in comparison to other OECD countries. Such areas could represent a focus for the advocate's work. These include 15-17 year olds who are not engaged in education or employment; a high incidence of diabetes and asthma; and 3-5 year olds who are not in pre-school or early learning. Other indicators where Australia achieved a middle OECD ranking include teenage pregnancy, obesity and youth suicide. By comparison, the ARACY report card identifies that Australia leads the world with its low youth smoking rates. The learnings from Australia's successful anti-smoking campaigns targeted at young people can assist in other youth-focused campaigns and advocacy work.

3. How should an advocate for children and young people work?

NCOSS argues that the function of Commissioner needs to be high profile, independent, credible and well-resourced. Furthermore, we suggest that the role should not report to one particular Minister but to Parliament.

⁶ ARACY (2013), 'Report Card: the wellbeing of young Australians', Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

The Commissioner needs clearly defined functions and powers. While these functions need to be broad in scope, they should not be vague or meaningless. There should be a clearly defined role in monitoring how government policies, programs and services (including those delivered by NGOs) are impacting on and improving the lives and well-being of children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. The Commissioner needs to identify where the system is failing or having adverse impacts, and propose viable solutions to respond to these failures.

Existing programs and services which are designed to support those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged do not always have a strong focus on the needs of children and young people. For example homelessness services may be designed to support adult populations and may overlook the needs of children. Similarly, disability programs are more typically focused on adults and carers, rather than children. There is a clear role for the Commissioner to bring the needs and perspectives of children and young people to centre-stage. However, there is also the need to understand the lives of children and young people within the contexts of their families, social networks, schools and communities.

One key role for an advocate is to review legislative proposals from the point of view of their impact on children and young people and ensure these perspectives are factored into Government's decision making processes. For example this could involve preparing Children and Young People Impact Statements. In keeping with the Commission's past focus on giving children and young people a voice, children and young people could actively participate in such developments. NCOSS argues that the advocate should be both a voice for children and young people, and assist children and young people to find their own voice. This process of empowerment needs to include more marginalised and disenfranchised children and young people, to help them develop their own identities, engage positively with communities, and move away from any victim personae.

We contend that a systemic focus that is one step removed from the various agencies providing services to children and young people will best enable independent oversight. Functions such as the Children's Guardian's Out of Home Care (OOHC) responsibilities and the NSW Ombudsman's Child Death Reviews should be kept separate to the Commissioner. Instead, the Commissioner should adopt a system-wide perspective and arms-length scrutiny, together with a broad systemic, cross agency and cross sector focus. NCOSS does not support combining the roles of Children's Guardian and Children's Commissioner; the integrity of both roles needs to be supported. Any blending may result in a confusion and dilution of roles, to the detriment of children and young people.

However, it will be critical that the Children's Commissioner and Children's Guardian consult and work collaboratively, together with the Ombudsman, peak bodies such as NCOSS and Youth Action and NGOs. The aim should be to avoid duplication, ensure cooperation and a collaborative approach, promote the sharing of information and develop strategic responses. Importantly, the advocate needs to provide leadership for the sector in realizing the strategic responses.

Conclusions

NCOSS considers that a Children's Commissioner is needed to focus attention on, and build strategies around, the prevention of poverty and strengthening of well-being for children and young people across NSW. Breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and responding to the impact of locational and geographic disadvantage on children and young people are key roles for the Commissioner.

NCOSS argues the need for a strong independent advocate for children and young people in NSW. In keeping with principles of social inclusion the focus should be on those who are disadvantaged and marginalised. We argue that the advocate should focus on some of the harder and more complex problems faced by children and young people in contemporary times. The function of Commissioner needs to be high profile, independent, credible and well-resourced. We suggest that the role should not report to one particular Minister but to Parliament. NCOSS looks forward to working constructively with the Children's Commissioner and Commission for Children and Young People.

References

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