



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

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# Response to Strong Families – Safe Kids Advice and Referral Service Discussion Paper



**INTEGRITY  
COMPASSION  
INFLUENCE**

## About TasCOSS

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TasCOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Tasmania. Our membership include individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to low income, vulnerable and disadvantaged Tasmanians. TasCOSS represents the interests of its members and their clients to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Strong Families – Safe Kids Advice and Referral Service Discussion Paper*.

Our views on this important issue are outlined in the attached submission. These views reflect the comments that we hear in the community sector from our member organisations and the communities they serve, particularly those who are low-income, vulnerable and disadvantaged in some way.

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# The Strong Families – Safe Kids Advice and Referral Service

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## Introduction

TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Strong Families – Safe Kids Advice and Referral Service Discussion Paper*. As the peak body for the Tasmanian community services sector, we represent our member organisations and the communities they serve, particularly those who are low-income, vulnerable and disadvantaged in some way. We have therefore commented on issues raised in the Discussion Paper that are at this level of concern, rather than responding to the more operational questions listed therein.

We are aware that much of the detail of the proposed new model has yet to be determined. To assist with this planning, we raise some of the questions that are of concern to our constituency in the following discussion.

## Placing the wellbeing of children at the centre of services

We were pleased to see that the *Strong Families – Safe Kids Implementation Plan 2016-2020* named up ‘Placing the Wellbeing of Children at the Centre of Our Services’ as its first strategy. We believe that this consideration should be front and centre in any restructuring. The City of Leeds in the UK provides a great example of a planning process with children at its heart, a long term vision, cross-party support, and engagement everyone who works with and cares about children and young people.<sup>1</sup>

As Mark Morrissey, the Tasmania Commissioner for Children, says ‘In reforming our system we must more actively seek out the views of children and young people. Children have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them and we have responsibility to seek out, hear and consider their views’.<sup>2</sup> While the wellbeing of children as a central driver is implicit in the Advice and Referral Service (A&RS) Consultation Paper, we feel that their needs and rights get lost in the consideration of structural and operational issues.

We strongly support the concepts delineated in the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) report, ‘Inverting the Pyramid: Enhancing systems for protecting children’<sup>3</sup> and the ‘The

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<sup>1</sup> Leeds Children and Young People’s Plan 2015-19 -from Good to Great-<http://www.leeds.gov.uk/docs/CYPP.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Commissioner for Children. Opinion Piece: To redesign Child Protection we need to look beyond Child Protection. <http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Opinion-Piece-Child-Protection-04.12.2015.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth. Inverting the Pyramid: Enhancing systems for protecting children. ARACY 2009.

National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children<sup>4</sup>. These include the need for different multi-level responses to some of the issues around the protection of children, early intervention with families, helping children and families more intensively, and reducing the unnecessary flow and churn of children and families in a system that can be unintentionally harmful. We are pleased that these approaches have been considered in formulating the 'Redesign of Child Protection Services in Tasmania' (March 2016). However, the recommendations of the Redesign document appear to be primarily structural, and there is only brief mention of the need for cultural change. Nor is there much attention to cultural change in the in the A&RS Consultation Paper. While we believe in the need for structural change, we consider the need for cultural change to be at the centre of many of the problems inherent in the current system. Further reference to the ARACY framework and a systems approach is suggested.

### Governance, structure and cross-sector partnerships

While the child protection redesign model is predicated on a public health approach<sup>5</sup>, there is little detail about how the community sector, where the bulk of prevention, promotion and early intervention services occur, will be treated as an equal partner in decisions regarding the new system. The sector has not had a direct voice either in the development of the initial Redesign of Child Protection Services report or in the Implementation Plan. While the sector has been consulted as part of the Redesign and will be participating in the Cross Sectoral Consultative Committee on Child Wellbeing, it has not been a driver of change.

The voices of children and families on how the Information and Referral Service (A&RS) can operate in their best interests also appears to be missing.

How can the community sector, as a key player in the system, be involved in high level decisions regarding its design and implementation of Strong Families – Safe Kids? How can the sector have a direct voice in decisions regarding the A&RS?

How can implementation of the A&RS take a whole-of-community view (including that of children and families)?

While the Discussion Paper states that 'as part of the Advice and Referral Service it is proposed to co-locate government and non-government elements to encourage closer working relationships and sharing of information' (p.22), the co-location proposal only looks at options for co-locating the A&RS with the Safe Families Coordination Unit, with potential extension only to other government services further down the line (with the exception of Aboriginal Community Organisations which are named up for possible co-location).

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<sup>4</sup> Council of Australian Governments (2009), *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* Commonwealth of Australia.

[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/child\\_protection\\_framework.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/child_protection_framework.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> A public health approach aims to improve the overall health of the community. It has a focus on prevention, promotion and early intervention; working in partnership; reducing inequalities; and effective and sustainable action.

There are difficulties to be overcome in the co-location of government and non-government services, but the success of the Community Based Child Protection Team Leader positions based in Gateway services suggests that further co-location could break down barriers and result in a more responsive and integrated process for children and families.

What are the plans for co-locating government and non-government services and how will these decisions be made?

Recommendation 15 of the Redesign of Child Protection Services in Tasmania report refers to 'key community infrastructure, such as child and family services and neighbourhood houses, being appropriately integrated into a broader system for promoting child safety and wellbeing'.

What role will child and family services and Neighbourhood Houses, etc. have in the A&RS? How will this be funded? If staff are to have a role in providing information and advice, what training will they receive?

## Gateway Services

A primary concern of TasCOSS and our constituency is the lack of clarity about the future of Gateway services.

In her March 2015 Ministerial Statement on Child Protection Design, the Hon Jacque Petrusma, Minister for Human Services, stated that 'Gateway Services have provided a critical role in providing early support for families and children in need, and will need to continue to do so.'

Again in April 2015, at a launch of a book on the successes of Gateway Services<sup>6</sup> the Minister released a statement stating that:

*The Hodgman Liberal Government is committed to supporting Gateway Services and their alliance partners, in their important role in providing vulnerable Tasmanians with access to the support they need.*

*...Supported by all sides of politics, Gateway Services provide a truly integrated, person-centred and responsive access point for Tasmanians in need.<sup>7</sup>*

The Redesign report raised concerns however, about the Gateway and generated uncertainty regarding the future of this model, proposing that a review of the relationship between CPS and Gateway intake services should be conducted. The call for this review was re-iterated in the Implementation Plan, but there was no further detail provided regarding the aims of this review or how and when it would occur.

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<sup>6</sup> Gateway Services, 'Together we achieve – stories celebrating five years of Gateway Services'  
[http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/uploads/99\\_99\\_stories\\_celebrating\\_5\\_years\\_of\\_gateway\\_services.pdf](http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/uploads/99_99_stories_celebrating_5_years_of_gateway_services.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> 'Stories Show Success of Gateway Services in Changing Lives'  
[http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/stories\\_show\\_success\\_of\\_gateway\\_services\\_in\\_changing\\_lives](http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/stories_show_success_of_gateway_services_in_changing_lives)

Questions around the future of Gateway services are causing considerable uncertainty for workers in the sector and how that will affect the children and families that seek help and support through this pathway.

The Redesign report stated that ‘the evidence suggests that [the Gateway] reform has, at best, been only partially successful.’ The main evidence provided to back up this statement was a 27% increase in the number of notifications to CPS between 2008/09 and 2014/15 which was attributed to ‘a combination of mandatory reporting and lack of service options’ – not dysfunction on the part of the Gateway. The report said that a prime concern of families and services consulted was the ‘constant churn’ between Gateways services and Child Protection services with families being referred back and forth between portals. We believe this concern could have had an operational solution rather than requiring a system re-structure – for example, a clear, defined protocol between the services.

In 2011, following concern about the prostitution of a 12 year old girl who had been under the guardianship of the government, a Tasmania Select Committee on Child Protection was established to examine the adequacy of child protection systems and practices and recommend improvements. The Committee’s report<sup>8</sup>, which was based on extensive community consultation, uncovered extensive evidence regarding what was, and was not working in the child protection system, including the Gateway. The Committee recommended that support for the Gateway should be continued but made extensive recommendations aimed at improving the interface between the Gateway and the Child Protection System.

A comprehensive review of Gateway and Family Support Services, conducted in 2012<sup>9</sup>, found that ‘Tasmania is well served by the Gateway and Family Support Services model, and that the service system is functioning as intended. A client survey ‘provided heartfelt feedback from parents about the value of the services and the skills of the workers.’<sup>10</sup> A key aspect of client satisfaction with the Gateway/IFSS model is that these services are seen to be at arm’s length from government and the statutory system, therefore more likely to be called on and to be trusted.

The 2012 review found that, at that time, the Gateway model had slowed the rate of entry into out-of-home care and that significant numbers of families were being diverted from the statutory system into family support services. Relationships with external agencies were said to be improving and the model working effectively as an early intervention mechanism. The review highlighted areas for further development but cautioned that ‘if this reformed service system is not sustained in its current form the likely repercussions include future significant service capacity issues within statutory systems such as CPS and OoHC.’ It went on to say that ‘it would be un-helpful to shake confidence in the family support services system and providers to create unnecessary uncertainty about continuity.’

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<sup>8</sup> Parliament of Tasmania (2011), *Select Committee on Child Protection. Final Report.*

<sup>9</sup> Disability and Community Services, 2012, *Gateway and Family Support Services, Midterm Review Report, February 2012*, Government of Tasmania. [http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/88743/GWFSS\\_Mid-term\\_Review\\_Report\\_2012-02-02\\_FINAL\\_VERSION\\_FOR\\_WEB\\_PUB\\_Feb201....pdf](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/88743/GWFSS_Mid-term_Review_Report_2012-02-02_FINAL_VERSION_FOR_WEB_PUB_Feb201....pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.6.

An investigation by the Auditor General in September 2011 also confirmed that Gateway services were working effectively.<sup>11</sup>

A 2013 report on 'Parents in the child protection system', conducted by Teresa Hinton from Anglicare Tasmania's Social Action and Research Centre<sup>12</sup>, found that parents' of the Gateway varied:

*For some it had been a very positive experience and they particularly appreciated home visits, someone they could talk to and a hands-on approach. However experiences of the service were very relationship based and could depend on whether a positive relationship developed with workers.*

Workers experience of the Gateway were also mixed, some being very positive and others expressing concerns about a perceived lack of responsiveness to lower level needs and issues with the referral interface between Gateway and Child Protection.

As there are such different perspectives on the Gateway and much of the feedback refers to the early days of its establishment, TasCOSS strongly suggests that an independent evaluation of the current Gateway be conducted. This would enable a clear assessment of the value and potential of this model, as well as a way to capture some of the deeper learnings that have occurred during its development and implementation. Any decisions should be guided by what is in the best interests of children and families, not by what is the most expedient and easiest solution.

Given extra resourcing (e.g. more Community Based Child Protection Team Leader positions) a statewide infrastructure to support a 24 hour call centre, It might be possible for the Gateway to address operational issues around capacity and service duplication and take on the broader statutory referral functions and linkages envisaged for the Advice and Referral Service. This could occur in conjunction with strategies to shift in the culture of the Child Safety Service in order to take more account of prevention, early intervention, service integration and service continuity. Whatever model is implemented, we agree that it needs to ensure clearer and more consistent pathways for clients, a common culture among workers, and better channels of communication.

We would like answers to the following questions about Gateway services:

Has the potential for Gateway to be further developed into the 'single door' Information and Referral Service been fully explored?

How is the proposed A&RS different to the Gateway and better than the Gateway?

What will the A&RS achieve that the Gateway hasn't been able to?

Will there be a comprehensive independent evaluation of the Gateway?

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<sup>11</sup> Auditor General (2011), *Report of the Auditor-General No. 2 of 2011–12. Children in out-of-home care. Parliament of Tasmania, September 2011.* <http://www.audit.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/OoHC-Final.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Hinton, T (2013), *Parents in the child protection system*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

What input into this new model have families had based on their experience with the Gateway?

What would be the flow on effects of removing the Intensive Family Support Gateway model from communities across Tasmania?

Has there been consideration, for instance of the 40+ case workers employed by Mission, Baptcare and the Alliance Partners, and the potential loss of their skills both to these services and to communities around Tasmania?

Who will provide the face to face advice and support in communities such as Circular Health, the West Coast etc?

Will the highly successful Mission Australia Case Management System, used by Alliance Partners continue to be supported in some way?

## Cultural competence and community needs

There is widespread inter-generational concern among Aboriginal peoples about the role of the government in child welfare and protection. The Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation (TAC) call for 'the transfer of jurisdiction over child welfare and child protection to the Aboriginal community' including responsibility for out of home care.<sup>13</sup>

We believe that respectful, equal, and ongoing engagement with Aboriginal organisations in Tasmania should precede any attempts to arrive at solutions to issues relating to Aboriginal children and families. Those engaging with these organisations should ensure that they have sufficient understanding of the Aboriginal community and an appropriate level of cultural competency to undertake this role.

The same principles should apply to engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, although we anticipate that the solutions they come up with will be quite different.

## Other considerations

### *Involvement of the community sector*

Changes proposed in the Redesign will have a significant impact on how non-government services (beyond Gateway/IFSS) will interact with the redesigned Child Safety Service, particularly through the A&RS.

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<sup>13</sup> Sculthorpe, H (2014), *Luwutina mana-mapali krakani waranta. Keeping our children with us: Report to Government and the Aboriginal Community about changes needed to the child protection system in Tasmania*, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Hobart.



What professional development, ICT support and other resourcing will flow on to community services involved in the new structure?

How can genuine partnerships be established with the community sector and organisations involved in protecting our children and/or supporting families not be set up to fail with short term funding, lack of resourcing, and lack of flexibility?

### *Supporting workers*

Workers both within and external to the child protection system are progressively dealing with more intense and complex situations.

How can we develop a strong, professional and resilient workforce where workers feel supported and encouraged?

How can we develop a genuine team approach among workers across the system?

How can we ensure awareness and respect for cultural differences, both among workers and in their dealing with clients?

### *Supporting families*

Families are increasingly under stress, with sometimes dire consequences for their children.

How can we ensure continuity and consistency of support for families and build on the relationships they develop with workers (without creating dependency)?

How can we work with families who have successfully navigated their way through the system (e.g. via peer mentoring/consumer engagement models)?

How will the A&RS be marketed to families to waylay the perception that they have entered the child protection system and will be officially on record, and may risk having their children removed from their care?

### *Implementation processes*

How can proposed changes be managed so that community organisations do not lose their experienced, professional staff?

What is the capacity of the Department to implement and deliver proposed changes in a way that has no, or minimal, fallout for the community sector?