

Creating child-friendly cities conference

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Young People, Families and Communities

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Good morning.

I would like to **acknowledge** the traditional owners of the land on which this event is taking place.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about Queensland's Commission for Children and Young People & Child Guardian and **our interest in creating child-friendly cities.**

I'd like to talk about how the Commission is contributing to child-friendly cities ---- and identify how we can play a greater role in partnering with key stakeholders ----to further the child-friendly cities agenda.

We have also prepared a Discussion Paper which provides more detail about some of these issues.

The Commission would appreciate any feedback on the issues raised in the discussion paper by the end of the year as it will form the basis of our future policy advocacy work to promote a child friendly cities agenda.

Commission's mandate

I'd like to start by explaining the Commission's legislative responsibility to protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland - particularly those most vulnerable.

We have a mandate to give priority to children and young people who:

- cannot protect themselves or have no one to act for them
- live in out-of-home care, including foster care
- who are in detention, or
- are disadvantaged by disability, living in an isolated area, homelessness, or poverty.

The Commission's strategic focus includes working towards:

- achieving safe environments for children and young people where risks are identified and managed, as well as
- targeted preventative and early intervention strategies for children and young people who are at risk of harm.

We have a range of activities which contribute to the creation of child-friendly cities.

They include:

- monitoring, reviewing and promoting laws, policies and practices impacting on children and young people

- conducting, co-ordinating, sponsoring, participating in and promoting research about the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people
- recording, analysing, researching and reporting on child deaths
- promoting the development of risk management strategies for organisations providing services for children and young people to ensure their safety and wellbeing, and
- ensuring that children are involved in any decisions which affect them.

Monitoring and reviewing laws, policies and practices

Government legislation has a significant impact on our ability to create child-friendly cities.

For example:

- pool fencing laws aim to reduce the incidence of child drownings¹
- laws to reduce speed in school zones aim to reduce the number of children being run over; and
- all new homes must have hot water control devices installed to prevent burns to children.

There are also laws which prohibit smoking within 10 metres of a children's playground².

However, there are also laws which may work **against** the creation of child-friendly cities.

For example, we have regulations allowing large residential developments to be built without appropriate access to play areas for children and young people.

This has been linked to a decrease in physical activity and an increase in obesity among children and young people³.

Queensland has also recently introduced 'move on' powers --- which allow police to 'move on' those perceived to be causing 'anxiety' to the public ---- affecting mostly homeless people, Indigenous people and young people.

Some see such powers, if implemented without corresponding referrals and supports --- as unfairly bringing young people into conflict with the police and accentuating their feelings of alienation and exclusion.

It could be argued such actions might actually increase the likelihood that young people will take part in anti-social behaviour or criminal activities⁴ ----- bringing them into contact with the juvenile justice system.

In addition, the use of these 'powers' can reduce the amount of public space available to homeless people and force them to use spaces ---- which are less safe, such as smaller areas hidden from public view⁵.

These examples beg the question - are our laws working against creating child-friendly cities?

And what role do organisations such as the Commission play in addressing these issues?

We have a mandate to advocate for changes to legislation which impacts on the creation of child-friendly cities.

For example, we're currently reviewing the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*, the basis for town planning and development in Queensland.

Our focus is on the requirements which should be considered to meet the needs of children and young people - including consulting with and engaging them in the planning process.

Research and reporting

The Commission also contributes to the creation of child-friendly cities through its research function - which includes conducting, co-ordinating, sponsoring, participating in and promoting research about issues affecting children and young people.

A good example is our recent survey of over 5,000 children and young people who live in out-of-home care in Queensland.

We asked them a variety of questions about their life in out-of-home care.

Of the over 1,700 responses we received, many related to the built and social environment.

When asked what they liked about their placement --- many said having a yard big enough to play in was important to them ---- as was the proximity of their house to school and other facilities.

Responses on what they liked included comments like:

- *“Riding. Going to the skate park”*
- *“Space to play in the yard”*
- *“Close to school, close to shops”*
- *“Because there’s heaps of room and can climb the tree, run around the yard”.*

When asked whether there was anything they wanted changed to make their out of home care placement better ---- similar themes emerged, including:

- *“A bigger yard, a big pool, cleaner gardens...”*
- *“A bigger backyard so I could really kick the ball around”*
- *“A yard with a bit of grass”*
- *“More ways of getting into town”*
- *“Live closer to town”*
- *“More sporting activities”.*

The Commission released a report earlier this year on these findings, titled *Views of Children and Young People in Care: Queensland*.

While these findings will be used primarily to improve out-of-home care for children and young people --- they also give us an insight into what children want in their environment to make it better for them.

The Commission also publishes an annual *Snapshot* report on the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland.

Snapshot 2006 published last month includes demographic information on children and young people :

- the availability of and involvement in child care
- participation in education
- rates of homelessness
- young people as victims of crime, as well as a range of other data on wellbeing.

In future, we're considering including indicators relevant to child-friendly environments, such as social exclusion. I welcome further discussion on this issue.

Child Death research

In an effort to reduce or remove risk factors to children and young people in their physical environments --- the Commission also maintains a child death register, which records details of the deaths of **all** children and young people in Queensland.

This information is collated and analysed, with recommendations made about things that can be done to reduce or remove such risk factors.

We are also responsible for monitoring the extent to which these recommendations are implemented.

The register contains data about deaths among children and young people, including ---

- transport related incidents
- drowning
- fire and accidental deaths such as falls, poisoning and electrocution.

Last year for example, the Commission recommended that the government -- refer the issue of low speed run-overs of children in driveways to the Parliamentary Travel-Safe committee for further consideration.

The Commission will continue to report on and make recommendations about the deaths of children and young people to government and key stakeholders.

This will assist in the planning and development of communities as we work towards reducing preventable deaths.

Employment Screening and risk management

The Commission also does a great deal of work educating organisations which require blue cards about how to provide child-safe environments for the children and young people in their care.

We promote the Working with Children Check, or blue card system, and conduct free risk management training throughout the state.

This training helps organisations which must have risk management strategies in place --- to implement practices and procedures which ensure children and young people can learn--- thrive ----and enjoy activities in safe environments.

As part of this process, the Commission has engaged with children and young people themselves to find out what makes them feel safe.

Engagement of children and young people in decisions that affect them

In line with the U-N Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶, the Commission has a legislated responsibility to listen to, and seriously consider, the concerns, views and wishes of children.

To do this better, we're developing a strategy to engage children and young people more effectively in our activities.

We will also be incorporating evidence about what works from the work of our peers. For example ---- Visible Ink, Brisbane City Council's Youth Team, has done some good work engaging young people --- to get their input into the Council's vision for the city in 2026.

The Commission is also liaising with Ipswich City Council ---- to advocate for the needs of children and young people to be incorporated into the planning of the Ripley Valley --- one of the largest master-planned communities in Australia.

The upcoming development of the Ripley Valley offers those interested in child-friendly cities a unique opportunity ---- to engage with local and state government, planners, developers and other stakeholders --- to promote child-friendly environments.

Progressing the Child-friendly Cities Agenda

In addition to carrying out its legislated responsibilities, the Commission has been listening and talking with representatives of local councils, developers, planners, professional bodies, government agencies and academics about child-friendly cities in the future.

Key issues of interest for us include:

- the lack of an organising entity to manage a co-ordinated response to creating child-friendly cities
- the ability of planners and developers to effectively create child-friendly cities due to the separation of functions between government agencies
- the funding models used by Government to plan and build infrastructure
- the availability of models to engage children and young people effectively – especially those disengaged from society and difficult to access
- the focus on younger age groups, with young people considered more difficult to cater for in planning and developing cities

- the need to recognise that children and young people are not a homogenous group - there are age, gender and cultural differences to consider.

Child Friendly Cities Agenda - strategies and directions

In preparing for this conference, the Commission did some additional preliminary social research and consulted stakeholders to get a better understanding of what constitutes a Child Friendly Cities agenda.

As mentioned, a short discussion paper has been developed outlining this work, including some indicative strategies and direction for future debate, policy development and research – most of which I have touched on here this morning.

We think creating child-friendly cities is much broader than planning and developing the built environment.

It must be based on a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex issues which may lead to negative outcomes for children --- particularly those most vulnerable.

Some directions we support include:

- achieving effective legislation and policies focused on the best interests of children and young people
- introducing strategies to reduce the number of children, young people and their families who live in social exclusion
- introducing workforce reform which allows parents to increase the amount of time they spend with their children, including the creation of employment opportunities within easy travelling distance of where people live

- enabling improved data, including child-generated indicators, to better inform policy makers and the public of the diverse needs of children and young people
- working towards the availability and accessibility of affordable housing and a commitment to providing quality crisis accommodation services to reduce the impact of homelessness on children and young people
- creating better access to essential services and facilities, including schools, child care, health services and recreational facilities, which can be assisted by the co-location of services, and
- fostering sustainable partnerships with key groups, including government agencies, local councils, developers, planners and children, focused on building our capacities to build better outcomes for children.

Key issues for the Commission in creating child-friendly communities

I would like to end today by posing a challenge to everyone here.

As Commissioner, I'm responsible for promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of *all* children and young people in Queensland.

They do not just live in our cities.

These children and young people also live in rural, regional and remote communities --- where there are significant disparities in health outcomes ---- and their use of health services compared to their urban counterparts.

There are also educational disparities, and in some cases, limited employment opportunities.

A large percentage of Indigenous children and young people live in these rural and remote areas.

So how does the creation of positive outcomes for these young people fit into our debate?

Having visited and talked with many elders and young people in these communities it is clear that many of the issues limiting life choices in these communities stem from a lack of employment --- lack of appropriate and affordable housing ---- and a lack of things for children to do.

I would like everyone here to include **these** communities in our considerations as well.

I think we need to focus our thinking more broadly on the creation of child-friendly *communities* - so our children and young people are treated equally, regardless of where they live.

Addressing their needs must be a priority for a truly just society.

The needs of all children whether in urban, rural or remote communities and especially those disadvantaged by geographic isolation or poverty - require our urgent attention and advocacy.

Please feel free to contact the Commission or have a look at our website if you're interested in any of the reports I've mentioned today.

¹ Building Act 1975

² Queensland Tobacco and Other Smoking Products Act 1998

³ Professor Paul Zimmet recently stated at the 2006 International Congress on Obesity in Sydney.

⁴ Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (2005) A Submission by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland in opposition to Brisbane City Council's Application to grant Move-On Powers to Police in King George Square, Kurilpa Point and New Farm Park. October available at www.yanq.org.au

⁵ City South Homelessness Profile. Social Policy Brisbane City Council January 2005.

⁶ Article 12, CROC "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".