

## OPINION PIECE

### **To redesign Child Protection we need to look beyond Child Protection.**

It's great to see the considered and big picture approach being taken by those who are involved in redesigning Tasmania's child protection system.

The one thing we know from history is that if we keep doing the same old things in a rapidly changing society, there will be problems. We live in a world of change, where pressures on children and families can be enormous and some will not be adequately equipped or able to cope for a whole range of reasons. Our child protection system also needs to change and evolve to deal with the situations many children and families are now facing. All said and done this must be about real children, born into real families who are often facing overwhelming difficulties.

To its credit the Government has acknowledged this need for change and redesign.

As the data clearly shows, more and more children and their families are coming into contact with the child protection system. And this number has been increasing every year. Last year there were over 14,000 notifications made to child protection. And as a result of ever increasing notifications to child protection, the system is increasingly struggling to cope with demand. This situation isn't unique to Tasmania. It exists across the entire nation.

This prompts me to ask questions such as - why so many notifications? Are we making children safer by simply making a notification? What is occurring with children and families in our community? Will earlier interventions keep more children out of the system?

Across Australia there have been dozens of reviews and investigations into child protection. And yet, by and large not much changes. Across the nation we spend over three billion dollars each year on a system that really isn't working that well. The current redesign of child protection is an opportunity for Tasmania to take a lead in addressing this issue in a much more long term, sustainable and effective way.

It is my view that that the greatest gains will be achieved by increased support to families that help to keep children out of the statutory system.

It is often said that child protection is everyone's business; it is also the case that most people have an opinion on why children end up in the child protection system, and on who is to blame. Usually the blame is squarely placed on families

and individuals or on the failures of those who work in the system. This is far too simplistic. As a colleague who I greatly respect said to me recently –

*“when we criticise all we do is make it worse for children in this system”*

To blame is unproductive. And also to miss the point.

We need to more effectively understand and address the many complex social and economic reasons children enter the statutory child protection system. These reasons include family homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, family violence and lack of adequate parenting skills. Through no fault of their own, some parents were never adequately equipped to be parents, for a range of reasons.

The courage and resilience of parents, especially those in poverty and other stresses is often ignored and misunderstood. I will be seeking to look at ways to better engage them in the solutions.

There is no quick fix; rather, it will require long term commitment and support from all involved. The current system whereby we leave it largely up to child protection services has not served children well. Their role is critical but we must not expect them to do it largely alone. It's time for a new paradigm.

We all have our part to play. In my role as the independent advocate for children and young people I will be doing my best to ensure that we not only look at ways to improve the existing statutory child protection but we also focus more strongly on ways to keep children out of the system, and if they must be removed from their families, they are well cared for.

Our statutory child protection service doesn't operate in a vacuum; it operates as part of a wider system for supporting children's wellbeing. Those who work in the education, health, policing and the community sectors as well as families and communities all have an essential role in safeguarding children. This means that for meaningful, effective and child-centred reform, our focus must be on improving the way all services who support children and their families operate, rather than placing the spotlight only on statutory interventions.

The evidence clearly shows that by providing early help and support to children and their families, both early in a child's life, and early in the emergence of a problem at any stage of their life, the outcomes will be much better and many will not need statutory child protection services.

I acknowledge there will be times when a child's best interests will dictate their removal from family but we must strive to strengthen the ability of families and communities to build strong and sustainable foundations upon which their children can thrive. Where families are unable or unwilling to meet the needs of their children, then we must be able to provide the best possible standard of alternative care.

Statutory child protection work is increasingly becoming an area that requires a highly specialised workforce and a strong, supportive leadership with an ongoing

commitment to improving systems and processes to ensure these children are offered the best chance at life that we can offer them.

In reforming our system we must also 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 a responsibility to seek out, hear and consider their views. There are clear benefits to meaningfully engaging children in decision-making about their needs, but there continues to be obstacles to doing so. While I certainly hear positive stories, children with experience of the statutory child protection system are often dissatisfied. Many feel confused, uninformed, ignored and exhausted by a system that exists for their benefit but which often fails to truly place them at its centre. We need to better acknowledge children as rights holders, not just as passive recipients of child protection interventions.

One young person I talked with about the current child protection Redesign, who has spent their entire life in state care, said to me recently –

*“Please listen to us. We have a right to be heard and if you ask what we think and then listen maybe better decisions would be made and things would be better for us”.*

Ultimately, when we better support children within the child protection system, we ensure that they can reach their full potential and this benefits us all.

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