

Submission

No 35

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

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## **Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW Fairfield City Council – Submission**

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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee inquiry about children and young people aged from 9-14 years in NSW. It is reassuring to see that the NSW Government embraces a community consultation approach with the development of their strategic direction. I hope that the comments provided enhance the direction and identify ways that local government and the NSW Government can better work together to achieve better outcomes for children and young people aged 9-14 years.

### **Background – Fairfield City**

Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) comprises of 27 suburbs of various sizes with a population size of 179,893 residents in 2006. Fairfield was the third most populated LGA in the Sydney Statistical Division after Blacktown and Sutherland LGAs. Fairfield LGA has 16,622 (9.24%) children and young people aged between 9-14 years (2006) representing a large proportion of residents.

Residents of Fairfield City come from over 200 countries, making it a City rich in cultural diversity. More than half of all residents speak a language other than English at home (72.5%). Fairfield LGA has more residents, who speak English poorly or not at all, than any other Australian LGA. Fairfield City accepts more migrants than any other City in Australia.

Families living within South West Sydney include some of the most disadvantaged families within the metropolitan area. Families across the region face multiple problems, including financial hardship, gambling, drug abuse, domestic violence and poor health. Results of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) measurements show Fairfield is in the bottom 10% of the State: 876 (4th worst in State), reflecting the relative disadvantage compared with the State as a whole (ABS 2006).

Unemployment rates in Fairfield City have been consistently higher than the rates for Sydney and NSW. The unemployment rate for Fairfield LGA was 10.4% in March 2007. The number of young people continuing into university has declined from 58% (2000) to 43% in 2003, where as the numbers continuing to TAFE have increased from 44% (2000) to 51% (2002).

### **The needs of children and young people from 9-14 years in NSW**

Fairfield City Council is committed to early intervention and prevention. Like the early years, Council believes that supporting the development of children and young people aged 9-14 years is essential in ensuring improved outcomes for children and a better future for NSW. However, this 'often-forgotten' group falls between current funding Policies. The NSW Department of Community Services current Policy priorities include:

- Families NSW targeting children from birth to eight years;
- Department of Community Services (CSGP) funds youth programs which target young people from age 12-25 years;
- Out of School Hours Care and Vacation Care (discussed later in the paper); and
- The Department of Community Services has finally recognised the needs of young people ages 9-12 years through the Better Futures Strategy. Funding allocation however is minimal with \$90,000 per annum available to service the whole of South West Sydney. It is fantastic that this age group has been finally recognised, however disappointing that adequate funding is not available.

In 2007, Fairfield City held a summit addressing the needs of children aged 8-11 years. The target group was identified in the community as the 'often-forgotten' yet critical age group. The summit developed a number of working groups, but without adequate funding Council and the non-government organisations were unable to sustain momentum.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** NSW Government needs to invest in our future and adequately fund programs for children and young people aged 9-14 years.

## **The impact of age, gender and disadvantage**

### ***Disadvantaged:***

Families living within Fairfield City include some of the most disadvantaged families in NSW. Children from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds more frequently lack the spoken language skills required to develop reading and writing skills (Eagar, Brewer, Collin *et al*, 2005). The Australian Early Childhood Study found that SES was the best predictor of beginning reading ability, while speaking a language other than English at home predicted lower language and communication skills in school (Ochiltree and Edgar, 1995). The number of young people continuing into university has declined from 58% (2000) to 43% in 2003, which clearly indicates that more needs to be done to support children and young people in disadvantaged communities.

Table 1 gives a snapshot of the issues facing, just some of our many, schools in the City. The 2004 English as a Second Language (ESL) Annual Survey revealed that most of the students enrolled at 2165 Primary Schools (PS) came from a non-English speaking background. School annual reports for 2003-04 reveal that Fairfield Primary School students speak 57 languages, with over a third coming from a refugee background. Students enrolled at Fairfield Heights Primary School represent 45 different cultural groups and students at Fairvale Primary School represent over 40 different nationalities.

**Table 1** Enrolments of students from NESB by 2165 primary school (2004)

	<b>Total # students</b>	<b># students from NESB</b>	<b>% NESB students</b>
Fairfield PS	705	662	93.9
Fairfield Heights PS	811	678	83.6
Fairfield West PS	723	596	82.4
Fairvale PS	547	494	90.3
All schools 2165	2786	2430	87.2

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Programs should focus on 'at-risk groups', that is low income families and families who speak a language other than English at home.

The impact of a high density rental market on children and young people is unknown. However, high density housing will account for the majority of new housing developments over the next 20 years. "The problem is that currently children in higher density housing are from among the poorest and most disadvantaged. The sad reality is that twice the proportion of children living in flats were living in a household with incomes under \$600 per week compared to all children in Sydney". (Randolph, 2006)

The Randolph, 2006 research identifies numerous potential health issues including an increased risk of becoming overweight, behavioural problems and social isolation.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** NSW Government should ensure that all high density areas are child-friendly and that Housing NSW ensures that, where possible, children and young people are not housed in inappropriate accommodation.

**Age:**

There are many challenges facing young people aged 9-14 years, the transition from a child to a young person, from primary school to high school, puberty, and independence. Depending on the life experiences and maturity of the individual and whether they fit the 'label' child or young person. This is a critical period for many and an opportunity for the community to support and guide young people in their journey. The challenge lies in the ridged boundaries of funding agreements.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** Establish an integrated approach which ensures flexibility between current DoCS programs to meet the needs of the individual child and/or young person.

**The activities, services and support required*****Out of School Hours Care (OOSH) and Vacation Care:***

OOSH covers services for school-aged children (5-12 years) before and after school and during the school vacations and acts as a form of childcare for working families.

The total number of Approved Vacation Care Service places in Fairfield and Liverpool local government areas (LGAs) (those that receive CCB funding from the Australian Government) currently available to meet the needs of 10,710 working families, is 753 places. This provision meets the needs of only 6% of working families.

Despite this apparent shortfall in Approved Vacation Care Services, eight vacation care services and one occasional care service have closed in the Fairfield and Liverpool LGAs over the past few years. Only two of these services targeted children with disabilities. This is mostly because of the lack of financial viability of service and not necessarily a lack of need. Currently, Approved Vacation Care Services are operating at only 69% capacity. This also raises concerns about the ongoing viability of existing services. All of these services were in receipt of small amounts of funding from the Department of Community Services (DoCS) Children's Services Program. however funding has been relinquished.

Two major barriers for children and young people aged 9–14 years in accessing services are:

1. Affordability for families, especially as there are many low-income families in many suburbs across these two LGAs. Anecdotal evidence indicated that parents leave children at home from the age of 10 years and risk their health and safety due to financial constraints. Affordability is affected by Child Care Benefit (CCB). CCB funding is inadequate and does not take into account service needs and limits options for families. For example CCB is calculated and paid per hour which restricts that amount of subsidy for parents, as well, restrictions on allowable absences makes it more difficult for casual users of the service. If these services are to remain viable, then a review of CCB is required by the Australian Government. CCB funding is not available once they leave primary school, again leaving parents with limited options.
2. The need to cater for children from 5-12 years is not always possible as the needs and interests are often different. The need to cater for the older children is essential and alternate options should be available to ensure that all ages are catered for.

While the NSW Government is not involved in operating OOSH services, it does however have a responsibility to ensure that the Australian Government is aware of the limitations of CCB funding for OOSH services in NSW.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** NSW Government should lobby the Australian Government to ensure that adequate CCB funding is available.

**Better Futures:**

The NSW Department of Community Services has recently recognised the needs of children and young people aged 9-14 years, with the Minister for Youth endorsing funding towards the Better Futures Strategy. The Better Futures Strategy aligns with the following State plans:

- Priority R3 Reducing levels of anti-social behaviour;
- Priority R4 Increased participation and integration into community activities; and
- Priority S4 Increasing levels of attainment for all students.

Fairfield City Council supports directions taken and the priorities identified especially in relation to:

- Improved access to activities that promote positive development for children aged 9-12 years;
- Increased capacity of children's youth services to deliver services to this age group; and
- Improved integration of service planning and delivery to children aged 9-12 years.

The need to provide appropriate services, especially in relation to recreation and leisure opportunities is essential to improving their health, resilience and connection to families and the community.

Funding, however, is insufficient with only \$90,000 per annum available to service the whole of South West Sydney. It is fantastic that the group has been finally recognised, however disappointing that adequate funding is not available.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** That the NSW Government provides adequate funding to enhance the Better Futures Strategy especially in areas of disadvantage and high need.

**Best Practice Guidelines:**

The need to develop best practice guidelines for working with children and young people is essential to ensuring that we make a positive difference. There is a lot of evidence supporting the early years; however the need for more research for these middle years is required.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** Policy makers should invest in developing evidence that effectively measure the success of projects to ensure that programs make a positive difference.

**Community Engagement:**

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** That the NSW Government through the Commission for Children and Young People ensure that children and young people aged 9-14 years are engaged in this process.

**Dental Health:**

The Australian Government will invest up to \$360 million over three years in a Teen Dental Plan to make it more affordable for families to keep their kid's teeth in good health. The Australian Government's Teen Dental Plan will assist one million Australian teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17, with dental costs. Under the Teen Dental Plan, eligible families will be able to claim up to \$150 towards the cost of an annual dental preventative check for each of their teenage children. Tooth decay ranks as Australia's most prevalent health problem, while gum disease ranks fifth highest. The Teen Dental Plan is a bandaid solution that provides no real benefit to young people, as the cost of treatment and long

waiting list makes dental care 'out of reach' for most children and young people aged 9-14 years.

Medicare provides eligible Australian residents with affordable, accessible and high-quality health care. However, Medicare does not cover dental services, despite tooth decay being ranked as Australia's most prevalent health problem. The NSW Government should ensure that the Australian Government embrace its responsibilities in relation to dental health.

The NSW Government also needs to commit more resources to dental health. The need for more public dental services in areas of disadvantaged is critical.

**RECOMMENDATION 9: That the NSW Government lobbies the Australian Government to include Dental Services within the Medicare Program. That the NSW Government increase funding for public dental services in areas of disadvantage.**

### **The impact of changing workplace practices on children and young people**

#### **Return to Work Policy:**

The push to ensure that mothers return to work when their youngest child turns eight, devalues the importance of this period in a child's life. It not only puts additional financial pressures on families, but with the limited care options for children 9-14 years, it places families in difficult positions.

#### **Child Friendly Workplaces:**

In today's society it is essential that work places adopt a family friendly philosophy. While business needs are critical, employees should embrace and promote a balance between work and family life.

**RECOMMENDATION 10: Both the Australian and State Governments need to lead by example and adopt a family friendly philosophy. The impact of Government Policies need to take into consideration both financial and social implications equally and ensure that we have a balanced society which values the role that parents have in Australia's future.**

### **Summary of Recommendation:**

Fairfield Council has identified ten recommendations for the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee to consider. These recommendations should be considered by all NSW Government portfolios to ensure a holistic strategic approach that allows for both a continuum of care and integration amongst Policy direction. Recommendations include:

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| <b>RECOMMENDATION 1:</b> | NSW Government needs to invest in our future and adequately fund programs for children and young people aged 9-14 years.   |
| <b>RECOMMENDATION 2:</b> | Programs should focus on at-risk groups; that is low income families.  |
| <b>RECOMMENDATION 3:</b> | NSW Government should ensure that all high density areas are child-friendly and that Housing NSW ensures that, where possible children and young people are not housed in inappropriate accommodation. |
| <b>RECOMMENDATION 4:</b> | Establish an integrated approach which ensures flexibility between current DoCS programs to meet the needs of individual children and young people.  |

- RECOMMENDATION 5:** NSW Government should lobby the Australian Government to ensure adequate CCB funding is available.
- RECOMMENMDATION 6:** That the NSW Government provides adequate funding to enhance the Better Futures Strategy in areas of disadvantage.
- RECOMMENDATION 7:** Policy makers should invest in developing evidence that effectively measures the success of projects to ensure that programs make a positive difference.
- RECCOMENDATION 8:** That the NSW Government, through the Commission for Children and Young People, ensures that children and young people aged 9-14 years are engaged in this process.
- RECOMMENDATION 9:** That the NSW Government lobbies the Australian Government to include Dental Services in the Medicare Program. That the NSW Government increases funding for public dental services in areas of disadvantage.
- RECOMMENDATION 10:** Both the Australian and State Governments need to lead by example and adopt a family friendly philosophy. The impact of Government Policies need to take into consideration both financial and social implications equally, and sure that we have a balanced society which values the role that parents have in Australia's future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee's inquiry about children and young people aged from 9-14 years in NSW. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations with you further. Please contact Amanda Bray, Manager, Community Life on 9725 0303 or [abray@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au](mailto:abray@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au)

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