

23rd November 2005

Comment on Parliamentary Inquiry on trends and issues affecting children and young people in the planning and provision of the built environment from Willoughby City Council staff.

Issues surrounding Children:

Willoughby City Council has "Guidelines for the Development of Child Care Centres" that improve on the requirements of the Children's Services Regulation 2004. These Guidelines cover issues such as car parking, access, planting and landscaping, and children's toilet facilities. Persons wishing to open a childcare service must comply with these Guidelines in addition to the Children's Services Regulation 2004. These Guidelines also specify that Home Based Carers and Family Day Carers may not require Council development consent, depending on their location, in an attempt to encourage more carers.

Council has a range of DCP's under which there may be requirements for children's playgrounds in certain residential unit buildings, and for green space in general. The recent trend has been to encourage developers to incorporate an area for the provision of childcare within large developments. Domestic housing is also required to have a certain amount of naturally landscaped area dependent on the size of the block of land.

The introduction of the Children's Services Regulation 2004 has resulted in a move by the Department of Community Services away from consultations with developers prior to their licence application. This has put the onus on Councils to attempt to ensure any development applications meet all aspects of the Regulation prior to consent being given. As not all Councils have designated Children's Services staff, there is increasing chance that consent will be given to applications that do not meet the Children's Services Regulation 2004. This is likely to result in more developments not able to be successfully licensed by the Department of Community Services unless significant and potentially costly works are carried out.

There has been an increase in development applications for childcare centres in mixed-use buildings. These are generally multi-level, with a combination of uses ranging from corporate offices to food courts. Evacuation procedures are generally of greater importance in such situations, considering the increased likelihood of fire in many of these buildings. The majority of applications for childcare centres tend to be for ninety children, which is the maximum allowable under the Children's Services Regulation 2004. This has obvious impacts on quality of care provided and on the ability of the applicant to provide suitable and age appropriate evacuation procedures.

The trend within Willoughby LGA is towards privately operated childcare centres. To be financially profitable, these services are less likely to provide care for the age group, which has the greatest demand – the 0-2 year olds. Private providers tend not to focus on pre-school services, which offer shorter hours during school terms as these traditionally make little if any profit. The onus is therefore on community organisations and local government to provide pre-schools, usually at a deficit. Willoughby City Council currently provides the premises for four of the nine pre-schools in this area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that supply does not meet the current demand for pre-school places in this area.

Issues surrounding Youth:

In regard to the Parliamentary inquiry into trends and issues affecting children and young people in the planning and provision of the built environment, Willoughby Council Youth Services notes the following:

Consultation

Consultation with young people plays a vital role in the provision of services. Willoughby has consulted young people on the major Civic Place redevelopment project as well as being proactive in consulting young people on a range of Council issues, many of which involve the built environment. Young people must be consulted in the planning of the built environment because strategically located youth services and facilities can dramatically impact upon their lives.

Location of services

Similarly, strategically located youth services can impact dramatically on their effectiveness within the community. The days of situating a youth centre in an out-of-sight location must come to an end. These Centres spend most of their time trying to justify their existence, as it is very hard to attract young people to an awkward location.

Willoughby Council has been ahead of its time in locating youth facilities in central areas within the Chatswood CBD. As a result, the facilities are utilised to their full potential including the Chatswood Youth Centre and Chatswood Skate Park. There was some public outcry when it was first decided that the skate park would be located close to residential and amenities, however there has never been a problem since the opening of the park.

Willoughby is even planning to draft a business plan to include a youth-friendly café into the major Civic Place redevelopment project.

CBD Security Committee

Council facilitates the bi-monthly CBD Security Committee where senior Council staff meet with senior police, church representatives, shopping centre management, security companies and school representatives to discuss important security issues within the Chatswood CBD. This group has been very effective in addressing security issues and contributing toward the reduction of crime within the area. Members of this committee are consulted in regard to safety issues related to the built environment.

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