

Submission

No 46

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

Organisation: Randwick City Council  
Name: Mr Ray Brownlee  
Position: General Manager  
Telephone: 02 9399 0994  
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DB (F2004/08174)  
(Contact Officer: David Briant - 9399.0994)

5 May 2008

The Hon Carmel Tebbutt MP  
Chair, Committee on Children and Young People  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Tebbutt,

### **Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW - Submission**

Randwick City Council welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and Young People aged 9-14 Years in NSW. Council supports any initiatives which aim to reduce the number of children and young people who experience disadvantage within the community.

While the population of Randwick City is relatively well-off financially, that is it has a higher proportion of households earning a high income (32.5% earn \$1,700 per week or more) compared to 29.5% for the Sydney Statistical Division (SD), the City also has a higher proportion of low income households (17.5% population earning less than \$500 per week) compared to the Sydney SD figure of 16.8%.

Randwick's low income households are largely located in public housing estates in the southern part of the Local Government Area (LGA). Public housing dwellings (including those owned by the NSW Aboriginal Office) make up nearly 7% of the LGA's housing stock. These neighbourhoods also experience disadvantage in part due to the change in allocation practices of by Housing NSW, whereby families with the greatest (and often complex) needs are given priority housing over the more functional but low income families on their applicant register. Many of these households include primary and lower-secondary aged children but for privacy reasons we are unable to quantify the exact number of families with children aged between nine and fourteen years of age.

On the basis of our observations and consultation with local human support service providers, the increase in the proportion of families with high needs in public housing neighbourhoods has overstretched their funded service levels (including schools). The problem is particularly acute when managing children with challenging behaviour or issues relating to child protection/parental support. Unfortunately funding levels have not been increased while the demand for support services has grown. Although Council has put in place a number of youth initiatives partnering with local service providers such as the Shack and MASK and through its community grants program the extent of funding available to address this issue falls well below the required levels.

Given this context, Council's response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference is set out below:

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE QUESTIONS**

### **1) The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age**

Some of the key findings which came out of consultations regarding activities, services and support for children and young people included the need for the following programs, activities and services:

- A 24hour service for families and young people that is managed by support staff experienced in dealing with a range of issues such as:
  - Family violence - Need for increase in medium-long term housing for young people who have escaped difficult and/ or violent family situations. There is only one dwelling house providing accommodation for 4 clients operating in the LGA which is funded under the Supported Accommodation Program
  - Domestic violence – Domestic violence has a significant impact on young people. A Negative family environment is known to cause a downward spiral of young lives leading to destructive, dysfunctional, disengaging behaviour
  - Child Abuse
  - Parental neglect of school aged children
  - Family breakdown
  - Parenting support/skills improvement
  - Mental Illness - Aboriginal young people in La Perouse – mental health issues (high proportion)
  - Transportation of clients to attend support services. Young people from disadvantaged communities have considerable difficulties participating in programs and structured activities that are both affordable and accessible. There is a need for more responsive transport solutions
  - Need for an alternative model of service delivery for above services e.g. a sub regional approach (collective).
- Affordable and accessible recreational and developmental activities that stimulate and engage the interest of this age group, that will also help in building personal resilience, self-esteem and life skills. Making these activities available may help redirect younger children from less desirable pathways. Typical examples of these activities that are not affordable to low income families include:
  - Creative programs e.g. music, dance, visual/digital art
  - Leisure based educational programs – Science Club, CSIRO children's science programs, outdoor base environmental activities or nature programs like those being run by the Centennial Park Trust. Such activities typically charge a fee that is not affordable to low income families
  - Parenting support programs administered through schools
  - Home work/tutoring clubs for disadvantaged school children requiring additional assistance and remedial learning programs (away from the school environment for fear of being stigmatised by their classmates)
  - More support or Home School Liaison Officers (HSLO) are required. There are only two HSLO servicing all the public primary and high schools in the Eastern Suburbs.

## **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**

- The developmental needs of nine year olds are significantly different to that of fourteen year olds. As such, generic programs or activities aimed at this target group have not been as effective as they could be. Fourteen year olds are usually reluctant to interact with nine and ten year olds (unless they are their siblings). Programs catering to children aged 12 to 14 years are perceived by teenagers to be more 'socially acceptable'. If a line needs to be drawn, then it would be more appropriate to use the primary and secondary school dividing line.
- There is also the added concern that younger children in this target group are more impressionable than the behaviour of older kids within the target group could potentially have a negative influence on them.
- Some health related educational programs are more effective if delivered to same gender groups, such as sexual health or personal hygiene programs. Leisure based activities such as Go Kart building, for example, is more appropriate for 12-14 year olds because the younger age children lack the higher level motor control skills, strength and dexterity.
- Younger children in the Inquiry's target group are more vulnerable to parental neglect (due to parents' mental health, drug or alcohol addiction for example) and need a higher level of support and care than a fourteen year old (whose emotional needs may have a different focus).
- Disadvantaged families often miss out on opportunities to enhance health and well being. This is a major issue relevant to low income families living in the Eastern Suburbs. A typical example would be a family's inability to purchase timely remedial services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and other related problems likely to affect a child's learning or developmental abilities. Currently the waiting list for such (subsidised) community health programs can be up to three years. If not promptly attended to, it could hurt a child's learning ability and future employment prospects.
- The extent of disadvantage of a child is far reaching and can affect a child's ability to strengthen their links with the community in general. A typical example is their participation in local sporting activities. The cost of membership fees for sporting club, purchasing of sporting equipment and uniforms, mouth and shin guards, and cost of travel to competition venues can be prohibitive to financially disadvantaged families. Instances of social isolation have been observed because of family poverty. Children from the same disadvantaged background and neighbourhood have a tendency to 'hang out' together (often accompanied by their younger siblings) in a loose band, often unsupervised and engaged in petty anti-social behaviour. Directing affordable structured programs to this vulnerable age group is considered to be an effective solution for giving better life opportunities to children.
- In relation to specialised child protection services, there is an obvious lack of available resources in the area. As a result, there have been many incidents of anti-social behaviour carried out by children as young as eight years old. Many of these episodes occur after business hours and during weekends when support agency services are closed due to a lack of available funding. The local Police have advised that in many instances, when a child is returned home, they would find their parents or carers inebriated or absent.
- Under these circumstances, one possible solution of addressing this issue is to provide a safe house for children, young teenagers and/or their families (with an accommodation component), one that is equipped with skilled staff operating on a 24 hour basis to refer those in need to support services in the area. Safe houses such as this would operate in addition to services provided

by DOCS. The preferred funding body for these safe houses would be a Commonwealth Agency.

**3) The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience.**

This question has been addressed in our responses to questions 1 and 2 of the inquiry.

**4) The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years, including possible changes to workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years; and**

An increase in the number of both carers in employment has led to a high demand for affordable after school care or child care centres, making it increasingly difficult to secure conveniently located care centres. School holidays, particularly during the December to January period, are a difficult time for parents. Many out of school care centres (affordable option) are not open during this long holiday period, forcing parents to seek alternative and, in some instances, more expensive care as a last option. Where the older teenagers in this target group are concerned, they are often left to care for themselves (and their younger siblings) without adult supervision.

The recent Centrelink rule that care givers must undertake some part time work when the child turns five years of age have had a significant impact on outcomes for children and caregivers, particularly when they have difficulty securing care for the days they have to work e.g. casual weekend shifts. An unhappy and financially stressed household is not beneficial to bringing up children.

**5) any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.**

- Lifting the profile of and extending the resource level of out of school hour care services to provide structured activities for children, including during the weekends in localities of high disadvantage can help address some of the issues identified in this submission.
- Recurrent funding is insufficient to keep up with cost of delivering services plus services are being subjected to unrealistic pressure by funding bodies to accommodate new clients without making the necessary funding adjustments.
- Current services are already at capacity. Service providers are not able to take on more clients, which is a very frustrating situation resulting in many people requiring help being turned away.

If you would like to speak with a Council officer about this submission, please call David Briant, Senior Social Planner, on 9399 0994 or Melinda Leves, Community Project officer, La Perouse and Surrounding Areas on 9399 0941.

Yours faithfully,



Ray Brownlee  
**General Manager**