

Colony47

LIFE SKILLS & OPPORTUNITIES

**Submission to the Agenda for Children and
Young People Consultation Paper**

February 2011

1. INTRODUCTION

Colony 47 is one of Tasmania's leading community service organisations. We deliver services across Tasmania to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and people who are experiencing barriers to participation in society, in particular because of issues relating to employment, training, housing and lack of social and family networks.

We have extensive experience in delivering services to, and working with, children, young people and their families. The majority of our work in this area is undertaken using an early intervention model where we work with the young person and their family to improve their family relationships, strengthen the skills of the parents and improve the connections and communication between the young person, their family, their education and the community. We currently deliver the following specialised programs:

1. Youth Connections – supports young people in the Glenorchy, Hobart, Kingborough and Huon Valley municipalities who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from education;
2. Reconnect – supports young people aged 12 – 18 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and their families, to improve their level of engagement with family, education, employment, training and the community;
3. Mara House – a medium to long term 24 hour supported accommodation service for young women aged 13 – 18 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
4. HIPPY – a home based early childhood enrichment program which promotes school readiness for ages 4 – 5 in the Clarendon Vale, Rokeby, Mornington and Warrane areas;
5. Communities Supporting Families – provides support for families to build positive relationships with their children aged 6 – 12 years to ensure their wellbeing;
6. Tapping Inner Strengths – provides parents with strategies for parenting their teens;
7. Strengthening Families – provides parents with young people aged 10 – 14 with parenting strategies. The program operates in the Huon and Southern Midlands areas;
8. Colony Partnership Brokers – works with organisations and individuals to achieve improved educational outcomes for young people by fostering engagement between education providers, business and industry, parents, families and community organisations.

It is our experience in delivering these services and working directly with families and children and young people aged 0 – 18 years that informs Colony 47's comments and recommendations on the Agenda for Children and Young People.

2. GENERAL COMMENTS

The Consultation Paper purports to provide “the road map for Government Services for the next 10 years and beyond.” While Colony 47 welcomes the development of an approach that seeks to address the range of issues faced by children, young people and their families in

Tasmania, we feel that there are a number of areas in which the Consultation Paper needs strengthening.

At a general level the Consultation Paper:

- **Lacks vision** and **underestimates the cultural changes** that have taken place and will continue to occur in the future. In particular, the levels and diversity of the risks to which young people are exposed have altered significantly in a short space of time. Technology has contributed towards fast tracking young people's interactions with broader society and dangers at an increasingly younger age. In our opinion education has not kept up with this. We are no longer talking about marginalised or low socio-economic or disadvantaged families as having "kids at risk." We need to ensure that services reflect this and acknowledge the very real need to support the "average" family attempting to support their young person through what seems to be a youth culture that has broadened out their social norms around alcohol and drug taking, "couch surfing", school non attendance and so on.
- **Lacks detail** about how objectives will actually be achieved. Many of the implementation proposals give no indication what sort of actions will be taken to achieve these proposals. It is neither directive nor action focused.
- Is **welfare and problem focused** rather than building on a strengths model. The Agenda needs to be inclusive and recognise and support functional families and young people.
- Requires **further discussions with professionals** to develop realistic implementation strategies particularly as the aspirations stemming from the Paper are likely to be greater than available resources.
- Needs to be across **all levels of government** not just the state government. It is reasonable that the state government should have an overview but unreasonable to expect that it is their responsibility alone. There needs to be an understanding about the role to be played by local government and discussions about where the federal government engages in the process.

3. SPECIFIC AREAS OF CONCERN

3.1 EARLY INTERVENTION

The Consultation Paper has used the terms from the Tasmanian Social Inclusion Strategy of "prevention and early intervention – start early" which can imply that early intervention is working with the child at a young age, as evidenced by the growth of programs for children aged 0 – 5 and their parents. However, early intervention can also be viewed as working with the young person and their family when the problem/issue first occurs. It is our belief that both definitions of early intervention should be used with an appropriate allocation of resources into programs to support families when they are starting to have relationship/parenting issues regardless of the age of the young person.

The Consultation Paper identifies the need to provide improved policies and service delivery arrangements for children, young people and their families but identifies few supports for

parents apart from the Child and Family Centres for the 0 – 5 age range. It is generally acknowledged that the family is the best place for a child to live and develop. However, the Consultation Paper does not give weight to the need to assist parents to change their parenting styles to build resilience, to restore confidence in parenting and to adapt to the changing needs of their children as they grow and develop from infants, to children, to teenagers, to young adults.

The early intervention work that is being undertaken by programs such as Launch into Learning to engage parents in the education of their children needs to be supported and built on once the child enters primary school and then secondary education. Colony 47 has developed a range of programs to support and strengthen family relationships between parents and their children as the child develops. These highly successful programs are aimed at working with parents to understand the need, and to develop the skills, to adapt their parenting styles to the changing needs of their children. Programs such as these need to be supported, strengthened and expanded.

3.2 PARENTING PROGRAMS

As indicated above, it is essential that parents be given support in parenting children over 5 years.

This document *neglects* the very real needs of families to have *universal* education and support to manage the *transitions* in parenting that parents and carers must navigate in order to keep strong, supportive connections with their children.

The focus on 0 – 5 years should be extended to 6 years so that the transition that the child faces (at 5 – 6 years when moving into school life) which involves a different set of needs/issues experienced by the developing child and requires shifts in parental behaviour management strategies, is adequately supported. From our work in Reconnect, parenting roles also significantly and radically change for all parents around the ages of 10 – 13 years. This is a critical time of transition for many families, and we see families from all walks of life struggle to come to terms with this period of parenting in a way that nurtures and supports young people's need for independence combined with their need for safe boundaries in the face of a changing cultural context.

The Consultation Paper discusses Gateway, IFSS and TYSS as being available to respond to the needs of vulnerable families. However, it does not acknowledge that these systems can only meet a small proportion of the families and young people in need of services.

Page 23 of the Consultation Paper discusses the establishment of Child and Family Centres. While the intent underlying this idea is good, it needs to be ensured that these centres are easily accessible. For example, it needs to be ensured that effective transport options to the centres be provided.

3.3 MENTAL HEALTH

3.3.1 Page 37 the Consultation Paper speaks of early intervention for young people experiencing mental health issues. **There is currently a lack of any targeted hospital services for children experiencing mental health issues.** There is a great need for a youth focussed residential mental health facility where young people can access treatment and be separate from adults and older people who are also experiencing mental health issues. This could help reduce the stigma of 'going to the psych ward' for young people experiencing mental health issues and help increase positive outcomes.

3.3.2 The Consultation Paper does not acknowledge that youth mental health services are overwhelmed by demand from young people and that many do not receive the support required as they fail to satisfy the necessary criteria to receive a service. Many of these young people will enter adulthood with untreated illnesses which often lead them into substance abuse, unemployment, homelessness and family breakdowns.

In addition, children who have a parent with a mental illness are at increased risk of developing their own illness and other related issues. One out of five people in Australia will experience a mental health issue at some point in their lives and many, if not most, of these people have work mates, neighbours, friends and family members who could offer valuable support if they knew how. The Consultation Paper needs to address the need for education and support to be given to children and families experiencing mental illness. Support needs to be provided within a school context. Yet many teachers and school officials are not prepared or trained to respond to mental health crises.

3.3.3 Our experience in working with this client group has highlighted that young people experiencing significant issues, such as 'hearing voices that tell them to do things', combined with significant self-harm, suicide ideation and substance use are not always supported by our mental health system because, for example, 'their symptoms make sense in the light of the previous trauma that they have experienced' or 'the young person has experienced domestic violence in the past' and so they do not qualify as having a mental health condition and being accepted into our mental health care system. Thus the young person and their family are given no support, and the young person cycles into hospital emergency wards or police custody or homelessness (or all 3). This system needs to change. **The Consultation Paper speaks about identifying children and young people who have mental health issues as early as possible. Specific detail is required as to how this issue is going to be addressed.**

3.4 CHILD PROTECTION

3.4.1 Children in care need support people who are independent from child protection decisions (so the child can trust them) who actually check in with children who are placed in care.

3.4.2 When children are placed in care siblings should not be separated.

- 3.4.3** Many young people are unaware of their 'care plans' or even if they have one, and sometimes are unsure of who their case worker is. Often they do not receive any money or support when turning 18.
- 3.4.4** Support (both financial and on-the-ground support) is needed for the great numbers of families who take in other children to help protect them from unsafe situations. Families who do this work are brave and have potential to save our child protection system a lot of resources and money. Currently, however, we find in our work with families that they receive little support and this places great strain on families trying to do the right thing for the child.
- 3.4.5** There is a need to develop some guidelines for practice in child protection that interpret the 'practice guidelines' and the current literature on trauma, abuse and neglect to assist practitioners handle situations such as the removal of children or the placement of children in care, in supportive ways that minimise the resulting trauma of the experience.
- 3.4.6** Support needs to be given to the families, not just the children.
- 3.4.7** There needs to be more innovative and flexible solutions to child protection. Maybe, for example, there is no need to remove the child in all situations but rather put a worker in with the family when they are struggling. Our experience in working with young mothers, for example, shows that if they have a child removed they receive little support or assistance even though they are still a young person themselves. If reconciliation and building resilience are to be achieved resources and support must also be directed towards helping the mother. She should not always be punished. Perhaps, for example, there should be a supported residential facility for young mothers and their babies where they receive intensive parenting support so that there is a greater chance that the family unit can stay together.

3.5 ACCOMMODATION

3.5.1 Page 13 of the Consultation Paper states that:

"The Tasmanian homeless population is significantly younger than the Australian homeless population, with 69 per cent of homeless people being aged 34 years or younger in 2006. Almost one third was aged 12 – 18, 50 per cent higher than the national proportion at 21 per cent."

These statistics clearly indicate:

- That more crisis accommodation is required for young people particularly on the eastern shore and in the Kingborough area;
- That more long term accommodation options are required for young people;
- The need to address accommodation options for young people in regional and rural areas; and

- The need to increase the availability of services such as Reconnect for young people and their families.

The emphasis on social inclusion and community responsibility for social inclusion indicates that greater emphasis should be placed on providing accommodation services and supports that enable families and young people to stay in their preferred communities. This is important so that they can retain linkages with school, support networks and services.

- 3.5.2** It is incredibly difficult for a young person experiencing homelessness (even with the help of workers in the social welfare sector) to access services such as Centrelink, Medicare, Housing and so on, given the identification and other paperwork requirements and the realities of the transitory and ever changing lifestyle of a young person trying to get by with no money and nowhere to stay. In our experience in working with this client group it can take up to 6 months to assist a young person to get their housing application together. When a young person is homeless we need a one-stop-shop to get them into these services quickly before their homelessness becomes entrenched.
- 3.5.3** Children need transitional support too. Unfortunately the only known transitional support service for children in Hobart (a brilliant program) had their funding cut and there are no such services currently operating.

3.6 AGE GROUP

It is our experience that few support services exist for families with children in the 6 – 12 age range. The Consultation Paper does not give any real indication that this gap in services has been recognised and addressed.

Preventative level programs located in communities for parents and young people that link up and cover all ages and stages are required.

3.7 UNIVERSAL SUPPORT

Page 16 of the Consultation Paper states that:

“In developing new approaches, strong emphasis needs to be placed on service delivery arrangements which adopt principles of progressive universalism. This means that universal services are offered to all families, with additional services and assistance for those that have specific needs or are at high risk.”

This strongly indicates that programs such as Strengthening Families and Tapping Inner Strengths should be widely available and offered to any and all interested parents and not only those who have young people at risk. This would be in addition to the services available to those needing extra support and at higher risk. Perhaps the establishment of a 24/7 parenting line similar to Parentline in Victoria which, for the cost of a local call statewide, offers phone counselling, referral and information for parents of 0 – 18 year olds.

3.8 EDUCATION

3.8.1 Page 40 of the Consultation Paper refers to the services being provided by the Youth Connections Program. Youth Connections is a great program for 1 on 1 flexible case management to support a young person who has disengaged or is disengaging. However, it is underfunded. The program is not able to work with all schools and educational providers as this Paper suggests. It can proven difficult on occasions to have support provided to a young person through Youth Connections because the demand is far outweighing the resources of the program. Currently, there are 35 schools in the south that are to be serviced by this program and only 4 staff. If this program is a major factor in Tasmania's Agenda for Children and Young People it requires greater resourcing and support.

3.8.2 Partnerships with families need to extend in schools beyond early childhood schooling. Teachers need professional development opportunities and leadership initiatives in order to engage with families in positive partnerships that work together to support the child.

3.8.3 School discipline systems are not designed to effectively support students who have experienced abuse, neglect related trauma, attachment-related difficulties, family conflict or other trauma. Research shows that current discipline systems using time out, suspensions and exclusions amplifies the child's trauma and their resulting behaviour. Restorative practice principles should be embraced as a means of effective disciplining.

Teachers need greater training in attachment and early childhood trauma. If teachers have training in these issues then they will be able to recognize when a child is not simply 'being naughty' and be able to place a framework around the child to work with them. Teachers need to be able to support the child rather than label them as 'naughty' or 'disruptive'.

These issues must be addressed in order for other goals such as increasing learning outcomes, attendance and attainment for children and young people to be met.

3.8.4 Teachers and principals need more education in how to identify signs of sexual abuse. Anecdotal evidence gained through our experience in working with this client group suggests that teachers do not always recognise the signs of abuse. This poses a serious threat to the kind of support we are providing our children in schools.

3.8.5 Greater resourcing needs to be put into staff supporting education, such as social workers. There needs to be a review of how well services are functioning and what resourcing would be required to make a more meaningful contribution to improving youth attainment and transition. This is of particular importance given the principles of prevention and early intervention stated in the Consultation Paper.

It would help to have education/alternative education specialists that all families and services representing families can contact to try to figure out an education package or arrangement that will work for the child or young person. It would also help to create easier insurance arrangement &/or incentives to assist workplaces to take on young people in work experience arrangements (where they are not engaged in school programs).

3.8.6 It is essential that there be consultation with young people who have disengaged.

The additional following comments have been made in relation to education by the Colony Partnership Broker Board (CPB):

3.8.7 One of the key challenges which has been identified by the CPB is that in Tasmania education is not sufficiently valued by many sections of the community. This issue is not addressed adequately in the Consultation Paper. Attitudinal change within the community is not easy to achieve and needs a far higher priority.

3.8.8 The state government should be entering into partnerships with key stakeholder groups such as local government, state school parents and friends, independent schools, the Catholic Education Office and business to further educational outcomes.

3.8.9 Improving attendance: The current figures for retention to year 12 in Tasmania are the second lowest in the country. An essential step in building retention is ensuring that students attend school five days a week throughout the school year. Principals need to be more accountable for attendance for the complete school year and not just to the 'census date'. The notion of one census date for the year needs to be reviewed and consideration given to a 'real time' attendance scheme so that schools are not paid for students who are not attending. It is recognised that schools cannot achieve this alone and they require wide scale organised help and assistance. This may include, for example:

- Police and schools working together on truancy campaigns;
- Justice systems prosecuting parents who fail to send their children to school; and
- Communities working collaboratively through partnerships and mounting community campaigns to ensure continuous improvement in attendance and taking civic pride in attendance statistics in local schools and colleges.

3.8.10 Maintaining and improving educational standards: It is important that educational institutions train, educate, and develop skills so that young people can take their place in the real world.

- While it is recognised that considerable effort is being put into literacy and numeracy from state and federal resources, many young people do not have the requisite competencies to continue to study beyond year 10 or to enter the work force.

- The document contains no mention of how to further develop and stimulate students that are currently achieving and are either 'middle of the road' or 'higher achievers'. It is important that resources in the future are not diverted from these students and that they are further extended to achieve higher levels of excellence.
- Section 3 of the document looks at broader models through the extended school concept for achieving engagement. These models need to be focused on returning young people to schools. Flexible education programs based in communities need to be supervised by teachers and the student's performance monitored.

3.8.11 Career education: Very little attention is given to career development other than to make mention of individual pathways. Over time this area of education has been seen to be expendable and there has been little long term consistency of approach. If we are really to provide an agenda or future for young people what needs to be provided is a focused and carefully considered, well resourced program designed by experts from early school years through to completion in Year 12. Young people need to be provided with the skills for lifelong learning in careers development.

Careers and employment needs to be fully integrated into curriculum from the early years through to Year 12. It is important that teachers in all subject areas are able to help students make the link between what is being taught and how this knowledge is needed in the workplace and particular jobs and professions.

3.8.12 Parent and community engagement: There is recognition in the document that parents and communities are important in the development of young people. This view is totally supported by Colony Partnership Brokers and central to the philosophy and work of our group.

However, it is disappointing that there is no mention in the document about how this is going to be achieved. There are some excellent examples of strong parent and family engagement and strong community engagement occurring in Tasmanian schools. The Agenda needs to reflect that the potential benefits from engaging parents, families and communities will need a new targeted program to approach this in a different way if this is going to be achieved.

3.8.13 Internet based communication: Tasmania is at the forefront of the role out of the National Broadband Network and it is expected that internet based information systems and communications will become an ever bigger part of everyday life in all societies. To maximise the outcome of these developments it is important to consider where they can be used to benefit young people. There is little or no recognition in the Consultation Paper of this significant change. The document needs to recognise the potential part that electronic communications will have over the next ten years and look

at how it can be shaped to provide opportunities for improving outcomes for all children and young people.

3.8.14 Student tracking mechanisms: CPB would like to see a comprehensive system for tracking students when they transition at all levels in the educational framework. For most schools in Tasmania this would include when students move from year 6 to 7, from year 10 to 11 and, because of the high fall out rates in year 11, from year 11 to 12 and from year 12 to further study, training and employment.

The tracking will mean that there is a far more accurate record of student progress with the ability to pinpoint challenging and successful age levels, regions and programs. The tracking system also needs to incorporate a process for following up on students who may be 'off-track' or at risk of being derailed to provide assistance, support and inspiration for reengaging.

3.9 ENGAGEMENT WITH NGO'S

Many of the implementation proposals in the Consultation Paper focus on government agencies and do not address the issue that NGOs are generally not included in cross-agency initiatives, interagency panels and efforts to create more effective approaches to case management. The Consultation Paper focuses on encouraging government departments to work together, ignoring NGOs. For example:

- The discussion of the Young People at Risk Teams on page 44 talks about the need for true collaboration between a multitude of services in the provision of support. It describes these teams as comprising “representatives from the police, youth justice, child protection, mental health, education, drug and alcohol and housing services.” It fails to include NGOs yet many of these services are delivered by NGOs. In addition, it is suggested that there be a lead professional within these teams. While we support this move, unless that appointment is drawn from ALL professional services currently engaged with the young person and unless that appointment is based upon **who has the greatest rapport and quality of relationship with that young person** the efforts of the team is likely to not be realized. In some cases it may be most appropriate for the lead role to be provided by an NGO service.
- The Interagency Support Teams discussed on page 45 also do not include NGOs. In many cases it is NGOs who have the greatest relationship with and knowledge of the young person and without the input and coordinated effort of the NGOs efforts to support the young person can be ineffective and counterproductive.
- The court system and police and Youth Justice usually does not include NGOs, and although the Consultation Paper does mention integrating collaborative service provision at page 54 – 56, it does not deal with the issue of NGOs.
- It is often the NGO that builds the relationship with the young person. This needs to be valued and incorporated into interagency and collaborative approaches.

3.10 HEALTH

Page 27 of the Consultation Paper discusses the 'Start Healthy – Stay Healthy' initiative. In order for an initiative such as this to be effective it is essential that the young people be consulted so that it can be ascertained exactly what is wanted and needed in each specific community. By providing the young people with what they want the levels of engagement with the community will increase.

4. SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide greater detail on actions and implementation of suggested directions and objectives.
2. Allocate appropriate resources into programs to support families when relationship/parenting issues first arise, regardless of the age of the young person.
3. Fund programs for parents and families beyond the 0 – 5 age group to support families to manage the transitions in parenting that parents must navigate in order to keep strong, supportive connections with their children.
4. Provide a targeted youth focused residential mental health facility.
5. Provide greater education and support for children, young people and families with mental illness.
6. Provide specific detail in relation to how children and young people who have mental health can be identified as early as possible.
7. Provide greater support in child protection for:
 - Child protection workers (resources and practice guidelines);
 - Young people under child protection (independent support people, financial and other support once 18);
 - Foster families (both financial and on the ground);
 - Families of young people in child protection.
8. Address the need for greater accommodation options for young people, including crisis accommodation, long term accommodation and transitional accommodation for children.
9. Provide support and services to ALL young people and families in addition to the services available to those needing extra support and at higher risk.
10. Include NGOs in cross-agency initiatives, inter-agency panels and efforts to create more effective approaches to case management.

11. Expand funding for the Youth Connections program.

12. Provide greater support and education for schools and teachers for:

- Creating greater partnerships with parents;
- Effective discipline;
- Detecting abuse;
- Alternative education options.