



Submission to Children's Commissioner on the Rights of the Child

Communities for Children
Frankston & Cardinia

May, 2018

Prepared by:

Cynthia Lopez Valenzuela, Children's Participation Officer (CPO);
Jodie Belyea & Cindy Lee Harper, CfC Coordinators
Cathie Valentine, Program Manager,

Contents

1. Overview	3
2. Communities for Children- a national initiative	3
3. Communities for Children, Frankston	3
3.1 Children’s Participation Officer	4
3.2 Comments on progress in achieving rights of the child:.....	5
4. Communities for Children, Cardinia	5
4.1 Cardinia Safe T Net.....	6
4.2 Comments on progress in achieving Rights of the Child:	7
5. Recommendations	8

1. Overview

This document has been developed in response to the Australian National Children’s Commissioner’s call for submissions on progress fulfilling obligations in relation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The following submission outlines the activities undertaken by two Communities for Children projects delivered in Frankston and Cardinia (Victoria) and Managed by Anglicare Victoria, to directly address the following rights of the child:

3. General principles (**3. GP**)

- Best interest of the child (**art. 3**)
- Respect for views of the child (**art. 12**)

4. Civil rights and freedom (**4.CR&F**)

- Freedom of expression (**art. 13**)

6. Family environment and alternative care (**6. FE**)

- Parental guidance, responsibilities and assistance in child-rearing (**art. 18**)

2. Communities for Children- a national initiative

Communities for Children (CfC) was first funded by the Australian Government in 2005. In 2009, CfC was subsumed into a broader Australian Government initiative named the Family Support Program (FSP). CfC is funded by the Department of Social Services. The Cardinia CfC program was aligned with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *Protecting Australia’s Children* plan. “CfC is designed to provide prevention and early intervention services to families across Australia, particularly to those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or live in disadvantaged communities, to improve child safety, wellbeing and development and family functioning” (CfC Frankston Evaluation report, 2015).

CfC is delivered by a ‘facilitating partner’ model. A local service provider is selected as a facilitating partner to contract, govern and support a network of service providers, known as ‘community partners’. CfC activities allow for tailored approaches at a local level so communities can develop flexible and innovative service strategies and initiatives that best reflect their needs and circumstances (CfC Frankston Evaluation report, 2015).

3. Communities for Children, Frankston

Since 2005, Anglicare Victoria has been funded as a CfC facilitating partner in the Frankston communities in Victoria. The aim of CfC Frankston is to work collaboratively with children, families and the community to overcome the challenges and difficulties of raising children within vulnerable families (CfC Frankston, Community Strategic Plan) (**3.GP- art. 3; 6. FE- art.18**). After extensive consultation, the locally determined priorities for CfC Frankston services to address are:

1. Family violence
2. Parent education
3. Transitions
4. Child wellbeing
5. Innovation
6. Child friendly communities

The funding and support given CfC Frankston to the community partners to implement their programs has enabled service provision which enhances parents' and other family members' self-worth and self-esteem. The parental support and educational focus of these services has assisted parents to acquire knowledge, skills and confidence to nurture their children's development and create safe and supportive home environments. Additionally, there has been a particular focus on supporting young parents and engaging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (**3.GP-art. 3; 6. FE- art.18**).

3.1 Children's Participation Officer

A key element of CfC Frankston practice is a strong emphasis on acknowledging and promoting children's participation in the programs it funds. CfC Frankston has a strong commitment to engaging with children in the local community and capturing their voices in policy and decision-making processes. CfC Frankston realises this commitment through a dedicated Children's Participation Officer (CPO) role.

The CPO is an innovative position; enabling children's voices to be heard and represented in respect of service funding, planning, design, delivery and evaluation for CfC projects. This assists service deliverers to engage in child-friendly and inclusive practice, and also aids in the dissemination of children's feedback to wider services networks, planners and decision-makers. These actions are directly responsive to the UNCRC, specifically articles 12 and 13 (giving a voice to the children of Frankston) (**3.GP- art. 3, art. 12; 4.CR&F- art13**).

Below is a brief summary of a few activities that CfC Frankston has funded or supported through the CPO's role in the last five year period.

- **Awesome Kids Family Calendar:** Since 2011, CfC Frankston has worked in collaboration with at least 20 schools and kindergartens to develop a creative and interactive calendar to assist families organise their lives. The main objective is to create a calendar for and with the children of Frankston to allow their ideas, voice and creativity to be seen and heard by the community. As part of the development process, the CPO works with a group of students 5-12 years of age and a staff member to discuss the theme for the year (e.g. diversity, inclusion) and design artwork to use in the calendar. This project is driven by the philosophy "we can learn from kids too" (**3.GP- art. 12; 4.CR&F- art13**).
- **Totally Kids Conference 2013:** In 2013, CfC funded and supported a conference designed to provide primary aged children with an opportunity to improve their collaborative leadership skills. The conference was organised by a 'kid's council', with assistance from the CPO and a local council. Children's participation was central in this project - they were included in collective decision-making, planning and reflection processes over a nine month period. The council and conference also provided opportunities for adults to listen to and hear from these children (**3.GP- art. 12; 4.CR&F- art13**).
- **Children as Recruiters 2014:** CfC Frankston provided an opportunity for children to actively engage in the recruitment of their Children's Participation Officer. The children undertook the 'Children as Recruiters' training and subsequently took part in the interview process as a parallel activity to the adult panel. This enabled them to be meaningfully involved in

decision-making and thereby pursue improved outcomes for themselves and the broader community (**3.GP- art. 3, art. 12; 4.CR&F- art13**).

- **The Voice Lab Project 2016-2018:** In 2015 CfC Frankston brokered a relationship between Polyglot Theatre and the Gandel Foundation to the end of conducting a project with pre-school, primary and secondary students. This project focused on children expressing themselves around experiences of transition across school years. The project was carried out using a tool developed by the creative team of Polyglot known as Voice Lab. CfC CPO was present at all sessions and shared skills and expertise around how to most effectively facilitate children's participation. An ongoing partnership with Monash University has now also been developed in order to produce evidence of the outcomes from this project (**3.GP- art. 3, art. 12**).

3.2 Comments on progress in achieving rights of the child:

3. General principles- best interest of the child (art. 3)

All the community partners within CfC are focused on working in the best interests of the child. This is an imperative of both the Australian Government which funds CfC services, and accords with the Victorian State Government's legislative framework that guides service provision to Victoria's most vulnerable children. The facilitating partner model drives the facilitating partner organisation to provide significant support to community partners in developing service planning and carrying out service activities. This assists facilitating partners to better provide services which meet the needs of program participants, including children and young people.

3. General principles-respect for views of the child (art. 12)

4. Civil rights and freedom-freedom of expression (art. 13)

Despite creating and taking up many opportunities, CfC Frankston recognises that children's community engagement could be further strengthened in the Frankston area. Through consultation and awareness-raising activities, staff have emphasised to local service networks the need for children to have greater input and engagement with both social service programs, and the broader community.

For CfC Frankston, this work continues. The achievements of the initiatives outlined in this submission are significant, but greater improvements can still be achieved in regard to local service and community engagement of children. To assist with this, CfC Frankston will continue to support organisations to better understand what hearing the voice of a child means, how to hear their voice and what opportunities they might provide to enable children's freedom of expression.

4. Communities for Children, Cardinia

Communities for Children provides a platform for an integrated response to children's needs by all levels of government – and universal, secondary and tertiary services - to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children. This is realised through a focus on empowering vulnerable, 'at risk' children and families with knowledge, skills and access to resources that facilitate children's healthy development.

The activities of Cardinia CfC have been purposefully aligned with the strategies and areas of focus set out in COAG's *Protecting Australia's Children* report. Cardinia CfC's work began in 2009 with a needs assessment and consultation in the local area. Cardinia Shire, located on the fringe of Melbourne is one of the fastest growing regions of Victoria. The population has grown from 87,000 in 2014 to 105,000 in 2018. Most of the growth is occurring through young families moving into the Shire, as indicated by the biggest increases in population growth occurring amongst the 25 – 34 year old and 0-9 year old cohorts.

This is accompanied by some risks. Lack of local job opportunities, long commutes to work, and high proportions of income spent on housing means many families are under significant pressure. This is evident in the large proportion of residents who regularly run out of food. Cardinia Shire has one of the highest levels of food insecurity in Victoria. Movement to the area, which occurs at the rate of 6-7 families per day, means that community services within the Cardinia Shire are continually under strain. The dominant issues for vulnerable families reported by these services are accessibility of transport, housing, jobs, food and services, the impact of social isolation on wellbeing, and family violence. Reports of family violence to police have increased significantly since 2010. This is significantly concerning for many reasons, not least of which the impact that exposure to family violence has on children's wellbeing and development, as clearly established by scientific research.

The priorities for Cardinia CfC are:

1. Provision of services addressing family violence and its impact
2. Implementing universal platforms to engage and intervene early with vulnerable families
3. A focus on working in areas of higher disadvantage
4. Building community capacity

Objectives serving these priorities are achieved through the work of the facilitating partner and the community partners. Community partners funded through the CfC initiative provide services directly to families. Their activities, together, form a cohesive network of service responses tailored to the constellation of community needs in the Cardinia Shire.

Hearing and being responsive to client voice and feedback is essential to the continuous improvement of these services. Eliciting regular feedback from participants about their experience of service provision and the outcomes this has assisted them to achieve has been shown to lead to significant improvements – as detailed in the Cardinia Community Strategic Plan 2015-2017. Ongoing feedback improves services and enables clients – including children and young people - to co-design the supports they need. This empowers active participation and moves away from a view of people as passive recipients of services to co-producers and active members of civil society.

One example is an initiative of the facilitating partner in Cardinia CfC - the Cardinia Safe T Net, which focuses on supporting children's safety, health and wellbeing

4.1 Cardinia Safe T Net

- **2011-12 Development of website:** Consultations were undertaken in local primary schools asking the children three questions: 'What does being unsafe feel like?' 'Who can I talk to?' 'Who can I call?' Their voices were gathered and put onto the website to answer the questions, along with the children's art work.
- **2013 Story creation** with the year 5-6 children to explore risky behaviour and bullying, resulted in the tale *Francesco's Roll*, which can be found on the site. The children were very

proud to receive printed copies of their book - which included their pictures - and to be included in the website.

- **2013** *The launch of www.cardiniasafetnet.com.au* was at a local primary school which is in one of the highest areas of disadvantage in the region. This school had been involved in the original development and in the story creation project.
- **2017** *The Caring Relationships* project was facilitated with another primary school, in an area of high disadvantage within the Shire. We explored 'what do caring friendships look like?' 'What do caring families look like?' 'What do caring communities look like?' All of their feedback and drawings will be included on a website. Going back out to the schools to let the children know how their information has been utilised is a major part of any project we do with children.
- Currently, we are developing a Children's Voice project, the results of which will also be included on a website. We are asking the children what their communities are, how they rate them and how they could be improved. The information received from the children will be shared with them and to local sources where they will do the most good - e.g. with local councillors who make decisions regarding sport and recreation opportunities.

4.2 Comments on progress in achieving Rights of the Child:

3. General principles- Best interest of the child (art. 3)

Respect and feedback to the children is the first question asked in any project. How will the children know what we have done with their words? These are solved before a project is developed. We keep the children's words intact and include their artwork, always with appropriate permissions. We are endeavouring to bring audio recordings to the website as we know that children enjoy hearing from other children.

3. General principles-Respect for views of the child (art. 12)

4. Civil rights and freedom-Freedom of expression (art. 13)

We think carefully about any questions we ask the children, to ensure they have the freedom to express themselves. We consider it vitally important that any participant in a survey or activity know what their answers look like collectively and where their information will be sent to have the most impact.

There is always room for improvement. We need the requisite permissions from parents, carers and guardians. We also make sure we ask the children directly for permission to put their artwork, answer or voice recording on the website.

We concur with Frankston CfC, that work needs to be done on interpreting children's voice. For example, when going out to the children for our Children's Voice consultation, we will be asking them to identify their communities. This will not be a concept that all are familiar with and will need to be explained. This will set the parameters for the workshops and begin the process of organising thoughts. We have given considerable thought to this as we do not want to direct the children's thinking and we do want them to have full expression. It is an interesting balancing act.

5. Recommendations

1. There needs to be an ongoing feedback loop between the children, the community (adults) and community structures (institutions of Government, statutory bodies and service systems) to ensure that the voices of children are represented to important decision-makers within society.
2. Hearing children's voices is specialist and considered work, requiring carefully designed and implemented processes. To the end of supporting recommendation 1, institutions of Government, statutory bodies and service organisations are encouraged to invest in the development of these processes, and positions to support these.
3. A vital question we need to ask before any project is 'how will the children know what we have done with their voices?' Understanding how adults interpret and potentially limit children's expression is also important, as is finding methods to minimise this. Ensuring that the children's voices are forwarded on to where they have the most impact and that the children know this has occurred is the essential element of any project in our work with children.