



Annual Activity Statement 2021

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Child Advocate Snapshot

The Child Advocate service for children and young people in care provides an independent mechanism to facilitate children’s participation in decisions that affect them – both at the individual and systemic level.

Individual advocacy activity relates to the oversight and monitoring of the experiences children and young people have in Out of Home Care, ensuring their rights are upheld and promoted, supporting the resolution of complaints, and advocating for, as well as advising on, child-centred practice and decision making.

Systemic advocacy activity relates to providing opportunity for children and young people to participate in the co-design of the service system, ensure their views are provided to the Department of Communities Tasmania, and inform the development of policy, procedures and practice standards.

The focus and time of the Child Advocate role continues to primarily be in relation to matters concerning individual children and young people. The nature of this work falls into different categories and needs, although on occasion there is crossover in how the work is provided given the complex and intersecting needs of many children and the adults around them.

This 2021 Annual Activity Statement provides an overview of the individual and systemic advocacy work undertaken by the Child Advocate in the 2020-21 financial year.

Individual Advocacy Activity – July 2020 to June 2021

The Child Advocate received a total of 139 referrals, relating to 212 children and young people, between July 2020 to June 2021. The regional distribution of the 139 referrals is illustrated in Table I.

Table I. Regional Breakdown of Referrals		
Southern Tasmania	Northern Tasmania	North West Tasmania
87	34	18

The type of involvement of the 212 children and young people with the Child Safety service system is as follows:

Child Protection Orders	169
Advice and Referral Line	5
Assessment/Supervision Orders	20
Restored to Family	2
Third Party Guardianship	6
Care Leaver	4
Not in the system	6

The breakdown of the age of the 212 children and young people was:

Age	No. of children and young people
0-2	22
3-5	41
6-8	39
9-11	41
12-14	31
15-17	34
18+	4

Of the 139 referrals received, the contact with the Child Advocate was initiated by:

Parent/Family	27
Caregiver	34
Service Provider	34
Internal to CSS	22
Government Agency	8
Child/Young Person	7
CYF Executive	7

Referrers contacted the Child Advocate via the following means:

Phone	71
Email	43
Generic Child Advocate Email	18
In person	4
Facebook Messenger	2
Text	1

To the primary need at the point of referral to the Child Advocate can be categorised as follows:

Nature of activity	No. of referrals
1. General enquiry and seeking advice	54
2. Direct advocacy	31
3. Capacity building & consultation with child	22
4. Amplifying the child's views	32

1. General Enquiry and Seeking Advice

A referrer may require information about what a child's rights are in a situation, how the Child Safety – Out of Home Care system works, what should be expected, or how they may approach a particular issue.

The Child Advocate can access relevant detail from the Child Safety information systems, provide clarification, consultation and advice on how to pursue the resolution of an issue, or to connect them to relevant people or programs.

This is a brief, information-sharing process with minimal input from the Child Advocate.

2. Direct Advocacy

If a situation presents in which all adults agree on what the child needs, and there is a consistent understanding of the child's views, the input of the Child Advocate is required to help overcome challenges that are due to either administrative, legal, financial or systemic constraints.

The Child Advocate assists adults in adding weight to the child's views/needs to address the barriers that are impacting on decisions or actions required, when it is collectively agreed by all involved to be in the child's best interests.

This process requires consultation between the Child Advocate and the child's Care Team and working with the Care Team to advocate for particular outcomes.

3. Capacity Building and Consultation with a Child/Young Person

When adults are collectively working well but might be unclear on the child's views and needs, or how to engage and/or assess a child, the Child Advocate provides advice on how a child can participate and ensure their voice is integral to the planning and decision-making processes.

The Child Advocate provides recommendations to the Care Team on how child-centred consultation, decision-making and assessment can progress. If appropriate and aligned with the child's needs to have an independent person directly involved, the Child Advocate will engage directly in the consultation process with the child.

The Child Advocate works closely with all key adults so that a consistent understanding of why the Child Advocate is involved can be conveyed to the child.

4. Amplifying the Child/Young Person's views

If key adults have different views on what is in the child's best interests, and/or different understandings on what the views and wishes of the child are, then the work of the Child Advocate usually focusses on firstly establishing connected and inclusive planning and decision-making processes and helps to minimise the conflict by amplifying the child's needs.

This ideally occurs via a Care Team approach and is the forum to help address different views. The Child Advocate provides a child centred perspective to this, which may have got lost in different competing adult agendas.

The Child Advocate will progress directly consulting with the child, ensuring all adults have a clear understanding of what the steps to this engagement involves, and that all adults demonstrate support of this process with the child.

Summary of general enquiries and advice

The individual advocacy work of the Child Advocate either:

- provides advice to adults on how to consult with a child;
- involves consulting with a child to get their views; or
- consulting with a child to obtain clarity on their views.

The length and extent of involvement of the Child Advocate is varied and is at times quite extensive. The Child Advocate will usually only cease involvement once satisfied that the planning and decision-making is child-centred and involves the child in some capacity.

Determining what approach and to what extent the Child Advocate is involved will depend on the nature of the issues. For example, if all key adults state that Sammy wants to go home, the last thing Sammy needs is to have another adult asking the same question. What Sammy needs is for the Child Advocate to work with adults to overcome the challenges that are preventing or delaying Sammy getting home.

If, however, some adults articulate that Sammy wants to go home, and others state Sammy really doesn't want to go home, the role of the Child Advocate will look different. The Child Advocate needs clarity on Sammy's views. Determining what is in Sammy's best interests lies in consulting with Sammy, and indeed, it is in ensuring Sammy is able to participate in the decision-making and planning, that Sammy's best interests are met when there have been differences of opinion amongst adults.

Systemic Advocacy Activity – July 2020 to June 2021

Establishing a Child Advocacy Liaison role

As at June 2021, the Child Advocate role has been in place for three years and throughout this time the capacity of the role to balance both the individual and systemic advocacy demands has been observed. The most notable concern has been the capacity of the role to meet the individual advocacy needs of children and young people across the north and northwest regions of the state.

In response, the Tasmanian Government has committed to appointing an additional Child Advocate for the north and northwest regions through the [Strong Families Safe Kids: Next Steps Action Plan 2021-2023](#) (Action 33). The role will work fulltime alongside the Child Advocate and replicate the same scope of individual and to some extent the systemic advocacy work. The recruitment for the Child Advocacy Liaison role has commenced.

Online Viewpoint Questionnaire

During this period the creative process with the Viewpoint questionnaire was finalised and following extensive consultation conducted in mid-2020, the questionnaire was ready to trial broadly for 12-17 year olds in September 2020.

In December 2020, the final approvals from the Child Protection Information System (CPIS) owner and data security perspectives were finalised and a similar consultative process was commenced towards the creation of an equivalent questionnaire for 5-11 year olds.

Implementation of the questionnaire for 12-17 year old young people in care commenced in the first half of 2021. This began with a team in each region of the state, with training provided in February.

In the first half of 2021, consultation took place with professionals and children to trial the questions created by Youth Change Makers for the 5-11 year old questionnaire. This set of questions is halved in comparison to the 12-17 year old questionnaire, and constructive feedback was received that will be integrated into further changes before implementing this questionnaire for children.

Capacity building via the development and delivery of training

A key activity of the Child Advocate work plan for this period was to focus on the capacity building of Child Safety Officers to engage children and young people in decision making.

During the 2020-21 financial year, the Child Advocate developed an online training module and a one-day face-to-face training package.

The 'Child Participation: putting principles into practice' training package is built on the foundation of state, national and international obligations in charters, acts, frameworks, standards and principles, which detail the need to uphold a child's right to participate in decision-making.

The Child Advocate delivered the first day of this training in May 2021 in the south, with four more training days planned across the State.

Non-family-based care visits:

In the first half of the 2020-21 financial year, the Child Advocate commenced visiting all young people in non-family-based care commenced, beginning with the young people residing in therapeutic residential care. Further visits have since occurred to engage in meet and greet opportunities with young people residing in residential care and with young people supported through Special Care Packages.

From January to July 2021, the Child Advocate had completed a full complement of visits of southern based non-family-based care arrangements.

Foster and Kinship Carers Tasmania Conference

In May 2021, the Child Advocate provided a brief presentation in Launceston about the role and child advocacy services available to children and young people in care at the Foster and Kinship Carers Tasmania statewide conference. This was an opportunity for the Child Advocate to meet and network with foster and kinship carers, who are often the first line of advocacy in a child's life in care. The Child Advocate also participated in the 'Big Day Out' at the YMCA, which involved lots of fun activities with children and young people.

Legal Aid – Separate Representative Steering Committee

During this reporting period the Child Advocate joined the Separate Representative Steering Committee. Through its strategic planning, Legal Aid identified the need to develop practice standards for Separate Representatives, the lawyers representing children in child safety legal proceedings. The Child Advocate's role in this committee is to ensure the views of children and young people are included, this has been fundamental to helping inform the standards under development.

Premier's Youth Advisory Council

The Premier's Youth Advisory Council convened in February 2021 and took a workshop approach to identifying solutions for major issues meaningful to this young person and young adult cohort.

Along with diversity/disability and climate change, Out of Home Care was the third topic workshopped. The Child Advocate facilitated this workshop discussion with the young people.

Youth Change Makers

During this reporting period, the Youth Change Makers have considered and provided input into:

- A draft procedure relating to family contact/access visits – to be called Family Time
- Communication material about Care Teams – resulting in a fantastic child and family friendly flyer
- Three key focus groups related to:
 1. Questions for Viewpoint for children and young people with a disability
 2. Questions for Viewpoint for Aboriginal children and young people
 3. Third Party Guardianship
- Design of the state-wide consultation process for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy
- Design of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Out of Home Care systemic monitoring process for 2021
- Design of the Viewpoint questionnaire for 5-11 year olds
- Drafting of the Out of Home Care Standards
- Input into the Child Safe Organisations Bill 2020 (the Child Advocate included this feedback into a broader analysis and provided a written submission along with the Department of Communities Tasmania response via the request for comment process).
- Input and feedback on the Out of Home Care system in Tasmania to the Expert Panel to provide advice on the essential therapeutic elements required for an improved service system response for Tasmanian children and young people with highly complex needs.

Additional collaborations

The Child Advocate has continued to meet with individual stakeholders whose work sees them closely supporting children and young people in care. This has provided opportunity to further distribute the brochures produced early in 2020, which details the child advocacy service to children, and who to contact if they have a concern. Given that all children and young people in care received these directly when first produced, it is important that other key supports have additional copies available for future communication needs.

The Child Advocate participated in a workshop for the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC). This was a cross-sector consultation aimed at gathering information on how to focus future work and decision making relating to the pandemic for the broader Tasmanian community.

The Child Advocate also participated in the webinars developed and made public by CREATE via YouTube. These were on the specific topics of siblings in care and transitioning to independence.

Conclusion

The 2021-22 financial year is shaping up to be yet another busy year. A key focus of the Child Advocate in the next financial year is finalising the Child Advocate Liaison position and increasing the awareness and promotion of the role in the North and North West of Tasmania.

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