

# CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

November 2020



## The Commissioner's monitoring and advocacy

The Commissioner for Children and Young People, Leanne McLean, is monitoring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people in Tasmania – and advocating for their wellbeing to be central to response and recovery strategies.\* This brief is one of a series of snapshots on selected topics arising from the Commissioner's monitoring activities, especially during April – June 2020. While evidence of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people is still emerging, these briefs are intended to provide insights into the Tasmanian experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and to outline some key learnings for policy and practice across agencies and other organisations delivering services contributing to the wellbeing of Tasmanian children.

***"It's our lives and we should know what is happening for us."***

*~ A young person with an experience of out-of-home care, during a consultation with the Commissioner for Children and Young People*

## Overview

During April – June 2020, the Commissioner and her team proactively engaged in conversations with organisations providing out-of-home care services to children and young people in Tasmania, including those living in foster care, kinship care, and residential care. The Commissioner met with Youth Change Makers, a consultative group of young people with a care experience facilitated by the Child Advocate in the Department of Communities Tasmania with assistance from CREATE Foundation (Tas), to understand their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the Stage 1 public health restrictions. The Commissioner also participated in an online Q&A session with children and young people in care along with the Minister for Human Services, the Hon Roger Jaensch MP and others.

Through the Commissioner's monitoring activities,

it was clear that those working in Tasmania's out-of-home care system faced considerable uncertainty and held significant concerns for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, many children and young people with a care experience felt unsure and worried about what was happening. However, monitoring also revealed that, with some notable exceptions, the out-of-home care system in Tasmania continued to function similarly to the way it functioned before the COVID-19 pandemic, despite facing very challenging circumstances during this period.



## **Organisations worked together for the best interests of children and young people**

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was apparent that there was a concerted effort by the Department of Communities Tasmania and organisations delivering out-of-home care in Tasmania to work collaboratively to protect and promote the best interests and wellbeing of children and young people in what was a rapidly changing landscape.

The Commissioner heard from several organisations that, as system owner, the Department of Communities Tasmania responded rapidly to provide certainty and leadership in the face of rapidly changing public health advice. In particular, the Commissioner heard that child safety officers in the Department of Communities Tasmania worked constructively and collaboratively and that, in many cases, the move to holding care team meetings online worked well — with some care team meetings reportedly working more effectively than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commissioner also heard that organisations appreciated the implementation by the Department of Communities Tasmania of new and enhanced communication mechanisms, including weekly meetings between the Department of Communities Tasmania and community sector organisations providing out-of-home care.

Additionally, TasCOSS has taken on the key coordinating role for the community service sector in Tasmania during the COVID-19 pandemic, including providing advice to organisations on COVID-19 preparedness and restrictions, and hosting well-attended monthly forums providing COVID-19 response and recovery updates to the sector.

## **Face-to-face service delivery was balanced with using ICT to ensure the safety of children**

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, child safety services were deemed ‘essential’, which allowed the Department of Communities Tasmania and out-of-home care providers to continue providing face-to-face services where necessary and in line with public health advice.

Fewer face-to-face visits to children and young people in care and their carers were conducted by the Department of Communities Tasmania and out-of-home care providers during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Decisions about conducting face-to-face visits generally were made on a case-by-case basis, informed by a risk assessment process and the needs of individual children, young people, and their carers. In many instances, face-to-face visits to children, young people, and carers were replaced with remote contact by workers, including via phone and video calls.

In March 2020, the Tasmanian Government announced several initiatives to support children in out-of-home care during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included: \$260,000 so that children and young people in out-of-home care could have internet access and mobile technology for communication and home learning; \$260,000 to provide one-off immediate \$200 payments to foster and kinship carers for each child or young person in their care, so families could purchase essential cleaning or hygiene products; and \$70,000 for the Flexible Active Families Fund to support children and families receiving family



preservation or family restoration support through Child Safety Services or Intensive Family Engagement Services.<sup>1</sup>

The Commissioner heard that during the COVID-19 pandemic some children and young people in out-of-home care have preferred communicating remotely rather than face-to-face with their workers, especially via text message, as these means of communication have provided them with greater feelings of control and safety; this is a familiar and comfortable form of communication for many young people.

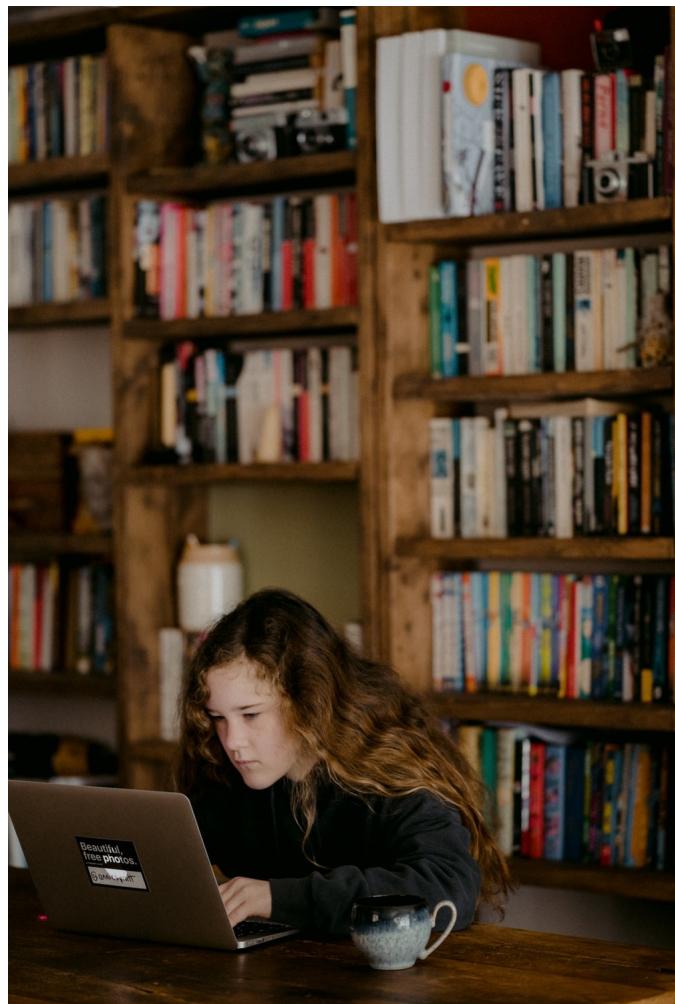
Face-to-face contact between children and young people in out-of-home care and their families of origin mostly ceased during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some young people in care told the Commissioner that they were not allowed to see their siblings face-to-face during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during April – June 2020 when Tasmania was experiencing Stage 1 and 2 restrictions. These young people felt that this decision was imposed on them by their out-of-home care providers.

Fortunately, as noted in the Commissioner's *COVID-19 Monitoring Insights: New Ways of Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, some children and young people in care were able to stay in touch with their siblings and other family members via remote means, such as telephone and video calls. For some older children especially, the Commissioner heard that a shift to remote or online contact with family members led to more frequent communication and a greater sense of connectedness with their parents or siblings.

The Commissioner is conscious that there are a number of children in Tasmania living in informal kinship care arrangements. The Commissioner has heard from some informal kinship carers that they have also faced particular challenges during this time but were ineligible for COVID-19 related financial supports targeted to children in out-of-home care.

## Residential and rostered care settings faced particular challenges

For organisations providing rostered out-of-home care services for children and young people, including therapeutic residential care and care arrangements funded by special care packages, the COVID-19 pandemic required them to overcome particular challenges. These included: ensuring sufficient staffing; developing protocols for responding to a potential outbreak in care settings; accessing sufficient personal protection equipment (PPE) for staff; and implementing social distancing in care settings. Fortunately, these organisations appeared to respond quickly, constructively, and effectively to protect the health and safety of children, young people, and staff in these care settings.



## **Access to information for organisations and for children and young people was variable**

During the initial weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tasmania — when public health requirements were understandably changing almost daily — organisations and carers felt very uncertain about what was required of them in relation to children and young people in out-of-home care. However, the Commissioner heard that as time went on, the accuracy of information and the frequency of communication by the Department of Communities Tasmania significantly improved, especially for organisations and carers providing out-of-home care.



In late March 2020, the Child Advocate for children in care within the Department of Communities Tasmania distributed information to children and young people in care about her role and about how to raise concerns or access her advocacy services.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, non-government organisations shared information with children and young people in care. For example, in April 2020, the CREATE Foundation disseminated information about the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions to children and young people in care, including a webpage for a national audience, as well as a resource for Tasmanian children and young people, answering questions such as: “I am in foster care – what happens if my carers get sick?”; and “Can I still see my worker/CSO? If not, what sort of contact will I have?”.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Commissioner heard from some

young people with a recent care experience that they felt that information flowing to them from the Department of Communities Tasmania was inadequate during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when they needed additional support and contact.

Some young people also noted that information provided to carers about changes to care arrangements due to the COVID-19 pandemic did not always reach children and young people themselves. For example, some young people in care reported that they were not aware that they could apply for funds from the Department of Communities Tasmania to ensure they had internet access and mobile technology for learning at home.

## **Children and young people in care missed having respite care**

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations, carers, and children and young people in care expressed uncertainty and concern about the reduced availability of respite care. Several out-of-home care and disability providers either scaled back their own delivery of respite care or experienced difficulties accessing respite care ordinarily provided by other organisations for children and young people.

Respite care is valued by many children and young people in care, as well as by carers, because it helps to maintain placement stability, supports the safety of children and young people, and gives carers time to recharge. The Commissioner heard that, in some instances, reduced access to respite during the COVID-19 pandemic placed stress on carer households and caused disappointment for children and young people. While perhaps prudent from a public health perspective, reduced availability of respite care was particularly challenging for those children and young people in out-of-home care with a disability, as well as for their carers.

The Commissioner understands that respite care for children and young people in out-of-home care has been mostly reinstated to normal levels, while still complying with public health measures. The Commissioner has heard that specific government directions enabling out-of-home care providers to manage risk within their corporate governance frameworks were crucial to the return of respite care.

### **Children and young people in out-of-home care experienced challenges while ‘learning at home’ during Term 2**

Several young people in care across all three regions of the state told the Commissioner that learning at home during Term 2 of 2020 was especially challenging for them. They reported that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, they often needed extra educational or emotional support from teachers, aides, and principals. The Commissioner heard that this extra support was much harder to access when most students were learning at home, including for those children and young people in care who continued to learn at school.

Further, accessing appropriate ICT for learning from home was a significant challenge for some children and young people in care during this period. The Commissioner heard that not all foster and kinship families had sufficient access to computers or mobile devices to meet the educational needs of everyone learning at home; and that, notwithstanding the Tasmanian Government’s ICT Fund, child safety officers were not always able to immediately assist children and young people with obtaining ICT for educational purposes.

The Tasmanian Government is to be commended for the establishment, during the COVID-19 pandemic, of Vulnerable Student Panels – a collaborative initiative between the Department of Education and the Department of Communities Tasmania. It appears that these panels provide a valuable mechanism for continued enhanced collaborative monitoring of and provision of support for vulnerable students, including those in out-of-home care, who are enrolled in the government school system.



## Implications for policy and practice

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for Tasmania's children and young people, and the entire Tasmanian community, but it has also opened up possibilities for all of us to reflect on our usual ways of working and consider where we want to go from here to build an even better Tasmania. In doing so, it is important that we involve all members of the Tasmanian community, including children and young people, in a process of reflection, sharing ideas, identifying ways forward and enacting change.

Informed by the Commissioner's monitoring and advocacy work during the COVID-19 pandemic, three implications for policy and practice directed at strengthening child-centred ways of working in out-of-home care in Tasmania are proposed here as a starting point for future discussions.

- To ensure children and young people in care are informed and enabled to actively participate in decisions that affect them during the COVID-19 pandemic, they need to receive up-to-date and accurate information relevant to their care, including information about COVID-19 and related public health measures.
- To enable children and young people in care to participate effectively in education, especially if learning at home, and to help them to maintain connections with people of significance in their lives, they need access to ICT including devices and internet connectivity. They — and their carers — also need information and support to enable them to effectively use ICT and help them stay safe online.
- Practice changes in the out-of-home care system brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic need to be documented and evaluated. This will inform decisions about future practice either during a subsequent wave of the COVID-19 pandemic or as part of ongoing practice improvement.

## References

1. Jaensch, R. (2020, March 27). *Keeping Tasmanian children and families safe*. [http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/helping\\_tasmanian\\_children\\_and\\_addressing\\_family\\_violence](http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/helping_tasmanian_children_and_addressing_family_violence)
2. Department of Communities Tasmania. (2020). *Child Advocate*. <https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/children/oohc/child-advocate>
3. CREATE Foundation. (2020). *Your questions answered: What COVID-19 means for children and young people in care in Tasmania*. <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tasmanian-FAQ.pdf>

\* In April 2020, the Commissioner released her COVID-19 monitoring framework, *Monitoring & Advocacy During COVID-19*, which is available here: <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/CCYP-COVID-19-FRAMEWORK-APRIL-2020-WEB-1.pdf>

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