



Tuart Place

A resource service for Western Australians who experienced out-of-home care during childhood

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Response by Forgotten Australians Coming Together Inc to a Consultation Paper for the Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Background

Forgotten Australians Coming Together (FACT) Inc, trading as *Tuart Place*, operates a counselling and support service for people who were placed in any form of out-of-home care during childhood, including foster care, church-run orphanages, and other institutions located in Western Australia.

FACT was formed in the mid-2000s by the Late Laurie Humphreys JP, a Former Child Migrant and ex-resident of Bindoon Boys Town. After achieving incorporation in 2009, FACT began work on establishing a 'drop in' centre for West Australian care leavers, with assistance from a committee of care leavers, academics, and other stakeholders.

'Tuart Place' commenced operation in January 2012, funded by the WA State Government via *Lotterywest*. Tuart Place is a Public Benevolent Institution and has Tax Deductible Recipient status. The majority of the 1,100+ clients of the service are former applicants of the *Redress WA* scheme.

Tuart Place provides a range of services, including trauma-informed counselling, therapeutic and life-skills groups; family tracing; assistance and support to access records; social activities and reunions; and support with preparing and pursuing complaints against past providers. The quarterly *Tuart Times* newsletter is posted to approximately 1,400 recipients, and is available on the Tuart Place website (www.tuartplace.org).

Tuart Place is staffed by professionals with significant expertise and experience in providing services to survivors of abuse in institutional and other out-of-home care settings. The service model has a strong emphasis on peer support, mentoring and leadership; and on meaningful participation by care leavers in its model of governance.

FACT Inc, trading as Tuart Place, has lodged two applications for funding under the *Find & Connect* scheme, and is currently appealing the assessment process used in the second application.

Input to the Royal Commission's Consultation

The far-reaching scope of the Royal Commission announced by the Prime Minister distinguishes it from previous inquiries in this area, and provides the Australian Government with an opportunity to conduct a leading-edge investigation prioritising the input and expressed needs of survivors.

FACT's contribution to the Consultation is primarily in the areas of *Duration and reporting arrangements of the Royal Commission*, and *Support needs of victims and their families*, however we will firstly comment on the importance of appointing more than one Commissioner.

State-based Commissioners

There are significant differences between the institutional responses offered to victims of abuse in different States, and varying degrees of progress with implementing services and support. Different types of data will be available to the Commission from each State, and we believe it is essential that existing bodies of evidence are accessed and collated within each locality in order both to spare victims the trauma of re-telling their accounts of abuse, and to save the Commission time in collecting evidence.

State government departments in WA, Queensland and Tasmania will have records from their respective redress schemes that will yield data on abuse in out-of-home care and profiles of institutional responses that are specific to the redress processes conducted in those States. Similarly, Parliamentary Inquiries currently underway in Victoria and NSW will collect data specific to abuse and institutional responses in those States, as with the Mullighan Inquiry in South Australia, the Forde inquiry in Queensland, and the Tasmanian Ombudsman's investigation. These Inquiries had varying scopes and differing terms of reference, and it seems unlikely that examination of such vast quantities of diverse information by a single, centralised entity will provide an optimal model of investigation.

FACT Inc believes it is important for the Commission to conduct separate investigations in each jurisdiction in order to accommodate differences in the types of data available, as well as numerous other historic and present-day factors specific to each locality. We recommend that the Commission examines the adequacy of services available to victims of abuse in each State, for the purpose of establishing a framework that secures a sustainable and appropriate response across the States. As suggested in the Commission's Consultation Paper, there may be advantages to having concurrent hearings, which would allow investigations and analyses to progress simultaneously across the country. A national, standardised template for data collection and reporting would facilitate consistent collection of data for centralised, over-arching analysis by the Commission.

A State-by-State analysis would also enable Commissioners to conduct effective investigations of present day child protection systems in each State. We are all aware that the sexual abuse of children and young people is still rife in our communities and an important aspect of the Commission's work will be considering ways of 'stopping the abuse'. It is imperative that we learn from past failures and ensure that our current care system does not produce the next generation of redress applicants. Prevention and effective early intervention are far more desirable than providing remedial measures after the event. We recommend that the Commission undertakes a thorough analysis of current child protection systems in each jurisdiction and examines what proportion of child welfare policies are actually implemented in practice. We also recommend that the Royal Commission examines alternative approaches to prevention and protection used within Australia and overseas.

Duration and reporting arrangements of the Royal Commission

As stated in the Commission's Consultation Paper, the huge task ahead will necessarily take years, rather than months, to complete. The issue of duration and timeframes for the forthcoming Royal Commission are key factors raised by a large proportion of people who have contacted Tuart Place since the announcement. An overwhelming theme in these phone calls has been the hope that the Commission will proceed as quickly as possible, with people expressing fears such as: "We could be dead before it's finished".

A demographic snapshot of 1,118 Tuart Place service users shows that 74 per cent are aged over 51, while 27 per cent are over 70 years of age. This profile is consistent with statistics generated by the Redress WA scheme, in which the majority of the 6,000 applicants were "aged between 50 and 70

years of age, with more than 60% of all applicants aged 50 years and over” (Department for Communities, *Redress WA Newsletter*, No 2. Nov 2009).

The advanced age and poor physical and mental health of many abuse survivors create a real imperative for the Royal Commission to collect, consider, and report as soon as possible. We are strongly in support of the proposal that the Terms of Reference seek regular reporting throughout the work of the Commission; and that recommendations and reforms are implemented during the process.

The long delays experienced during the Redress WA scheme are still fresh in the minds of many West Australian care leavers, and most applicants had to wait about two years for an outcome after submitting their statements. For many people this process of waiting was - of itself - very traumatic, and applicants often talked about ‘waiting to be believed’. Countless redress applicants also described the process of disclosing and detailing traumatic memories of childhood abuse as being equally as bad as the original abuse itself.

As stated in an ABC News interview with the Director of Tuart Place (22-11-12; transcript attached), the announcement of the Royal Commission has prompted some anxiety among West Australian care leavers, who fear they will be compelled to recount their abuse “all over again”; or that their personal stories of abuse will be made public. Our response to these concerns has been to reassure people that individual victims will not be publicly named by the Royal Commission unless it is their wish to be identified, and that victims are not obliged to disclose their abuse unless they want to. However, we welcome the Commission’s swift actions in gathering input from stakeholders to facilitate the prompt release of Terms of Reference for the Commission, as these Terms will be helpful in allaying fears and misapprehensions circulating among the Child Migrant and Forgotten Australian networks.

Support needs of victims and their families

People who experienced abuse in out-of-home care are a particularly vulnerable population group. Without exception they suffered the early loss of parental connections which, of itself, often results in significant psychological harm. When early loss and trauma is followed by abuse and/or neglect beyond the family home, the risk of long term damage to the person’s psycho-social functioning is extremely high. As found in other care leaver populations, the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder is almost universal among Tuart Place service users, and diagnosed mental health problems such as anxiety disorder and major depression are commonplace.

However, the support needs of older people who experienced child abuse in orphanages and other out-of-home care settings were largely overlooked until relatively recent times. The HREOC’s *Bringing them Home* Inquiry (1997), and the *Lost Innocents* (2001) and *Forgotten Australians* (2004) Senate Inquiries served to highlight the widespread incidence of complex mental health problems, poor physical health, lack of education, and low socio-economic status experienced by many Former Child Migrants, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian-born care leavers. These Inquiries, and subsequent apologies to the Stolen Generations, Former Child Migrants and Forgotten Australians led to the provision of some support for these groups, and served to increase public understanding of the impacts of multiple traumas and abuse experienced during childhood.

However, despite progress in some areas, older care leavers still encounter entrenched moral judgements and limited social awareness of the devastating impacts of childhood abuse. Our service users report feeling frustrated when confronted by commonly-voiced beliefs such as the view that because the abuse occurred decades ago the victims should ‘be over it by now’. They also feel frustrated when rare ‘success stories’ about care leavers who overcome early hardships to

succeed in business or public life are held up as proof that anyone can overcome early adversity – if only they had tried hard enough.

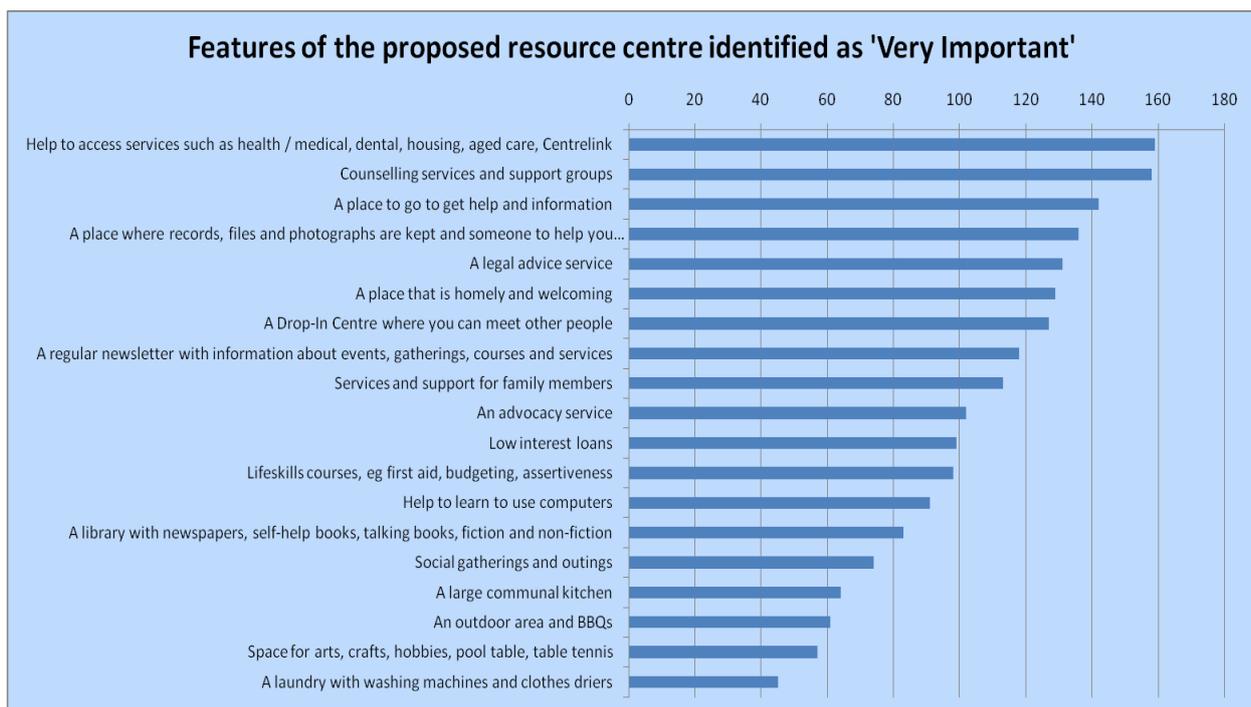
Misapprehensions such as these add insult to injury for the many Forgotten Australians, Former Child Migrants and members of the Stolen Generations who haven't been able to 'get over' their multiple early traumas, family separations, lack of education, and childhood abuse and neglect to make a success of their lives. These negative public perceptions serve to reinforce feelings of helplessness and hopelessness; they exacerbate negative self-judgements and feelings of low self-worth and, worst of all, they fuel the persistent, 'default position' self-blame experienced by victims who, as children, almost always come to the conclusion that in some way they must be somehow responsible for the abuse.

Existing data on support needs

The Royal Commission's investigation of the support needs of victims will be aided by the large body of existing information generated by the Senate Inquiries and other large-scale investigations and reports in this area.

In Western Australia, the specific support needs of care leavers were identified and documented in an extensive research and consultation process commissioned by FACT Inc in 2011, the findings of which were used to inform the development of a service delivery model for Tuart Place. Feedback from consultations with care leavers was used to prepare a postal survey that was mailed to 960 care leavers living within WA, including Former Child Migrants and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian-born care leavers. The age cohort of care leavers contacted in this survey is similar to that of current Tuart Place service users, 74 per cent of whom are over 51 years of age, and 27 per cent aged over 70. Data generated from the 222 responses received in the survey provides a comprehensive and up-to-date profile of the types of services and support most needed by older care leavers living in Western Australia.

As shown in the graph below, survey respondents identified help in accessing mainstream services such as medical, dental, housing, and aged care as the most important feature in a resource service for care leavers. Other priority features included access to counselling and support groups; a 'place to go' where help and information is available; support with obtaining records and photographs; access to legal advice; and a place that is homely and welcoming.



The results of FACT's postal survey were combined with data gathered during interviews with care leaver agencies and support groups in other states and an analysis of existing research literature, and formed the key source of information used in developing a model of service delivery for Tuart Place. The next phase of FACT's research process, funded by Lotterywest, includes an evaluation of service delivery at Tuart Place using an action research methodology, and further analysis of best practice models identified in current research literature and existing services within Australia and overseas.

Prioritisation of health services

The large volume of data generated by previous Inquiries and extensive research literature published in this area over the last 15 years provides unequivocal evidence of the significantly higher rates of medical, dental and complex mental health problems experienced by older care leavers, who are also more likely to have had less access to education, fewer employment opportunities and lower rates of income.

The prioritisation of health services identified by respondents in FACT's survey and in other studies signals a significant and much broader issue for consideration by the Royal Commission, and we recommend that the pressing need for reform in this area is reflected in the Commission's Terms of Reference.

Funding cuts to the Medicare 'Better Access' scheme will, as of January 2013, remove the current provision for more than 10 counselling sessions per annum requested 'under exceptional circumstances'. The removal of this provision will adversely affect older care leavers, many of whom have complex and chronic mental health needs. Appropriate specialised support is available to people who live in the vicinity of services such as Tuart Place in Perth, Open Place in Melbourne, and Lotus Place in Brisbane, however many live in rural areas and the prevalence of mobility problems among older care leavers is increasing.

The Government was heading in the right direction when it classified older care leavers as a 'Special Needs Group' in regard to aged care in 2009, however anecdotal evidence suggests there may have been minimal positive impact from this classification, and that the 'Special Needs' label may actually work against the interests of care leavers competing for limited places in aged care facilities.

Senior Care Leavers Health Card

FACT Inc recommends the inclusion of a *Senior Care Leavers Health Card* in the Terms of Reference, for consideration by the Royal Commission as a specific health support measure. The idea of such a card is not new, and was originally proposed by the Alliance of Forgotten Australians (AFA) and was carried forward by FACT's founding Chairperson, the Late Laurie Humphreys. The idea is similar to that of the Veterans Card, covering the cost of medical, dental, optical and ancillary health services for people in their senior years who experienced out-of-home care at a time when extreme forms of abuse and denial of education were widespread in the types of institutions and large orphanages that do not exist today.

A means-tested Senior Care Leavers Health Card would be of real, practical help to the cohort of older care leavers who face increasing medical, dental, and mental health problems and cannot afford private health cover.

A final word on support

As stated in an ABC News interview with the Director of Tuart Place (22-11-12; transcript attached), people who experienced child abuse are often deeply affected by news media coverage of this topic. At Tuart Place, reports of distressing flashbacks and other post-trauma reactions to child abuse

stories are *the most common symptom* described by clients in counselling; and we have yet to meet a survivor of abuse in care who is *not* triggered by this type of media coverage.

In Western Australia, events such as the Blaxell Inquiry; on-going debate on the Redress WA scheme; and most recently the Royal Commission, have resulted in prominent and continuous media coverage of issues relating to child abuse in out-of-home care, which has corresponded with heightened post trauma symptoms and greater discussion of this topic among Tuart Place service users.

Fortunately, the triggering of post traumatic reactions, while very unpleasant, can create a valuable therapeutic opportunity - if the person can safely ventilate their feelings. However, victims of abuse in out-of-home care often have limited sources of support, lack confidence to seek help, and think they are alone in experiencing flashbacks and other post trauma reactions. Exposure to reminders of the abuse leaves them feeling helpless and enraged, with no way of resolving their distress. People experiencing these reactions are at higher risk of suicide, substance abuse, and other forms of self harm.

Obviously, survivors of abuse in out-of-home care need to have good access to specialised, free-of-charge services, and they also need information about where this support is available. Since early 2012, Tuart Place has actively engaged with journalists and management at *The West Australian* newspaper seeking assistance with this matter. (As a monopoly daily newspaper, *The West Australian* dominates print media discourse in this State and has considerable influence in the public sphere). In recent months, journalists covering this area have often complied with a request to include the Tuart Place free-call number in coverage of abuse in out-of-home care.

We feel sure that the problem of heightened PTSD symptoms and heightened risks among care leavers triggered by media reporting of child abuse is not confined to Western Australia, and FACT recommends that the Royal Commission seeks to work cooperatively with the wider Australian news media in raising awareness of this issue, and that it encourages news media to include local support service details in coverage of the Commission's activities. A useful outcome would be for the Commission's work to convince the Australian Press Council (APC) to introduce guidelines on the reporting of child abuse similar to those introduced in 1994 for the reporting of suicide.

This is an important measure with wide-ranging benefits. Even if people do not pick up the phone, the presence of support service information sends a message to victims that it is normal for them to be triggered by coverage of child abuse and that if things get really bad, help is available. Victims typically believe they are the 'only one' affected in this way, and fear they are abnormal or mentally unstable. The simple information that they are not alone, and that many others have the same reaction, is of great benefit.

Summary of Recommendations for the Royal Commission

In summary, FACT Inc submits the following recommendations:

1. Commissioners to be appointed for each State/Territory to expedite the investigations, improve contextual understanding and make better use of existing data.
2. The Commission's Terms of Reference include an examination of the adequacy of services available to victims of abuse in each jurisdiction, for the purpose of establishing a framework that secures a sustainable and appropriate response across the States and Territories.

3. The Commission undertakes a thorough analysis of current child protection systems in each jurisdiction and determines what proportion of child welfare policies are actually implemented in practice; and conducts an analysis of alternative approaches to prevention of abuse and protection of children.
4. The Royal Commission reports and implements actions in a timely manner to spare victims undue trauma as they wait for outcomes; and that recommendations and reforms are implemented during the process.
5. Practical mechanisms to support care-leavers during the Royal Commission are put in place immediately.
6. The Commission's Terms of Reference include a specific focus on how to best meet the specialised health care needs of older care leavers; and that the concept of a *Senior Care Leavers Health Card* is included in the Terms of Reference, for consideration as a specific health support measure.
7. The Royal Commission works cooperatively with the Australian news media to raise awareness of the impact of news coverage of child abuse-related issues and that news media are encouraged to include local support service details when reporting on the Commission's activities.
8. The Commission encourages the Australian Press Council to introduce guidelines on the reporting of child abuse similar to those introduced in 1994 for the reporting of suicide.

Conclusion

We commend the Prime Minister for establishing a far-reaching Royal Commission with the powers to finally investigate longstanding and widespread complaints of systemic failures and concealment of child sexual abuse in institutional settings. The establishment of this Commission sends a strong message to Australian and international communities that child abuse and its concealment will not be tolerated in this country. In addition to many other potential benefits, it is hoped that the Royal Commission will also serve to raise public awareness about the significant and long-term damage caused by childhood sexual abuse, which is compounded by specific harms when the abuse occurs within religious or State-sanctioned contexts.

The FACT Inc Board of Management and staff and service users of Tuart Place will contribute input to FACT's submission to the Royal Commission, which will provide a broad range of perspectives reflecting considerable expertise, professional skills and lived experience. We are also available to facilitate other forms of input and welcome contact from the Commission.

Dr Philippa White, Director Tuart Place & Ms Jennifer Aldrick, Chairperson FACT Inc.

26th November 2012.