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Your Ref:
Our Ref:

22 August 2011

Ms Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for Human Services
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG) regarding the initiative '*Compulsory participation plans and support for teenage parents – targeted locations*' as described on the Australian Government, Department of Human Services website and in the joint media release by yourself with Senator Chris Evans and Kate Ellis MP on 10 May 2011, *Helping teenage parents finish school to support their children*.

Central to our roles as ACCG is to advocate for and promote the rights, best interests and wellbeing of Australian children and young people under the age of 18 years within our respective jurisdictions and to have regard to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

The ACCG has particular regard for children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged such as those who are in out-of-home care and state and territory child protection systems, in the youth justice system, who have a disability or are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

In relation to the above initiative, teenage parents who are under 18 years of age and their children fall within our remit.

While the ACCG support the aim of the trial insofar as it encourages working with teenage parents to ensure they engage with education,

employment and training, the lack of publicly available detail regarding implementation and other aspects of this trial is a matter of some concern. The absence of this information means that it is difficult to ascertain the potential impact of the trial on those young people and their children who will be affected by it or to identify deficiencies in service provision.

Examples of relevant issues are as follows:

1. The joint media release refers to the initiative of compulsory plans and support for teenage parents as a four year trial, whereas the information on the website refers to the initiative as ‘...an on-going measure.’ The ACCG respectfully request clarification on this matter and detail on the how the initiative will be monitored and evaluated.

2. The ten communities selected for the trial have been chosen because they are identified as disadvantaged communities with high levels of teenage pregnancies and intergenerational welfare dependency. Services such as child care and transport are essential to any parent’s ability to engage with their community. Requiring a teenage parent to engage with education, training or employment in order to receive income support without the provision of adequate services, has the potential to place them at further disadvantage.

The ACCG acknowledges the Australian Government’s commitment to invest \$47million over four years to trial new measures, such as expanded *Communities for Children* services and the *Jobs Education Training Child Care Fee Assistance Program*, to assist teenage parents to finish school and support their children. The ACCG also acknowledges the commitment by the Government to deliver \$38.2 million over four years to support innovative local programs to boost engagement and workforce participation in those communities selected for the trial, including through additional funding to the *Local Solutions Fund*.

However, it is not clear whether these additional services and programs will be established in time to meet, for example, the child care and transport requirements of teenage parents, by commencement of the trial in January 2012. The ACCG respectfully requests clarification regarding the action that will be taken to ensure participants in the trial are not disadvantaged by delays in the establishment of the new services in the ten communities involved in the trial.

3. The consequences are considerable for teenage parents and their child/ren if the new Centrelink requirements to receive the Parenting Payment are not met. Although the suspended payments

will be back paid once the teenage parent re-engages with Centrelink requirements, suspending income for any period of time places the safety and wellbeing of the child/ren and of the teenage parent at risk. As such the ACCG requests clarification of the extent to which the trial is consistent with the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* and promotes the best interests of the children and young people involved.

Furthermore, there is clearly an increased potential for Child Protection Services to become involved as a result of concerns about the welfare of both teenage parent and baby/young child should income be withdrawn or other related issues such as a lack of affordable accommodation impinge upon the standard of care provided to a baby/young child. For example, females aged 15-19 had the highest rate of usage of specialist homelessness services in 2009-2010 by any one age and sex group, with 1 in 51 users being a young woman.¹

Other services and agencies – government and non-government – may experience an increased demand for their assistance, especially where income support is withdrawn. We would therefore appreciate your advice on whether and how gaps in local support services will be remedied or taken into account where they affect a young parent's capacity to comply with compulsory participation requirements.

4. A number of ACCG members have roles in respect to children and young people in out of home care. Contemporary Australian research has shown that children and young people in out of home care are more likely to be teenage parents than members of the wider community of children and young people. They are also more likely not to have access to the community, family and other supports available to young parents in the wider community and may therefore be required to overcome additional barriers to engaging in participation requirements than those other young parents.

Therefore, while ACCG members welcome additional education and employment support for children and young people in this group, we would appreciate further information on whether there will be sufficient flexibility within the trial, particularly regarding access to income support, to take account of the circumstances and needs of particularly vulnerable children and young people such as those living in out of home care or in post placement support who are themselves parents.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. June 2011. *Government-funded specialist homelessness services-SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2009-2010*.

5. The ACCG understand that amendments to the Centrelink legislative framework will be necessary to support the implementation of the trial and request information on how these amendments will modify the existing rights of teenage parents accessing the Parenting Payment.

6. As far as the ACCG can ascertain, to this point there has been limited consultation in relation to the implementation of the trial. As the ACCG, we are uniquely placed to provide advice on the development of the trial to ensure that the rights and wellbeing of the children and teenage parents involved are protected and promoted. The ACCG respectfully requests information on the consultation process to date, and details of any further consultations that are planned.

Finally, the ACCG would like to invite you to its next meeting to further discuss these and related issues. This meeting is scheduled for the 7 and 8 November 2011 in Sydney and will be chaired by the New South Wales Commissioner for Children and Young People, Ms Megan Mitchell. Could you please indicate your availability by contacting Gregor Macfie, Director, Policy and Research on (02) 9286 7243 email Gregor.Macfie@kids.nsw.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,



Aileen Ashford
Commissioner for Children

Signed on behalf of ACCG members:

- Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People (Western Australia)
- Alasdair Roy, Children and Young People Commissioner (ACT)
- Howard Bath, Children's Commissioner (Northern Territory)
- Bernie Geary, Child Safety Commissioner (Victoria)
- Elizabeth Fraser, Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (Queensland)
- Megan Mitchell, Commissioner for Children and Young People (NSW)
- Kerryn Boland, Children's Guardian (NSW)
- Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People (SA)

cc Jenny Macklin, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs