

**Submission
No 67**

SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Mr Kevin Conolly, MP
Chair, Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services
Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

19 December 2017

Dear Mr Conolly

Re: Inquiry into support for new parents and babies

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) thanks the Committee on Community Services (the Committee) for the opportunity to provide comments on support for new parents and babies in New South Wales (NSW).

Established under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014* (NSW), ACYP is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0-24 years and promotes their participation in decisions that affect their lives. To do so, ACYP has consulted over 15,000 children and young people including children in pre-schools and schools across NSW. ACYP has also consulted with over 1,500 adults including parents and people who work with and for children and young people in regional NSW.

While our mandate spans from 0-24 years we recognise the particular importance of access to holistic and integrated support services in a child's early years. Early childhood is a period of rapid change and opportunity for a developing brain, and the early development of children influences their long term emotional, social and physical wellbeing.

In this submission, ACYP highlights the importance of listening to young people to whom government policies and practices apply. We will primarily focus on the issues raised in our consultations with young parents, young people at risk of homelessness, Aboriginal young people, and young people and service providers in regional areas. We also support the Child Death Review Team's submission and its focus on maternal mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and domestic and family violence.

ACYP acknowledges the robust system NSW has in place to promote the health and wellbeing of babies and new parents. Services that support new parents include, but are not limited to:

- **Blue Book and associated services:** A personal health record for children provided to parents as a guide to health, development and wellbeing checks.
- **Getting on Track in Time –Got it!:** A school-based early intervention mental health program for children up to Year 2 and their parents/ carers.
- **Safe Start:** Ensuring women within the NSW public health system who are pregnant or caring for a baby are screened for depression and receive two psychosocial assessments.

- **Start Strong:** Supporting children in NSW to participate in 600 hours of preschool education in the year before school no matter where they live or what their circumstances are.
- **Safe Home for Life:** Supporting families to stay together where it is safe to do so and ensuring that children and young people have a stable and safe living environment.
- **Building Strong Foundations for Aboriginal Children Families and Communities:** Providing free, culturally safe and appropriate early childhood health services for Aboriginal children from birth to school entry age.
- **Sustaining NSW Families:** A home visiting program working to ensure vulnerable families are linked in to community supports from the time of pregnancy until a child's second birthday.

Building on these initiatives, more can be done to enhance the adequacy of services and structures for new parents and their babies, especially those who need extra support such as young parents. Families that are particularly vulnerable and do not readily access online or mainstream community supports require further outreach. Accessible supports for young parents, parents who have exited the out-of-home care system, parents in rural and regional NSW, Aboriginal families and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families are particularly critical.

Noting that a child is most adaptable within their first 1000 days¹ ACYP believes early intervention is key to positively affecting biological and developmental functioning. Services and structures provided to support new parents are critical to promoting the best outcome for the child's cognitive development, physical health, social attachment and overall wellbeing. ACYP supports targeted frameworks, such as the First 1000 Days Australia movement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, that address the needs of specific populations within a holistic and culturally appropriate context.

ACYP acknowledges that Aboriginal children and young people remain significantly overrepresented in the child protection system and are exposed to considerably greater disadvantage than their non-Aboriginal counterparts². Information from the NSW Child Death Register shows that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants represent around 5% of all infants, they accounted for 10% of infant deaths over the past ten years. Aboriginal children represent about 28% of all children receiving child protection services in 2015-16 and 32% of all children under 1 year old (including unborn children) receiving child protection services.³ Findings from the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) indicated that while the majority of Aboriginal children are not developmentally vulnerable, 42% were identified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains.⁴

In line with AbSec's submission, we are of the view that Aboriginal people are best placed to determine the types of approaches that work for them, and local Aboriginal communities should be

¹ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., Keyes, M. & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper – Summary*. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

² AbSec, Inquiry into support for new parents and babies in New South Wales, p5

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Child protection Australia 2015-16: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2015-16/contents/table-of-contents>

⁴ Findings from the AEDC: <http://www.aedc.gov.au/parents/findings-from-the-aedc>

empowered to design, develop and deliver prenatal, parenting and early childhood services that meet the needs of their communities. Wherever possible, services targeted to Aboriginal children and families should be delivered through Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations.

At a minimum, services must be delivered in a respectful, welcoming and culturally appropriate manner in a process towards self determination. We emphasise the importance of recruiting, training and employing local Aboriginal staff and the need for adequate timeframes to allow services to build trust and develop a collaborative approach with the local community.

In our regional consultations with organisations and agencies that work with children and young people, participants highlighted the need to boost support for Aboriginal children and families, with a focus on safety, culture, identity and education. They noted that discrimination remains a problem in many communities, consistent with the feedback we have received in consulting with over 1000 Aboriginal children and young people. The Aboriginal children and young people we heard from also highlighted connection to culture as something that makes them feel safe and welcome. ACYP encourages the NSW Government to ensure Aboriginal parents and children have access to local and culturally appropriate service providers to promote the use of these services.

In addition to the consultations highlighted above, we have held focus groups with children and young people with experiences of homelessness, out-of-home-care and juvenile detention, through which we heard from a number of young people who had children of their own.

Young parents, while often highly motivated to care and provide for their children, often face considerable obstacles to achieving the best outcomes for their family. They are likely to face substantial challenges including socio-economic stresses and social stigma, which may limit their opportunities across various domains, including education, employment and housing. Although both parents and their babies experience multiple layers of vulnerability young parents have low engagement and high attrition rates from parenting support programs⁵ creating intergenerational risk factors. Statistically, children of young parents have higher rates of death due to extreme prematurity, SUDI/SIDS, suspicious injury and accidental deaths⁶.

The young parents we heard from spoke about the barriers in accessing safe and stable affordable accommodation within the private rental market. These barriers include the high cost of rent and low income; tenuous employment status (typically either part time or casual); poor or no rental history; and general lack of experience navigating the rental market. Participants also reported experiencing discrimination from real estate agents during the application process, and felt that they were more likely to be successful when case workers advocated for housing on their behalf.

They also raised the lack of programs for homeless young couples, noting that partners are generally unable to stay at the same refuge, and that there is insufficient emergency and ongoing housing support for young parents and their children.

⁵ Families ACT, *Parenting Programs in the ACT*, May 2015

⁶ FACS, *Child Deaths – 2011 Annual Report – Learning to improve services*, 2012

When asked what the NSW Government should focus on, young parents said that they wanted to feel respected and heard by Government departments and agencies they encountered; that they needed more financial assistance and autonomy at a younger age to support themselves to become independent; and that the Government should prioritise affordable housing, including rental and shared accommodation options. ACYP highlights the need for services to assist young people, especially young parents, find safe and appropriate accommodation.

Also important to new and expecting parents is the opportunity to engage in life skills preparation. We have heard repeatedly from children and young people that they do not feel equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate life as an adult. In particular, children and young people have told us that they would like to learn more about managing finances, seeking employment, maintaining healthy and respectful relationships, raising a family and accessing support services. They have also expressed the view that all parents should have access to parenting and anger management courses to reduce the incidence of violence against children.

Young parents have reported that programs which provide consistent, respectful and positive support have links to health, education and employment pathways and assist with securing and maintaining safe and appropriate housing are helpful. Building on the strengths of young parents and connecting them to the necessary supports at the time in which they need them will increase their capacity for safe and effective parenting, increase the likelihood they will be economically secure and improve their families' health and wellbeing. ACYP is working with a number of Government and non-Government partners to develop resources to fill this gap.

For those in non-urban areas, the service providers we have consulted with have raised that the regional workforce tends to be more mobile, which can cause people to disconnect from services. Service providers have also highlighted the importance of engaging with families consistently throughout the child's early years to create a strong and supported pathways into preschool and primary school, and expressed that there is insufficient support for culturally and linguistically diverse families and children living with disability outside of urban areas. They emphasised the importance of providing targeted support to people during life transitions, such as leaving school, moving out of home or having a baby. Early education was identified as a soft entry point for children, young people and parents to seek assistance on a range of issues so they can access information and referral pathways discreetly and without feeling stigmatised.

Early education was also seen as very important in our consultations with parents and carers engaged in a playgroup for babies and children with disability or chronic medical conditions. While they were generally pleased with the availability of services for children with disability, they felt that there were insufficient numbers of case managers for children with disability. Early intervention was seen as critical to addressing both physical and developmental disabilities and parents called for shorter hospital waiting lists; better access to respite care for parents and carers; and more accessible playgrounds and other public spaces. They also called for better and earlier access to information for parents and carers of children with disability, particularly information about preschool and primary school enrolment, which had been a difficult process for them.

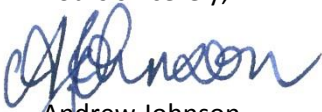
Information access has been a common theme throughout all of our consultations. In traveling across NSW and speaking with children and young people from a wide range of communities, it has become clear that many children and young people across NSW are unaware of the diverse local services, events and opportunities available to them. They have consistently expressed the desire to have a single place where they could access clear information about what was happening in their area, including information about sports and recreation, cultural performances, volunteering, jobs, apprenticeships, youth services and more.

ACYP is endeavouring to meet this need by working with a number of Government Departments to develop *Our Local*, a website that will provide localised, personalised and user-friendly information on topics of importance to children, young people and their parents or carers. *Our Local* will also provide a platform for users to provide direct feedback to Government on the programs and services they access.

We also highlight the important role of mobile children's services and playgroups in responding to the needs of regional and remote children and families; ensuring that they receive information about available supports; and promoting their access and attachment to services.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on this important topic. ACYP would be very happy to provide additional information to the Committee upon request. We look forward to the Committee's report.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Johnson

Advocate for Children and Young People