

## Northern Early Years Group response to Wellbeing Discussion Paper

This response is submitted on behalf of the Northern Early Years Group (NEYG) association, and has been prepared by the following members:

- Dr Sherridan Emery PhD. Deputy Chair of NEYG. University researcher whose work focuses on the wellbeing of children and young people.
- Ms Jane Hudson. Chair of NEYG. Retired educator, with 40 years' experience teaching and working in the Department of Education, as a teacher, regional Early Years Coordinator and senior staff member in a primary school, and community development facilitator in preparation for a Child and Family Centre.
- Dr Allison Trimble PhD. NEYG Public Officer. University researcher in education.
- Ms Danielle Watkins. NEYG member. Chair of groWaverley, an association for members of the Waverley community in Tasmania to share resources, skills and knowledge. groWaverley manages the Waverley Community Co-operative.

### **Question 4: In the knowledge of the existing domains of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework what should be our unifying vision for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy?**

The Northern Early Years Group works toward improving the health and well-being of young children and their families across Northern Tasmania. Our overriding purpose is to make the North of Tasmania a great place for children and young people to grow up in. This aim requires the following matters to be addressed:

- Provision of accessible, welcoming services,
- Services linked up and working together across the region,
- Services targeted at those most in need,
- Everyone speaking up about issues affecting young children and parents,
- Targeted and accessible research that includes children's voices.

We believe these issues are relevant for children and their families across Tasmania, as well as for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

We endorse the statements made by the Premier on p. 5 of the Discussion Paper that -

No matter where you live, no matter what your background is, no matter what your circumstances are – opportunities will be there and if you want to grasp those opportunities a better life will be within your reach. All Tasmanian children and young people deserve the opportunity to grow up in safe, nurturing and supportive environments.

We hold the view that the unifying vision for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (the Strategy) must encompass the overarching concept of *equity to overcome disadvantage*. Further, we believe that the purpose of the Strategy should rest on a *broad understanding of the nature of a safe environment*, supporting the recognition of the importance of a liveable climate. Finally, the experience of our members clearly demonstrates the need for the Strategy to operate *holistically*. The issues facing disadvantaged children, and their families and care-givers, are complex and multi-faceted ones which cannot be effectively addressed in isolation.

In relation to the notion of equity, we note that Tasmania is a State with significant challenges relating to inequality. Access to opportunities can be vastly different for children and youth growing up in disadvantaged backgrounds as compared with those who come from

advantaged backgrounds. The disparities in life-outcomes for young people living in poverty and in other circumstances of marginalization should be at the forefront of the Strategy.

On the question of what constitutes a safe environment, we consider it vitally important that the Strategy explicitly recognize the need for a livable climate. Current understandings about climate science indicate there will be future climate instability. This may manifest in stronger storms and weather events, bushfire threats, floods in addition to the risks of future pandemics potentially resulting from population impacts on species' habitats. As such, the Strategy should recognize that the greatest impacts of unpredictable events related to climate change are likely to be experienced by people experiencing economic disadvantage and should take active steps to address and mitigate the disadvantages experienced by vulnerable populations.

We consider that the strategy should present a holistic vision for child and youth wellbeing in Tasmania. An issue faced across society is the dissection of public policy into its various categories -health, education, social services, housing, police and the justice system, and the like - each with their respective areas of responsibility and each with their own Department within the State Government. This dissection is evident as well in the wellbeing framework. Children, young people, and families are whole beings. They have integrated webs of relationships with associated intersecting and inter-related needs. The dissection of people's lives into unconnected, discretely bounded aspects of need creates its own set of challenges for the people who most need holistic, wrap around support from government and broader society. The fragmentation of support into multiple programs issued/delivered from multiple departments leads to people having to explain their circumstances of disadvantage over and over again, to numerous different people, in multiple institutional settings. Too much time is wasted. Too many people seeking support are sent from place to place and re-traumatized in the process.

A key part of the Strategy that needs to be enhanced is cross-sectoral and cross-agency collaboration to bring about positive change. Such collaboration is too rare in Tasmania currently. We need services to truly work together so all sectors in which services are delivered are aligned with the same positive vision for the community. To improve children and young people's health and wellbeing permanently, we need local, State and Federal government, not-for-profits and private organisations to work towards a goal of one shared way of working. Integrated models of support such as that designed into the model for Tasmania's Child and Family Centres need to be more widespread. Such models of integrated support should also be applied for the benefit of older children and young people.

**Question 5. Please identify your specific community or communities.**

This submission adopts a place-based approach. It reflects our members' specific experiences in the Northern region of Tasmania, with a particular focus on Waverley in Launceston. Children and families resident in this suburb continue to experience serious and multiple associated levels of disadvantage which negatively impact their wellbeing. For example, the 2018 Australian Early Development Census profile for the Waverley assessed that 37.5% of children in that community were vulnerable on one or more domains when starting school, and 16.7% were vulnerable on two or more domains. These figures have increased, year on year, since 2012.

**Question 6. With reference to existing supports, programs and initiatives in Tasmania for your community what do you think works best and why?**

A member of our Group has reported that NILS (No Interest Loan Scheme) has been of value to the community. The Scheme has enabled families to purchase items such as laptops to give secondary students the capacity to access the internet at home. Such resources were especially important for the educational and social wellbeing of young people during the Covid lockdown.

The Department of Education LiL (Launch into Learning) program has provided many young children in Waverley the opportunity to develop their social and emotional skills in a school setting. With no other facilities in Waverley for community to meet, this has provided an intergenerational experience for children. As the only early intervention support in Waverley this program has developed safe relationships between parents and supports for learning based at the school.

**Question 7. If additional initiatives are required to ensure the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people in your community what are they and why have you made that suggestion?**

The following initiatives have been identified as urgent necessities for the Waverley community, and would, more broadly, benefit the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families throughout Tasmania.

- Reduction in the cost of Government-funded services. The cost of many services is beyond the capacity of many disadvantaged families to pay. Even a small contribution of \$2 can be the difference between a meal containing meat once a week for the family, and them having no meat at all.
- Provision of hot meals at both primary and secondary schools at least once per week. This would encourage healthy eating by students. Many community members go without meat and survive on two meals or less a day due to finances. Providing free, nutritious meals to students would increase health and wellbeing, leading to increased school participation and learning outcomes.
- Establishment of a safe, indoor space for community to meet, develop intergenerational relationships, and share skills and resources. Nothing like this exists in Waverley, other than the primary school buildings which have limited availability. The lack of a community space of this nature significantly restricts the capacity of the community itself to provide support to children, young people, and families in need.
- Provision of a service hub, such as a Child and Family Centre. Nothing like this presently exists in Waverley. The absence of such a facility, together with financial hardship experienced by many families, results in severely restricted access to many Government-funded services that are otherwise available only in the Launceston CBD or in other suburbs. Transport to services is difficult for many. To get to the nearest Family Centre requires a two hour return bus ride or a 45min walk along the 80km highway, on road level, with no pedestrian barriers. Neither option is acceptable, particularly for parents in inclement weather, pushing prams, or managing multiple children.

At the grass roots level of individual support, the wellbeing strategy needs to address wellbeing in a very 'real' way. Supporting wellbeing in some Tasmanian communities – and we return to our example of Waverley in Launceston - requires seriously addressing the very material basics: households that can't afford electricity, lack of heating in winter, provision of healthy food. A member of our group, who works to support the Waverley community in relation to such basic necessities, reports disturbing examples of need.

- A mother had not taken her daughter to the doctor when she had been unwell for some time. She was unable to afford the cost of transporting her to the doctor in town, as well as the medical expenses. The child was unable to walk the two hour return trip to the nearest doctor. The family lived off food support for a week from groWaverley (a community initiative) in order to save the money necessary to get the medical attention required by the woman's daughter.
- A mother could not afford the cost of sanitary pads for her daughter's first period.
- Many families are – not by choice – making do with all family meals without meat. Meat is simply too expensive. The availability of staples such as bread and potatoes through the groWaverley co-op has meant that these families have been able to purchase mince for a meat meal once a week.

While families suffer underlying multiple associated disadvantages including poverty, poor access to medical services, poor diet and nutrition, housing insecurity, lack of social and community infrastructure, other wellbeing initiatives are unlikely to be successful.

We strongly suggest that “community voices” must be supported, and afforded weight in the development and prioritization of government wellbeing initiatives. Experience of our Group members clearly demonstrates that, when a disadvantaged community like the suburb of Waverley, is supported to identify its local needs, and given the opportunity to design response initiatives, then successful wellbeing outcomes can result. The establishment of groWaverley by, and for, residents of the area, is a prime example.

- Fresh free fruit has been provided at Waverley Primary School and at groWaverley. This initiative has provided healthy snacks for children who would otherwise not be provided with morning or afternoon tea due to financial constraints. It promotes healthy eating and provides access to fresh fruit in an area known as a food desert.
- Little street libraries have provided access to reading material to support the literacy and numeracy development of local children. Many children do not have internet at home and are unable to access a library to borrow books.
- Recipe packs provided through groWaverley give families access to basic food and recipes to cook at home. This encourages families to cook together and supports the establishment of healthy eating habits. It increases children's literacy and numeracy through using the recipes. It, crucially, also provides a source of food to those financially struggling.
- Fishing rods and basketballs have become a regular sight in Waverley. These have been provided to local children and young people through groWaverley. Previously, because their families could not afford such items, children had little to do after school or on weekends. They now are able to use the council basketball hoop and fish in the lake.
- During COVID lockdown many children had no access to learning materials such as pens and paper as they were given to the students at school and stored there. The Waverley

Communities skills Café project, undertaken by the Northern Early Years group and funded through a grant from the Australian Early Development Census, supplied pens, pencils, and art supplies to children in the community.

**Question 8. Are you able to identify any barriers to Tasmanian children and young people accessing initiatives aimed at improving wellbeing for your community?**

At a systemic level, a number of barriers we identify several barriers.

- *Current grant-funding arrangements.* Present short-term funding arrangements require organisations to expend valuable time and resources in the continued repeating cycle of chasing funds, and competing for the allocation of finance. This process engenders competition amongst service providers rather than collaboration to more greatly benefit the community. It negatively impacts the stated objective of improving the health and wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people.
- *Lack of continuity in service funding.* In seeking to increase the involvement of children and young people in initiatives that are supportive of wellbeing it is important to recognise the impact of program continuity. For service clients, managing wellbeing, engaging in help-seeking behaviours, and having the level of trust necessary to take-up wellbeing options, are ongoing developmental processes. In part, these require people, who may be chronically marginalized, to trust in the organizations and provisions available to them. Engaging in wellbeing initiatives is optimal when strong relationships are built within communities and children, young people, and their carers feel safe and supported to become involved. Abrupt and unheralded loss of services within a community can irreparably damage such trust.

A recent example of this was the defunding of a valued student networker program which worked across schools in Launceston's northern suburbs. As a consequence of the loss of the student networker (who had been part of the school communities for many years), children and young people lost access to a person they trusted and who supported their wellbeing. This type of outcome breeds distrust amongst people who quite naturally become hesitant about getting involved in other initiatives.

- *Lack of effective communication at the community level.* The student networker program mentioned above was erased from the focus schools and we understand that the young people who made use of the program were neither told why it was gone nor informed about what would replace their regular sessions with the student networker.
- *Under-resourcing of programs.* Initiatives need to be properly resourced if they are to work. Tasmanian school vegetable gardens provide a disappointing example. A member of our group has visited numerous schools, and their vegetable gardens. She reports that, very often, the gardens have fallen into disrepair. The stories behind the state of the school veggie garden are too-familiar. Funding was obtained for its installation. It was set up with bright hopes of being an initiative that would support children's wellbeing. However, there was no ongoing funding for the garden's maintenance and care. This story of neglected school

gardens is illustrative of other initiatives where particular infrastructure is funded, without provisions for upkeep and maintenance. When the on-going delivery of programs is inadequately budgeted, the opportunity afforded for supporting wellbeing through the infrastructure is wasted.

At the grass roots level of individual support, the Strategy needs to address wellbeing in a very 'real' way. Supporting wellbeing in some Tasmanian communities – and we return to our example of Waverley in Launceston - requires seriously addressing the very material basics: households that can't afford electricity, lack of heating in winter, provision of healthy food, and the like. A member of our group who works to support the Waverley community in relation to such basic needs reports discomfoting examples of need.

- A mother was excited to find fresh green vegetables at the groWaverley stall. She had escaped domestic violence with her 3 kids and was living off food hampers. There are no fresh items in food hampers.
- Another mother was excited to find the groWaverley stall had books. She had finally got a house after moving out of the women's shelter. She had no furniture in the house, but was happy to be able to provide books to the kids so they could feel more homely.

**Question 10. What other issues are of concern to children and young people in Tasmania?**

This response relates to the Discussion Paper itself. It is an important consultation document, and the availability of alternative modes for making submissions is a worthwhile development which we support and applaud. However, the format of the Paper in terms of its overall length, detailed lists of Federal and State programmes, structuring in terms of the separate formal domains, and the sheer number of questions, have made it a problematic document to come to terms with. Our members who contributed to this submission have high levels of education and professional experience, and still found the Discussion Paper difficult to address. The required levels of literacy, time, and commitment required to respond to the Discussion Paper questions are unrealistically high. We can only question whether the document is realistically accessible and relevant to ordinary Tasmanian children, young people and families who are intended as the ultimate beneficiaries of the Wellbeing Strategy.

**Question 44. Are there significant data gaps? What options do we have to address them?**

It is noted that reference is made at p. 74 of the Discussion Paper to the PESRAC and UTAS Covid wellbeing surveys. While clearly relevant data, the applicability of this data will be time-limited. It is recommended that the University of Tasmania be established as a formal research partner of the State government to collect longitudinal mixed-method quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the wellbeing of children and young people in this State.

In addition, we refer to the well-respected data reported by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). That data provides a map of developmental outcomes, and is Australia's only nation-wide census of children in their early years. The AEDC provides evidence to support policy, planning and action for health, education, and community support, and can assist government to develop flexible approaches to policy and planning that address the evolving needs of children and families in the future. In addition to providing nation and interstate comparisons of children's developmental strengths and weaknesses, the AEDC, importantly, contains rich, detailed and fine-grained intrastate data on specific local community areas throughout Tasmania. It is

suggested that the AEDC is a valuable data resource which should be included in consideration of Tasmania's wellbeing strategy.