



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 and young people.

“Some young people have embraced COVID-19 as a time for moving forward and believe that it has forced our community to become innovative and more resilient to adapt to challenging times.”

~ Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT)¹

Overview

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tasmania, the Commissioner sought to understand how public health measures were affecting conventional service delivery for children, young people, and families. In this context, the Commissioner heard numerous reports of new, rapidly implemented ways of working by government agencies, organisations delivering services to children and young people and advocacy organisations, especially in the out-of-home care, disability, and community sectors. As well, the Commissioner heard that many children and young people in contact with or receiving services from these organisations responded in a flexible and constructive way to changes to their services and programs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff of several organisations – including those delivering services for at-risk young people – expressed significant concern about not being able to maintain face-to-face contact with children and young people, especially via incidental interactions. This constrained their ability to identify and provide supports early in the emergence of a problem.



During April and May 2020, when tighter public health measures were in place in Tasmania, children and young people were less visible in the streets and other public spaces, and were generally unable to attend youth fitness venues or drop-in centres. Additionally, there was significant concern expressed to the Commissioner that home learning and school closures were making it harder for principals, teachers, and other educational staff to keep an eye on at-risk students.

However, alongside these concerns, the Commissioner's monitoring also revealed that Tasmania's response to the pandemic has opened up opportunities for new and creative ways of delivering services to children, young people, and their families. Many organisations that deliver services contributing to the wellbeing of children and young people told the Commissioner that they hope to continue some of these new ways of working in the future – because they have seen tangible benefits for children, young people, and their families.



During the COVID-19 pandemic (or any future public health emergency), it is important that the Tasmanian Government and organisations delivering services to children and young people have a shared understanding of what constitutes an 'essential service' and of how service delivery methods are affected by current and evolving public health advice. This is especially the case where effective service delivery requires a level of face-to-face interaction.

Effective communication between government and community services organisations is key to the continuity of essential services for children, young people, and their families

The importance of early and clear communication by the Tasmanian Government regarding the continuation of essential services for children and young people during a public health crisis cannot be underestimated.

During the initial weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tasmania, when public health measures were understandably changing rapidly, the Commissioner heard that organisations delivering services for children and families were concerned about the consistency and detail of government information available to inform their service continuity planning.

However, the experiences of many organisations improved markedly over time – with some reporting they experienced more effective communication from government about new public health measures and revised service delivery requirements. The Department of Communities Tasmania organised frequent online meetings with community services organisations and developed new and improved feedback mechanisms for organisations to convey service-level information.

Of particular note, the Tasmanian Government has engaged TasCOSS "to ensure a joined-up and connected community sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic". The role of TasCOSS includes being the point of entry for community sector organisations to report issues and needs to government, disseminating sector-specific information from the Tasmanian Government to the sector, and being a source of advice and resources to the community sector in adapting and responding to COVID-19.² As well, some organisations commented on the collaborative approach taken by the Department of Communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, some organisations noted the Department of Communities Tasmania’s generally flexible and supportive approach to service delivery requirements for government-funded organisations providing services to children, young people, and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many described cooperative problem-solving between the Department of Communities Tasmania and organisations delivering services to children and young people, in order to prioritise the best interests of at-risk children and young people and to respond to their urgent needs.

Organisations and services have been employing information and communications technology effectively

Many organisations delivering services to children and young people have either rapidly introduced or significantly expanded their use of information and communication technology (ICT) to stay in touch with and deliver services to children, young people, and their families. The Tasmanian Government has supported organisations to increase their use of ICT during the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the COVID-19 Technology Fund (\$450,000) for organisations in the community managed mental health and alcohol and other drug sectors and the Essential Technology Fund (\$350,000) for community sector organisations.^{3, 4}

It is important to acknowledge that remote methods of service delivery are not necessarily feasible or equitable for all clients – especially those who are digitally excluded or who have complex needs. In particular, the Commissioner heard about the difficulties faced by those providing services to unaccompanied homeless children. Notwithstanding these and other challenges, it would appear that many organisations have demonstrated responsiveness, flexibility, and creativity in adapting their services and programs to new modes of delivery. Examples shared with the Commissioner have included:

- The establishment of Vulnerable Student Panels, allowing for greater collaboration by the Department of Education and the Department of Communities Tasmania in their oversight of vulnerable children and young people enrolled in government schools.
- Youth advocacy and consultation groups, including YNOT, CREATE Foundation (Tas) and Youth Change Makers running online consultations and interactive Q&As with children and young people.
- Neighbourhood Houses offering online classes for families in Tai Chi, English language, and literacy, plus online Scrabble, knitting, and bingo sessions.
- Child safety officers in the Department of Communities Tasmania conducting online care team meetings for children and young people in out-of-home care.



- Staff of community services organisations using video calls to conduct virtual home visits and read bedtime stories to children and young people in family-based care.
- Youth justice workers facilitating virtual visits for the Commissioner with young people at Ashley Youth Detention Centre.
- Services conducting young parent group meetings via Facebook or video conferencing.
- Children and young people in residential care cooking new recipes together, and sharing photos and videos of the results with their peers.

- Providing sexual health, maternal and child health, and mental health services to children, young people, and their families via telehealth – sometimes reaching new clients who might traditionally face barriers to accessing services.
- Facilitating contact for children and young people in out-of-home care with their families of origin by substituting face-to-face visits with more frequent phone and video calls.

Limitations on face-to-face service delivery have posed challenges for some

The Commissioner heard that some face-to-face services delivered by organisations either ceased or were reduced for periods of time during the stricter public health measures of Stage 1 and 2 restrictions. This clearly posed challenges for some – virtual service delivery is not necessarily appropriate for or equitably accessible to all children and young people or families. In particular, the Commissioner heard of the challenges that the pandemic posed for play-based services or interventions aimed at young children, such as counselling, that are particularly challenging to deliver in an online environment. However, the Commissioner also heard during that time, that many of those organisations developed and implemented low-technology innovations to maintain COVID-19 safe face-to-face service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, where possible. These included:

- Maintaining contact with children, young people, and their families by having outdoor conversations, such as on a client’s doorstep or over their fence.
- Delivering parcels of food, health and wellbeing packs or activity packs to children, young people, and their families.
- Setting up outdoor community activities, such as gyms and ‘op shops’.
- Replacing sit-down group meals with take-away meals for clients and community members.

- Developing new indoor activities for children and young people to replace outings to playgrounds, playcentres, and cinemas.

Community services workers have been responsive and flexible in a changing and uncertain context

The Commissioner’s monitoring revealed that, generally speaking, people working in organisations delivering services to children and young people have been adaptable, flexible, and hard-working during a time of considerable uncertainty and rapid change, implementing new operational requirements and responding to greater community need. Organisations told the Commissioner they have been:

- Developing COVID-19 pandemic plans for their organisation, including scenario planning for specific events such as localised outbreaks.
- Implementing new staffing rosters to ensure service continuity in the event of a client or staff member contracting COVID-19.
- Adapting to working from home, using new information and communication technology, and rapidly modifying their services and programs.



Many children and young people have been demonstrating flexibility and resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant, broad-reaching changes to the lives of children and young people in Tasmania. Organisations and service providers have told the Commissioner that, while undoubtedly many children and young people have struggled with the effects of public health restrictions on their wellbeing, many have coped remarkably well.

Staff of these organisations have told the Commissioner that many of the children and young people they work with have been:

- Adapting to learning at home (when attendance at school was either not possible or discouraged).
- Using ICT to maintain social connections with friends and family members.
- Enjoying spending more time with members of their immediate households.
- Complying with the public health measures which have restricted their movements and the size of their social gatherings, by staying home with their families or members of their household.
- Learning new skills and engaging in recreational activities at home, including cooking, exercising, and gaming.

Implications for policy and practice

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions has led to unprecedented challenges for Tasmania's children and young people, and the entire Tasmanian community, but it has also opened up opportunities for 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 working during the COVID-19 pandemic, four implications for policy and practice directed at embedding new ways of working are proposed here as a starting point for future discussions.

- To ensure continuity of service delivery to children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic or any future emergencies, organisations delivering services and programs to children and young people in Tasmania need early advice and service-specific guidelines from the Tasmanian Government. This advice must clearly define what is an essential service and how service delivery can continue in line with the needs of particular cohorts and with public health advice.
- To ensure that children and young people continue to benefit from new service delivery methods developed during COVID-19, there is a need to maintain and build upon strengthened communication and collaboration between community services organisations, and between community services organisations and government, with consideration given to implementing a partnership model for the sector.

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- To achieve positive outcomes for children and young people in Tasmania – during and after the COVID-19 pandemic – organisations which provide services and support to children and young people need to be supported and appropriately resourced to capture, evaluate, and communicate their new ways of working. These new ways of working should be captured and evaluated at both organisational and systems levels to identify what has worked well and what could be maintained, augmented or replicated in future.⁵
- To allow children, young people, and their families to continue to benefit from remote service delivery where appropriate and preferred, community services organisations need to be supported and enabled, through the provision of financial assistance, technology and training, to continue using ICT to deliver remote services as a complement to face-to-face service delivery.

References

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3. Mental Health Council of Tasmania. (2020). *July e-News*. <http://mhct.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MHCT-July-2020-eNews.pdf>
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5. Harris, D. & Dakin, P. (2020). *Principles of rapid innovation and evaluation: Responding to COVID-19*. ARACY. https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/405/filename/Responding_to_COVID-19_-_Principles_of_Rapid_Innovation_and_Evaluation.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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