

Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania
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FAO Mr Robert Benjamin AM KC
Child Safety Reform Implementation Monitor
GPO Box 1126
Hobart, Tasmania 7001
27 August 2025

Submission to the Office of the Child Safety Reform Implementation Monitor

Regarding: Recommendation 19.1: The Tasmanian Government should develop a whole of government child sexual abuse reform strategy for preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse in institutions and harmful sexual behaviours. The Tasmanian Government should develop an action plan for the implementation of the child sexual abuse reform strategy.

Dear Robert,

I am writing to you in my capacity as CEO of Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania (NHT). NHT have been engaged by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC) to work as part of the 'Change Lead' project with other community organisations and the Local Government Association of Tasmania. The objectives of the project are to work with the Tasmanian Government to facilitate effective and efficient engagement between community and the Government to respond to the Commission of Inquiry (COI); contribute to and implement the Change for Children reform strategy; and implement and embed the Standards set out by the Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework (CYSOF) across the Neighbourhood Houses Network.

This project is guided by the following principles:

- keeping children safe requires a focus on the prevention of harm;
- strong, well-connected communities;
- well-supported community organisations; and
- transparent and accountable institutions.

This submission is underpinned by these principles, but focusses on the latter, in regard to the way in which the recommendations of the COI are being implemented and communicated.

While we have been actively involved in shaping the *Change for Children* strategy and the upcoming action plan, greater clarity around how the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry and related reports are being progressed would enhance transparency and strengthen trust in the process.

When you met with the 'Change Lead' organisations in March 2025, you expressed that implementation of recommendations must not be 'tick-a-box' exercise. This is a view we strongly share. We have valued the Reform Unit's intention to collaborate throughout this project and have clearly communicated that the implementation of Recommendation 19.1 requires a commitment to concrete actions, defined timeframes, and clearly accountable agencies. However, we have not yet seen these elements reflected in the approach.

As an organisation that is outside of Government but works closely with multiple agencies and policy areas, we observe agencies undertaking the work of their assigned recommendations separately. We are concerned that the current approach does not adequately address the issues raised so clearly in the Commission of Inquiry: of siloed working, duplication of work, and children being 'lost in the system'. Addressing these systemic issues requires a more integrated and coordinated response to ensure that children and families receive consistent, connected support across agencies.

The impacts of the public sector hiring freeze seem to be hampering this work significantly – in the last year, the COI reform implementation team's staffing levels, and therefore capacity, has dropped significantly. We are concerned that without adequate resourcing, the implementation of the recommendations of the COI will be tokenistic at best.

We have previously raised with the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Justice, and Office of the Independent Regulator, our serious concerns about the experiences Neighbourhood Houses have had with the child safety system, in particular the Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line (ARL). In many cases, the system has not provided adequate support to children and young people before or at the point of significant crisis, highlighting a critical gap that must be addressed with urgency and care. There is a real sense of an overloaded, ineffective system – which was an issue also detailed in the COI. We are aware that this is an entrenched problem, however we are concerned that not enough is being done in the immediate term to address and communicate around this issue.

We ask for transparency from the Government on what is being done to ensure that Tasmanian children and young people are kept safe from sexual abuse. We ask for your support in advocating for adequate funding to resource the implementation of all recommendations, in a way that prioritises the needs, voices and wellbeing of children and young people. We are acutely aware that the current fiscal environment is challenging, but Government risks missing this key, potentially unique opportunity to make real, lasting change if it does not commit to acting now. Preventive work requires upfront investment which may be more costly in the short-term but delivers lasting value by strengthening the lives and wellbeing of children and young people.

At its core, child sexual abuse is about abuse of power. People with power causing harm to those who have less – in some cases, people who feel they have very little power using that which they do have to cause harm. As individuals tasked with holding the Government

accountable for its role in protecting Tasmanian children, we carry a meaningful responsibility to critically examine the actions of institutions and organisations and ask, with urgency and clarity: will any child or young person be safer and better supported because of this work?

I look forward to your report to Parliament in September.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simone', followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line extending to the right.

Simone Zell

CEO, Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania Inc