

Submission

No 71

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

Organisation: Gloucester Youth Advisory Committee
Name: Mr Paul Sheridan
Position: Director Corporate Services
Telephone: 02 6538 5250
Date Received: 8/05/2008

Inquiry into Children and Young People

Background

Gloucester Shire Council and DoCS fund a Youth Drop-In Centre and associated programs for local youth in the 12 to 25 years age group. The Centre operates in Gloucester which has a population of 2500 and a district population of 4800. Gloucester is located in the hinterland of the Mid North Coast of NSW and a travel time of 1 hour from Forster and Taree and over one and half hours from Newcastle.

The target group, 9 to 14 year olds, represents 41% of the Gloucester Shire's Children (0-12 years) and part of the Youth population (0-14) combined.

The Drop-In Centre opens for 12 hr per week and is run by a Youth Development Officer (32 hours) and up to 5 volunteers. The Gloucester Youth Advisory Committee, having representation from a number of professional social/welfare officers, Police, school, church and the community, advises the Gloucester Shire Council on youth issues. The Youth Development Officer makes this submission on behalf of the Gloucester Youth Advisory Committee.

1. The needs of children and young people - about nine to fourteen years of age.

Family Relationships

Young people around the 13-14 years age group are vulnerable to homelessness due to complications arising from the increasing trend for blended families. There is a need for "parenting adolescent" programs possibly delivered by Social Workers.

Education

Gloucester has a local Homework Centre Program run by the local Neighbourhood Centre which greatly assists many primary and junior high school students with attendances growing; however there is still a need for alternate approaches to school education for "at risk 13-14 olds" to assist their regular attendance and retention at high school until at least Year 10. Full time school counsellors will assist this area of deficiency in the meantime.

Health

Small rural areas desperately need a permanent full time Department of Health funded Children's Social Worker or Social Welfare Officer. These professional workers are usually funded on a part time short period contracts resulting in high worker turnover, long periods of no staff leaving other community groups endeavouring to fill the gaps as best as they are able. Once a position is again filled, this worker becomes less effective and is

required to expend much time to re educate client groups as to the new position and its role.

Disability services for children are also urgently required in rural areas particularly on an outreach basis.

On the issue of homelessness, it is considered that the vulnerable young people beginning adolescence who while may actually have parent/s residing in a house, often find themselves in a dysfunctional family situation such that these young people would rather wander the streets for a large proportion of the day and evening rather than be at home.

They have a house that is not really a home, lacking a place of love, care, safety, support, comfort, food and respect for each other. These young people can sometimes only find solace with other young people living in similar circumstances. Full time children's social workers are required.

2. The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage.

Drop-In Centres currently cater for the age group 12 to 25; this upper age of 25 is too high and places constraints on the effective activity and development programmes delivered by Youth Development Officers and volunteers to the 12 to 14 age group. The presence of young adults at drop in centres compromises the attendance and activities of the 12 to 14 age group. A separate program and funding is required for the under 12 year old group.

Community Services

DoCS require providing greater support through the provision of more welfare and social workers to cope with varying age groups particularly the 9 to 14 age group.

While the Better Futures Early Intervention Model is working towards helping families before they reach crisis point is a positive step, Youth Workers need to be highly resourced and skilled to service outreach to rural areas. A concern is that when young people who have merely been "mentioned" to DoCS with no action taken, are being disqualified from gaining assistance from this group.

Transport

Children and young people in regional and rural areas in the Mid North Coast have no access to public transport. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are 13 and 14 year olds and more independent in accessing other transport means (older friends) are being placed in an unsupervised and often risky environment.

3. the activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people to develop resilience.

Drop-in facilities, after school care work well as a prevention service, act as a point of referral to other services once issues are identified, does assist to develop resilience.

These services are required in most rural areas and existing services require more funded staff as it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain and retain suitable volunteers over the longer run.

Youth Development Officers believe that while Youth Centres are funded for 12 to 25 year olds, that 9 to 12 year olds require a separate program to ensure that both these groups do not impede other's effective development.

End of submission.

8 May 2008.