

INQUIRY INTO CHILD PROTECTION

Organisation: Nepean Community and Neighbourhood Services
Date received: 19 July 2016

June 2016

Legislative Council
General Purpose Standing Committee No.2

Re: Inquiry into Child Protection

Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services is a medium sized Not-for-Profit, Non-government, community based organisation, based in outer Western Suburb of Penrith. Our services cover Penrith Local Government area, (LGA). We have been operational since the early 1980's.

Our funding sources include State, Federal and Local Government Departments, with a significant amount of funding from Family & Community Services, (FACS). Our funding streams from FACS include; Families NSW, Community Builders, Housing communities Program, Aboriginal Community Youth & Family Strategy and Brighter Futures (BF) and Youth Hope (YH).

As part of this submission we will be responding to the terms of reference A), D), G) & H).

a) The capacity and effectiveness of systems, procedures and practices to notify, investigate and assess reports of children and young people at risk of harm.

Speaking from an NGO perspective it's difficult for us to comment on the effectiveness of systems and procedures within the Department. However our experience from an external position is one where local NGO services have knowledge of families, children and young people that are on a trajectory of heading towards the child protection system. Often NGO's will have concerns over time but not sufficient evidence at any one time to have sufficient information to achieve the threshold of significant risk of harm report to the Helpline.

Locally Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services, (NCNS), have implemented an initiative to pull together other services who are involved or working with family's who are on a poor trajectory. We work with other local service providers such as schools, Home School Liaison Officers (HSLO's), family support services, and generalist community development services to raise children or young person under chapter 16A, who we have concerns about in relation to child protection. Together we identify an intervention strategy that will help to avoid the family escalating to child protection. We call this model the Keep Them Safe (KTS), Circle and it is comprised of both Government and non-Government services who are directly involved with the child or children. Locally we were able to implement this initiative as services already had an existing level of relationship and trust due to attendance at local interagency, Cranebrook Neighbourhood Advisory board (CNAB). The interagency gave the network an opportunity to discuss ways to address the cumulative life events we were seeing being experienced by children and young people in Cranebrook. Any one event does not warrant a report but when we looked cumulatively at the life of the child, some early intervention by services are imperative to alter life trajectories of children and young people in high needs communities.

Our local model called KTS, is comprised only of prescribed bodies; Chapter 16A in the Children and young Persons(Care and Protection) Act 1998, allows for the exchange of information between prescribed bodies; Government and non-Government relating to a child's or young person's safety, welfare or wellbeing¹. In this Chapter, the term "organisation" applies to all "prescribed bodies", whether they are government or an NGO.² In the document summary of Prevention and Early

¹ Keep them Safe A shared approach to child wellbeing Factsheet No7 Information Exchange.

² <http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/kts/guidelines/info-exchange/provide-request>

Intervention Local Case Studies Project report; FACS Aug 2015³ it was expressed that a key finding across all areas identified in the report was that effective collaboration and information exchange were key factors for ensuring that prevention and early intervention works in practice. If there was some process for dialogue between child protection and the service system locally in the clients' local area, perhaps outcomes for families who are escalating could be altered.

FACS has a similar process with the Government services meeting together locally called the Youth Protocol Meeting, convened by FACS, where families identified as needing additional help are tabled and a referral options identified. Unfortunately there is no NGO representation at this meeting. At the very least a Community Program Officer from FACS funding administration could be present at these meetings, to identify local services whom child protection could refer the family too for assistance or at least feedback to our KTS circle. This would enable service providers locally to identify which service knows the family best and what strategies could be identified to assist them and avoid escalation of issues. This would mean that medium risk families who are reported to the helpline could come off the responsibility of the statutory responder and be taken under the wing of a local service. Currently Brighter Futures would be the only NGO receiving referrals of this kind and their referrals are predominately above ROSH.

Universal services have very little information exchange with local child protection Community Service Centres (CSC's). There is scope to implement a protocol to exchange information or share knowledge from frontline staff, who may see the families at neighbourhood events, with CSC staff via an established protocol. There is little opportunity to develop relationship between child protection caseworkers and local service providers, based in client's neighbourhoods. Services funded by FACS, Department of Education and communities (DEC) and other State Government funded services such as Neighbourhood Centres, Public Schools and other locally based services will be involved in the communities that children and young people are growing up in for the foreseeable future there is lots of scope to develop relationship once families are identified and engage them in community programs.

Recently The Hon. Victor Dominello MP provided the NSW Government response⁴ Recommendation 2 recommendation, where the Govt. response included:

".....it was identified that NSW public sector Capability Frameworks describes the capability and associated behaviours expected of all NSW public sector employees, at every level and in every organisation. The framework supports the achievement of this recommendation particularly with regard to collaborative practice and effective planning"

A key barrier to Building trust and strong working relations to the benefit of children, young people and families⁵ identified by the summary of prevention and early intervention local case studies project report is that "... the siloed nature of organisations and programs create barriers"

Along with KTS, NCNS has utilised existing structures in Cranebrook, the CNAB to instigate a Collective Impact Project. This was achieved by NCNS utilising existing budgets and good will from many organisations. We note that recommendation 17⁶ identifying that additional areas of high

³ Summary of Prevention and Early Intervention Local Case Studies Project Report, Family & community Services August 2015, pg , pg3

⁴ NSW Government response to the Recommendations of the Standing Committee on Social issues: Parliamentary Inquiry into service coordination in Communities with High Social Needs pg2

⁵ NSW Government Family & Community services; Summary of Prevention and Early intervention local Case studies project report pg.3.

⁶ NSW Government response to the Recommendations of the Standing Committee on Social issues: Parliamentary Inquiry into service coordination in Communities with High Social Needs Pg. 11

social need in NSW trial a collective impact approach; NSW Government reports that further consideration is required.

Funding services to provide backbone support to local collective, collaborative initiatives will improve outcomes for communities, children and young people; funding is required to sustain coordination and administration associated with such initiatives.

d) The amount and allocation of funding and resources to non-government organisations for the employment of casework specialists, caseworkers and other front line personnel and all other associated costs for the provision of services for children at risk of harm, and children in out of home care.

Casework specialist positions are integral to providing reliable regular contact and support to families undergoing significant struggles. Home visiting is an important component of a wholistic service, as is engaging with local networks that can provide additional information to the caseworker.

Currently NCNS is funded to provide Brighter Futures and Youth Hope as previously stated. They are receiving above ROSH referrals. Case management alone will only see more children removed, particularly in Aboriginal communities, as it's only a risk management process. Critical to better outcomes for families is to also engage case managed families in other early intervention activities that support participation in wider community life. This means that programs that have proven positive outcomes for clients, such as Aboriginal supported playgroup, Aboriginal speech and language program, tutoring for children and young people who are being case managed is critical to good client and case management outcomes. Contributions towards these activities for the benefit of BF and YH clients is integral to clients developing relationships with service providers outside their case work realm. These additional activities combined with casework enable clients to build relationship with others in the community, as well as external service providers.

G) Specific initiatives and outcomes for at risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and young people

We are most proud of our Aboriginal projects which have been a part of NCNS for almost 18 years. NCNS is an organisation that is bi-cultural in nature, with Aboriginal projects and staff making up a significant proportion of who we are. Over recent years Aboriginal representation on our senior management team and in our governance structures has matched the proportion of the Aboriginal projects within the organisation. In Penrith LGA we are the largest single provider of early intervention and culturally specific programs including Brighter Futures and Youth Hope case management to the Penrith community.

From our experience as previously stated it is the combination of case management to Aboriginal families who have been identified through the helpline and the engagement of these families in other early intervention programs such as Aboriginal speech and language program and Aboriginal supported playgroup that enables improved outcomes for families and allows work with the client to the benefit of their children and to avoid removal. Our work providing cultural activities to children and young people along with their case management has seen some amazing outcomes occur in relation to culture and pride and improved outcomes for children and young people.

"Children grow, learn and excel when their cultural needs are met, valued and respected".⁷

⁷ SNAICC - Secretariat of National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care

Meeting children's cultural needs through early intervention programs teaches parents and children to value learning, and respect for culture, as the best way to ensure improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's long term well being.

Another initiative of NCNS early intervention staff has been the implementation of a program called Cultural Connection. This program provides a suite of cultural facilitators that provide life affirming cultural stories and practices to families and Carers. Culture connect program builds community capacity, connection, respect, pride & identity for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples, and knowledge and awareness for the wider community. We have significant numbers of carers of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care who utilise this program to ensure children are exposed to culture and also ensures that the non-Aboriginal carers are exposed to and understand the significance culture has to Aboriginal children and young people and how this relates to increased wellbeing and educational outcomes for children and young people.

h) The amount and allocation of funding and resources to universal supports and to intensive targeted prevention and early intervention programs to prevent and reduce risk of harm to children and young people.

As stated previously it is critical to ensure that in communities' of high need, families, children and young people who may face significant disadvantage are provided with access to universal services. Universal services are strategic points from which the service system can offer a range of targeted early intervention programs and activities, but in a soft entry environment. Therefore the service is non-threatening for families and children.

ARACY in it's report "Better systems, better chances" states that the National Early childhood Development Strategy notes that "there is good evidence that many programs aimed at alleviating disadvantage during the early years of life are both effective for improving child outcomes and often yield higher returns on investment than remedial interventions later in life" (COAG 2009 p6)⁸

The report further states that "national effort to improve child outcomes will in turn contribute to increased social inclusion, human capital and productivity in Australia. This supports the notion that economic, human and social benefits are a likely outcome of prevention and early intervention."⁹ The report further states that there is an ethical argument for investments that optimise children's life chances and that actively seek to prevent chances of experiencing risk factors.¹⁰

Segal et al 2013, identifies that while the evidence for investment in the early years is compelling this is not to say that later intervention is not cost effective. Segal et al, analysed the effectiveness of 24 intensive family support interventions for at-risk children. They found 22 programs were effective in diverting children from the child protection system. They further argued that even small reduction in the number of children in out-of-home care can make these types of interventions highly cost effective. They argue it's never too late, "the idea that 'unless we as a society intervene

⁸ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, ARACY, Better Systems Better Chances: a review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention pg 50.

⁹ Ibid pg49

¹⁰ Ibid pg 49

early, it is too late' simply is not borne out by the evidence".¹¹ This point is particularly pertinent with regard to young people in out of home care and young people more generally.

ARACY report, quotes a Canadian report stating that "A system that incorporates the principle of proportionate universality for children in their early years would create and maintain a platform of universal services organised in a way that would eliminate the barriers to access that affect populations in the highest need" (Human early learning partnership (HELP) 2001 p1)¹²

Summary:

- a) That community service casework staff and NGO's based in the community, develop some protocol for dialogue to give and receive information even if that is via their FACS CPO. 16A can work for better outcomes for communities, children and young people, but we don't feel that it's being utilised to its full capacity in relation to discussion with services based in geographic communities by community service staff.

Initiatives such as our model of KTS could be developed in local communities for a more coordinated approach to managing families on the child protection trajectory. Models such as this would benefit from dialogue with CSC staff.

Cumulative traumatic events often take place in the lives of children and young people in high need communities. We don't feel that there is adequate weight given to these cases to intervene, often there is not enough happening at any one time to enable a report to be generated, as it does not reach the threshold of significant risk of harm. However local coordination of this knowledge could see earlier intervention for families, children and young people at risk.

- d) any case work undertaken with families, children and young people will have improved outcomes if the case work is accompanied by evidence based targeted early intervention programs where clients are able to engage in programs and activities that support child well being. Additional programs and activities should also be provided to support young people in out of home care.

- g) Early intervention Cultural programs can assist Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities to come together, share culture and improve trajectories for children and young people. These programs work with the case managed client to build resilience and cultural pride and demonstrates improved outcomes for children and young people.

- h) It is vitally important to maintain access to universal programs for all families, children and young people. However it is just as important that when areas of high need are identified that those universal services are able to up scale and provide targeted earlier intervention programs for families at high risk in a non-threatening environment which will aid engagement of difficult to engage families.

Nepean community & Neighbourhood Services thanks the Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry into child protection.

¹¹ Ibid pg 51

¹² Ibid pg 12.

Thank you

Laura Williams

Senior Team Leader

On behalf of

Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services

PO Box 7599, South Penrith, NSW, 2750

www.nepeancommunity.org.au

Ph:

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