

Submission

No 69

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

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6 May 2008

Michael Chau

Ms Kristie Matthews  
Committee Secretary  
Committee on Children and Young People  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Matthews

**SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Further to your phone call with Michael Chau of Council's Community Services Section regarding acceptance of Council's submission to the Inquiry, please find attached copy of the submission.

Further enquiries should be made to Michael Chau on 9748 9999.

Yours faithfully



**DAVID BACKHOUSE**  
**GENERAL MANAGER**



## **Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 years**

### **Submission to Committee on Children and Young People**

This submission is made on behalf of Strathfield Council. Strathfield Council is located in Sydney's inner west, about 14 kms from the City Centre. Strathfield Local Government Area (LGA) has a population of about 32,000 with large numbers of young people. Strathfield is known for its schools and has significant numbers of children and young people attending local schools including residents and non-residents.

Like many other local government areas in Sydney, Strathfield is under going significant change in its built environment as houses are being replaced with the building of large numbers of home units, of varying heights and densities. Home units are becoming the dominant form of housing in the Strathfield LGA. This submission is particularly concerned with development and opportunities available to children and young people living in housing types which imposes restrictions such as reduced space, privacy and movement.

This submission discusses issues relating to children and young people aged 9 to 14 years based on findings and observations in the Strathfield LGA.

#### ***1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about 9 and 14 years of age:***

Strathfield Local Government Area (LGA) has large numbers of children aged between 9 and 14 years of age. The percentage of children in this age range is higher than the Sydney Metropolitan average. The dominant household structure in Strathfield LGA is families eg couples with children, though the most recent ABS Census (2006) does record an increase in single parent families.

It appears that there is a strong connection between the numbers of families with school aged children residing in the local area and the large numbers of public and private schools. Strathfield LGA has significantly fewer children in the 0-4 age group than Sydney average, however when children reach school age (5 and over) the numbers of children in Strathfield increase. Therefore, it appears that families move into Strathfield LGA when children reach school age.

It has been estimated that the amount of student places in comparison to numbers of residents of school age is 2:1 in Strathfield LGA. Therefore, a large number of students in Strathfield LGA live outside the area but are frequent users of Council services and programs such as libraries, recreation and parks.

Council is currently reviewing its social and recreational plans, which will result in new plans for the years 2008-2013. In developing plans, Strathfield Council is assessing the needs of the general community and specific target groups such as children and developing plans for current and future provision of services, facilities, infrastructure and programs.

While it is known that there are large numbers of school aged children and young people living and/or attending school in Strathfield LGA, it is also likely that many of the recreation and social needs of some members of this age group may be satisfied by their schools eg sporting facilities, libraries etc. However, access to school facilities is limited only to current students and few, if any, schools allow access to facilities by the wider community including children and

young people. The Committee should review whether facilities provided by schools such as swimming pools, tennis courts, playing fields etc should be more accessible to the community.

Since 2001, the population of Strathfield LGA has increased by over 13%, primarily driven by building of multi-unit housing particularly in the form of home units. Over 40% of the Strathfield LGA population currently live in home units, which is significantly higher than the Sydney Metropolitan average. Many families with children, including those aged 9-14 years, live in home units.

The main occupants of home units are usually single people or couples without children. Home units were traditionally a 'transitional phase' on the way towards living and owning a house with backyard and garden. However, home units are increasingly the only viable and affordable form of housing in Sydney due to high cost of housing and diminishing supply of houses. Home unit living is fast becoming the dominant form of residential dwelling in the Strathfield LGA and this trend will continue into the future in line with NSW planning policies.

Living in home units raises significant social and recreational issues, which may adversely affect the social, physical and mental development of children and young people. Units are considerably smaller than houses and impose restrictions on private space (bedroom) and shared space (living rooms), noise and privacy. Units rarely provide play areas and are highly restrictive for children wishing to play games or sport with other children. Most unit developments (eg common areas) have limited or no private recreation areas such as open space or play areas. Balconies are generally not considered play areas for children due to safety concerns and in many high rise developments, balconies are almost unusable and unsafe due to strong winds.

Some newer and larger developments may contain some recreation facilities such as swimming pools, tennis courts etc, but generally children and young people access public parks and community facilities as substitute for private backyards of houses. Many parents however are apprehensive of allowing their children to play in parks unsupervised due to concerns about safety and crime. In contrast, children playing in private backyards generally would not raise the same level of concern about safety.

Many children living in home units are denied pet ownership as space is restricted or pet ownership is not allowed by strata committees. Despite the call by governments and health professionals for children and young people to become more active, many can not participate in various sports such as cycling as they do not have storage space for equipment such as bicycles at home.

An example of impact of crowded living conditions for young people in Strathfield is the usage patterns of Strathfield Library. Strathfield Council Library is heavily used by children and young people, primarily for study and recreation/social purposes. It has been observed that many are attending the Library to access study space but not necessarily to access library materials. Their purpose is to find a space where they can work because there is insufficient space in their homes. Many children and young people are living in cramped conditions caused by sharing limited living areas with too many other people.

Unit living can cause:

- Reductions in physical activity, participation in sports, recreation and leisure activities due to restrictions in space and unavailable or limited access to open space and facilities.
- Less freedom of play or movement leading to reduced social skills, creative development and physical co-ordination
- Reduced privacy – both within the home unit (with other family members) or within the unit development (common space issues). Lack of privacy can damage the social and

mental development of a child or young person. Lack of private spaces can be detrimental to school studies.

- Less socialisation with other children – no space for general play activities and children's parties

Participation in physical activity also assists in the development of self-esteem, discipline, social skills and responsibility. These are important skills for young people as they mature into adults. Obesity and lack of physical activity are of concern in all age groups, but particularly for children and young people as obese children and young people often become obese and unhealthy adults. Obesity in Australia appears to be rapidly increasing and is the subject of many health studies and government policies and initiatives. One of the contributing causes of obesity is lack of regular physical activity and increased amount of sedentary activities eg internet, online games, videos etc. There are many factors which discourage children and young people from regular involvement in physical activity such as fear of crime and safety reduces physical activities such as walking or cycling to school, shops or libraries, restricted private open spaces and lack of access to recreation and open spaces.

For walking and cycling to be more accessible, safe facilities for cyclists and pedestrians must be improved in order for the community, including children and young people, to access facilities such as schools, shops, and libraries.

Affordable childcare continues to be an issue for all parents. In this particular age group, childcare requirements generally involve access to Out of Hours Care (OOSH) and School Holiday programs. These services are essential for working parents to ensure that their children are cared for before and after school and during school holidays. The Committee should consider locating childcare services, particularly OOSH and holiday programs within schools.

## ***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.***

As discussed in the previous point, many children and young people are living in dwellings with limited space, usually units. Housing choices in Sydney including housing type and location are mainly dependent on level of family income. As home units are generally less expensive than houses, it is more likely that low income families live in units than families with higher income. However, with high costs of housing and diminishing supplies of houses, home units are increasing the only viable housing option for higher income families also. This has significant impact on their privacy, study and recreational space, interaction with other family members etc.

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

Development of resilience by children and young adults is critical to the development of adults who are able to participate fully in Australian society. Resilience can be described as the ability to cope successfully with change and stress in a constructive manner. Lack of resilience can result in unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse and crime.

Developing resilience also requires support and programs for parents as well as children.

## ***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***

As previously discussed, working parents of children in this age group need access to reliable and affordable out of hours child care services. Parents also need access to affordable school holiday programs and care as most working parents are not available to care for children during school holidays, which are significantly longer in time than annual leave for most workers.

Flexible working hours and arrangements are important for working families in order to balance work and family commitments.

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

It is recommended that this Inquiry fully consider the impact of medium to high density residential living on children and young people. The trend for higher density dwellings will continue and become in many areas of Sydney the dominant form of housing. Therefore, it is critical that Governments – Federal, State and Local – examine how this form of residential housing, affects children and young people and what strategies are required to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met and supported, through improving planning and provision and funding of services and programs.