

Kyabra Community Association Inc.

Response to the Commission of Inquiry Order (No.1) 2012

Kyabra's vision is of fair, thriving, sustainable communities that instil hope, embrace diversity, promote safety, and in which all people feel a sense of belonging.

OUR MISSION

Kyabra is committed to providing socially just services to enable the sustainable development of individuals, families, communities and organisations. It currently does this by facilitating opportunities for the enhancement of their strengths and capacities through its range of innovative services and business initiatives:

- Providing services that are based on the strengths and aspirations of community members;
- Resourcing workers;
- Resourcing communities and working in partnership with community members to achieve their aspirations, goals and vision;
- Investing in innovative and creative enterprises and projects;
- Influencing policy through research and advocacy; and
- Committing to environmental sustainability in its operation.

OUR GOALS

Our Community

To build upon our community with responses across a continuum of early intervention and tertiary approaches.

Excellence

To strive for excellence in practice and systems, across all areas of activity.

Financial diversity and sustainability

To seek and develop a diverse range of funds and enterprises to be sustainable and pursue identified goals and priorities.

Social policy and research

To make a positive contribution to social policy and have a solid research evidence base.

OUR VALUES – Strength in Community

Social Justice

We believe all people have inalienable rights as agreed to in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that all should have an equal opportunity to access the benefits of their society.

Respect

We aspire to demonstrate respect for all people and honour human diversity and uniqueness. We seek to uphold the worth of all individuals and to preserve their dignity.

Cultural Recognition

We are committed to recognising all cultures within the community. We honour the past, present and future significance of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) peoples' culture. We seek to support their initiatives to protect and maintain knowledge of core A&TSI protocols, and principles of governance. We believe that cultural recognition needs to be a precursor to any reconciliation process.

Belonging

We recognise the fundamental importance of relationships, which extend from a sense of self and connection to place, through to a diversity of family and community relationships, and ultimately rest within a sense of shared or global humanity.

Participation and Inclusion

We believe that everyone has a valuable contribution to make to family, community and political life. We value the diverse contributions that people can make.

Self Determination

We believe that people are their own experts and that change is most likely when people can be active participants in their own desired futures by controlling resources, relationships and decision making.

Hope

We are hopeful that even the most complex of social issues can be addressed. We believe that change is possible and that a capacity for learning and growth can prosper at any level in society given the right conditions and resources.

Strengths

We believe strengths and capacities should be acknowledged as the most important resource for change. We believe that while people will generally be doing the best with the resources that they have, complementary, external resources can be useful for change to be achieved and maintained.

Collaboration

We value collaboration, and we seek opportunities to pool our resources, and complement the strengths of others to create a caring and just society.

Innovation

We embrace innovative ways of creating effective responses to changing needs and current understandings. We see innovation as nourished by continuous research, evaluation, reflection, training and financial self-reliance.

Accountability

We actively support, accept and demonstrate accountability for all of our organisation's activities, including our financial and business operations, and our environmental and social impact through transparent, open and honest processes.

OUR CLIENTS

Kyabra services a range of quite broad geographic areas, reflecting the expectations of different programs and their funding sources. We have made attempts in the past to define our focus area clearly, and to limit our geographic catchment to optimise our responsiveness and our capacity to bring a social planning and community development approach to our work. However, this has proven difficult, not least because the areas of greatest need are also changing. As a consequence, Kyabra today is open to supporting work across a broad geographic area, as long as its core vision and values are not compromised.

Kyabra Community Association Inc. Strategic Plan 2012 – 2014

3c) reviewing the effectiveness of Queensland's current child protection system in the following areas:

i. whether the current use of available resources across the child protection system is adequate and whether resources could be used more efficiently:

We have had a long history of under resourcing and/or placing resources inappropriately across both Government and non-Government in relation to strengthening families and communities. Perhaps this has been a collective reflection of priorities, but this is an opportunity to express our hopes across government and community that we are indeed forward thinking and able to implement well considered, consultative, research based solutions.

A broad shared vision across both Government and non-Government would provide a more workable basis for identifying responsibilities and accountabilities for a range of core functions that collectively contribute to a Broader Vision.

For example; some practitioners and agencies (Govt and Non-govt) hold an underlying belief that parents do the best they can and when their intentions are unable to be realised to meet children's right of care and safety, they require additional family and community support to fulfil their parenting role.

Where children are at risk, interventions should meet both the safety needs of the child and work towards a situation where children can be reunited with their families or at the very least maintain a sense of connection. This belief would give rise to Carer training that focussed on ways of working with natural families that demonstrated respect and a desire to assist natural families in their parenting role.

Other views more closely aligned with historical practice are more concerned with rescuing children from 'Bad Parents' so as to reduce their vulnerability. Despite the research and evidence that we unwittingly expose many children to further abuse, this view still holds influence and would give rise to Foster Carer Training that would be more focussed on the placement environment and care of the child.

It may not be as concerned with the broader family support and community focus that reflects a more evidence based analysis. Such 'Child Rescue' models have also been adopted, not so much because of the views of Departmental staff, but we suspect because they are immersed in crisis and have only the resources and capacity to struggle with their statutory obligations.

Adequate resourcing entails hard Infrastructure (i.e. Information Technology, training facilities, capital etc.) as well as human infrastructure around the supervision, training and support of Direct Service Workers in both Sectors. In addition, there has been a long tradition in this State of underfunding in relation to Management structures that support our collective hopes for just and safe communities. This has implications for funding formulas and Service Agreements that have been historically based on assumptions that professionals can be employed to address complex structural issues without being adequately resourced to the task in both a Practice and Administrative sense.

ii. the current Queensland government response to children and families in the child protection system including the appropriateness of the level of, and support for, front line staffing;

Many in the Community Sector believe that the best interests of the child are best achieved by an integrated response that supports families and gives them access to the resources they require to realise their aspirations. (I.e. health, housing, education, family and community support, adequate income levels etc.). Out of home care is subsequently viewed as a resource to families rather than rescuing children. There is no argument that there are circumstances that necessitate the removal of children from their families of origin, either temporarily or at times, permanently. However, a Service Orientation that claims its primary client as the child fails to ground itself in research that indicates that child safety is enhanced when families are more connected to informal and formal community supports.

Some of the Department of Child Safety research and trials of Intensive Family Support have detailed factors that enhance the safety of children. This research provides solid evidence that would challenge an orientation that the best interests of the child can easily be separated from family and community support.

A service orientation of any individual function or component of the broader child protection system needs to sit within a broader shared vision that is based on solid research and acknowledges the structural impediments that impact on family aspirations.

It is absurd to think that families do not aspire to great hopes for their children. If this is acknowledged, our orientation should be about providing the resources that is their right rather than individualising, blaming approaches that serve to further marginalise families and undermine child safety enhancing factors. This orientation is further compromised by language that reinforces unfounded populist perceptions that fault lies with individuals rather than with systemic and structural factors. If the latter orientation was adopted, we would be more likely to talk about the impacts of poverty in reducing child safety factors rather than focus on individual, pathologising terms such as abuse and neglect.

As an organisation that operates a Foster and Kinship Care program we are cognisant with all aspects of the child protection system. Our local Child Safety Service Centre is Mt.Gravatt. We have enjoyed a long standing relationship with the Service Centre that is based on cooperation and partnership. As a result we have been able to offer a range of services and support to the families that come in contact with Child Safety Mt.Gravatt. What appears to have gotten in the way of localised responsive, collaborative and child centred responses to children in the out of home care system is the centralisation of many functions of the child safety system. Referrals to place a child are received from the centralised Placement Support Unit. These referrals are sent to *all* the Foster and Kinship agencies who then all look for a placement. As a result *all* of the agencies are spending time and resources to place a child whom may have been referred inappropriately for reasons such as the referral is outside of the agency's service agreement with the Department, the child and family are considerably out of area that would necessitate a Foster Carer having to transport a child to school across the other side of Brisbane as well as accommodating contact with the child's family on a regular basis across Brisbane, that the child is displaced from their local environment and broader connections, to name but a few.

The impacts of this way of working become much broader. Carers are unable to accommodate such arrangements and placements are jeopardised. Enormous pressures are placed on carers to take placements outside of their individualised carer agreement because there are not enough carers to accommodate the numbers of placements required. This pressure extends to staff that support Foster Carers and contributes to the breakdown of placements given the matching principles are not being duly considered. These factors lead to carers becoming disillusioned with the system and withdrawing as foster carers. Foster Care Qld reports that surveys of Foster Carers exiting the system predominately identify 'the Department' as the reason why they withdraw as Foster Carers.

What had worked for us well in the past was the local relationship with Child Safety Service Centres, the ability to form close working relationships with staff who have an intimate knowledge of the children and families that come into contact with the department and a history of involvement. As a result, we are able to match appropriately children to carer households, to have the child remain in their local environment and connected to their broader networks and the ability to continue to monitor the placement more effectively because it is localised. We are able to plan for sustainable placements that contribute to both the child's experience of the care system and a foster carer's level of satisfaction with being supported and valued in their role as a foster carer.

When we see the functions of centralisation to teams that do not have a relationship with children and families and when we see the levels of associated paperwork double, triple and quadruple a function that would best be addressed locally and within the realm of where the knowledge and understanding sit, we then see the system begin to implode in on itself. Paperwork is lost, misplaced or not complete, communication becomes problematic or does not exist, worker to worker relationships are not able to be developed because of the sheer numbers of staff involved and the levels of frustration and disillusionment begin to affect every person involved in the system. This is currently the reality of our day to day work and experience. We would assume that this would also be the experience of the Placement

Support Unit for the exact same reasons that we have outlined. We would extend these same sentiments in relation to the recruitment of foster carers, carer assessments and carer reapprovals.

iii. tertiary child protection interventions, case management, service standards, decision making frameworks and child protection court and tribunal processes

When assessing the needs of Children in Care, there are concerns about the resources required to address the varying needs of children and young people. Children with disabilities have particular requirements and carers need to be adequately supported to be able to meet their needs. Placing Sibling groups with a range of disabilities including both behavioural, intellectual and physical disabilities with a single Carer family may meet our aspirations to keep siblings together, but without adequate resourcing, it is doomed to failure. This circumstance, begs the question of how we support families who have a child, or children with disabilities so that this particular circumstance does not bring them into contact with the Statutory Child Protection System? When assessing the needs of Children in Care, it is unfortunate that there is not a corresponding assessment of the needs of children with disabilities in their families of origin. This is perhaps the core problem with our current systems that is re-active rather than pro-active and that skews our responses towards Tertiary rather than Primary, preventative responses.

This is closely linked with CMC recommendations about 'Whole of Government' responses that may reduce the demand on Statutory Child Protection Systems. For example families who have a member with a disability may potentially have contact with the Departments of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, Education, Health and Housing along with federal Departments such as Centrelink along with a host of under-resourced Community Agencies. Add this to community practices that exclude people with disabilities, and it is little wonder that many families, unwittingly end up in the Statutory System. It is not where they belong or want to be and is a clear example of how we de-value and under-resource families.

This is a broader reflection of lack of adherence to both Social Justice and Human Rights principles. Disability perspectives are perhaps the clearest example of how we collectively fail families, but the same principles apply to all families that are excluded from the resources and supports that they require to achieve their hopes and aspirations as families.

In relation to Case Management Approaches the current practice does not reflect collaborative partnership between Government, non-Government, families, carers and children in care. Control over decision making and approaches lie within the province of Child Safety. There are examples of Case Management approaches that are based in the assumption that collaboration and consultation with a range of partners, (eg. Wynnum Redlands Integrated Care and Support Initiative that previously existed) actually lead to improved outcomes for children, young people and families. As an organisation with an integrated model of service we will, where possible make a connection to the family of a child in care with our Foster and Kinship Care service. As a result we have a number of soft entry points for families to

connect with our broader range of services and strive to form a relationship with the family as clearly this best supports the child in care. Consequently we are well placed to be an integral partner in addressing the needs of the child and their family. Currently high caseloads of Child Safety Officers impact on the ability for them to adequately case manage. Foster and Kinship Care agencies, because of their relationships with carers, the child and their family are well placed to contribute more fully to the therapeutic, medical and educational needs of the children in out of home care.

iv. the transition of children through and exiting the child protection system;

The current out of home care system provides a valuable role for children who are unable to live at home. As detailed earlier we do not make the assumption that all children are able to live at home and that some of the issues that families face are multiple and complex. As an organisation that has a Foster and Kinship care program, we require foster carers to work as part of the team with ourselves and other non-Government and Government partners towards children being returned home or to maintain connection and relationship where this is not possible and is appropriate. As a result the following details what strengths and gaps exist in our current systems.

Foster Care provides a stable and safe environment for children in the out of home care system and carers play an important and influential role in a child and family's life. We believe that we support foster carers well but recognise that the mandated training requirements in relation to pre-service, standard and ongoing training are inadequate to equip carers for their vital role. The role of the foster carer needs to be seen in a much more professional light and as such the training should match this requirement. Kinship carers are often family members or part of the child's community and often the notion of placing a child who is unable to live at home within their extended family or friendship network is a preferred and most natural option if this can be explored. Often limited resources do not allow this to occur in a timely fashion or alternately are not able to be explored at all. Additionally Kinship carers are not consistently offered the support of being connected to a non-Government foster care agency and thus are not exposed to or are offered training to assist them in their role.

We have long held the belief (supported by research and evidence) that adding resources to families in early intervention is far more beneficial to avert having to apply resources at the tertiary end (as detailed earlier). We work with many of these vulnerable and marginalised families and the ability to be able to extend resources to more adequately support these families when initial flags are raised such as through the early years of a child's development and through transition points of pressure can and does avert more complex and statutory interventions at a later stage. We currently do this work given that we operate an integrated model of service, however we do not have specific resources available to enable us to do this work with families within the child protection environment. That we are able to accommodate these families is more about the way that we apply our resources than the funding dollars themselves.

ATTACHMENT A

A Family's Perspective

I had the opportunity to talk with a Mother who currently has a child in care about her experiences with the broad child protection system. She has given me permission to share her insights.

Prior to this woman's child going into care, she described herself as 'a bit of a lost puppy', she had nowhere to live, no family or friends to assist her and felt like a gypsy, moving from place to place. She feels great guilt for having had to place her child in care. It's a guilt that lives with her constantly and is felt most acutely when she separates each week after access visits. She also reports that her son experiences great trauma on these occasions as he just wants 'To be with Mummy'

Her son is currently placed with a Foster Carer that is attached to a Non-Government Foster and Kinship Care Service.

I asked her what she had found both helpful and unhelpful as well as what she might have found more helpful. These were her comments.

1. The Foster Carer was extremely helpful. She saw her as a friend, like a Mother, there to listen and not judge. More significantly, she saw her as giving her great support in her goal to have her child returned to her care.
2. Her circumstances at the time of her child going into Care were related largely to homelessness and isolation. She felt that greater supports at this time would have been helpful.
3. She felt powerless in her dealings with the Department. Excluded from decision making, particularly in relation to access. Notice time was problematic, given that she could not always predict what might happen in two week's time. She believed that there was little flexibility in these systems.
4. She had requested that she be connected with a 'Parenting Course', but the Department did not follow up.
5. In meetings with Departmental Officers, she felt judged arousing strong feelings of distrust and anger. She accepted that there were processes that had to be followed, but felt that they were slow and unhelpful in working towards her goals.

I think that her story is not atypical and there are a number of implications for Child Protection Reform.

1. Where Foster Carers are seen as a resource to the whole family rather than a placement option, there are greater potential for families to work towards their goals and enhance the safety of children in the longer term. This also has implications for resourcing Foster Carers to play this role in terms of supervision and training. They become colleagues with both non-government and government in a partnership with families that collectively serve the best interests of children and families.
2. Broader issues of the lack affordable housing and isolation demonstrate the need for Community Development, Universal Family Support Systems and an investment in both Public and Community Based Housing. This is also an acknowledgement that individualising, pathologising approaches to child protection fail to address the very

real structural obstacles that families experience. There will be increasing numbers of children entering the statutory system, if this is not addressed as a matter of priority.

3. Where children are in care, connection to families is compromised by inflexible access arrangements. Given that many families will be impoverished and under resourced, maintaining connection with their children needs to be supported in both a financial and systems sense.
4. Where families identify the resources required to provide a safe nurturing environment for their children (i.e. Parenting Courses), Departmental Officers are unable to follow up. This may be a reflection of their focus on the crisis end of the equation and under resourcing as well as a reflection of the general lack of appropriate Parenting Responses in the community. Research indicates that families with children in Care who are referred to mainstream courses generally report that they feel more incompetent as Parents after completion of the Course. This highlights the need for Parenting responses that can tap into parent's hopes and strategies for a better future for both themselves and their children. Existing courses are clearly not appropriate for families who have entered the statutory system. They are laced either overtly or covertly with judgements that are not helpful. Tailored, flexible Parenting Programs much like we currently offer better suit families that have complex issues.
5. The perception of families that they are being judged harshly by Departmental Officers will always be problematic given the statutory nature of the relationship. It may however also relate to the underlying values and philosophy of individual officers. How might they demonstrate respect for families and contribute to the further development of family strengths? Do they believe that stronger families and communities enhance child safety? Are there implications for training and the articulation of a clear shared vision for child protection across government and non-government? There is also a strong argument for non-government agencies to provide much of both Family Support and Alternative Care, given they are less encumbered with a statutory role.

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