

16.12.93

To: Sue Culligan

From: Tim

**Re: Napier Street Child Care Service research**

This is a short 'catch-up' note before I go on leave. From today (17.12.93) I will be on leave until late January. Please find attached a copy of the summaries of all the meetings. Could you pass this on to Toni and staff when you are finished with it? Could this note also be used as an invoice for the \$600 contribution of Family Services to the cost of the research.

It may be worthwhile to prepare a more formal summary of the main 'research findings' in the new year. What I have produced below are some short notes on what I thought were the main things to come out of it.

1. As you know, the research consisted of four meetings with five English speaking mothers which I facilitated, four meetings with Cantonese speaking mothers that Lucia facilitated and four meetings with Cottage staff that Lucia and I both attended. The ten mothers were selected from a potential group of 38 mothers. Originally it was planned to involve eight mothers in each group, but six withdrew for various reasons after initially agreeing to participate. There were also three preliminary meetings I had with Cottage staff to plan the research.
2. I think one of the major gains of the research was what everyone learnt through the processes of the group discussion, rather than any 'finished product'. The end point of the research was an arbitrary one linked to resources. It is great that you have decided to meet with the groups of mothers in the New Year to talk a few of the issues through in more detail.
3. For the mothers who took part in the research the service is clearly working extremely well. There was a strong congruence between staff and mothers' views of why this was so: the low cost of the service, the good staff/ child ratio, the child centredness of the service (with a strong focus on developing childrens' self esteem and skills), the family support provided especially for the English speaking mothers, the professionalism of staff, the friendliness of staff to mothers and amongst themselves. For English speaking mothers there was strong agreement that it was the best child care service they had used. This needs to be seen against a background of children. Three of the children with English speaking mothers had very difficult behaviours and one had major learning difficulties - and their mothers were under considerable stress. Cantonese speaking mothers were also very satisfied with the service.
4. The major unresolved issue for four of the English speaking mothers was for having sufficient hours of care to be able to look for paid work with the confidence that their hours of work and travel would be covered by child care, with the particular problem of the period 5.30 to 6pm when the centre is closed. There was however some good discussion of possible approaches to this problem.

What was highlighted for me in the issues raised by the Cantonese speaking mothers was the value of improved communication around parental views and concerns. While I felt the research led to considerable gains in communication there are clearly issues about how to maintain this, and also how to ensure that it occurs with the other 13 or so non-English speaking parents. (It should also be said that the feedback from the research was that the quality of communication with Cantonese speaking mothers appears to have been remarkably good given the language barriers).

Another theme in both groups was mothers being unhappy about how long they had to wait before their children could gain a place in the centre. In contrast mothers whose children got a place almost immediately were very happy. Part of this problem was unresolvable as due to a limitation of space and the existing waiting list. However in the sense that families felt that decisions about who 'got in first' was

unfair, improving parental understanding about the criteria staff use in making decisions would be of assistance. Staff made the point that they now do make greater efforts to explain this carefully to new applicants.

An extension of this problem was the point at which children were 'promoted' from the younger group to the older group, with one of the problems being that there are 12 full-time places for younger children and only 10 full-time places for older children. Again the issue may be partly unresolvable because of lack of space. However it was also important that parents understood why this decisions were being made and the way staff ensured that any programs in the younger children's room was appropriate to age and level of development.

5. Mothers' and staff views of how they judge whether the service is working well appear to provide an excellent starting point for developing a system of monitoring the quality of the service for the purpose of improving its quality. This may involve formalising what staff do already but doing it more systematically and documenting it. I would appreciate the opportunity to sit down with staff in the new year and develop this in more detail.

5. In terms of consultation with consumers mothers expressed a clear preference for the kind of small group process used in this research where they felt comfortable and felt they did not have to be polite. They saw problems with having parents reps. on a service committee, especially around the difficulties involved in representing the interests of other mothers? One of the interesting parts of this process was that the mothers learnt a lot about how the service was run, how decisions were made, and became increasingly confident in expressing their views - which in turn became more sophisticated and useful. This would not have happened in a 'once off' meeting.

6. A self-monitoring exercise cannot provide all the answers to harder questions about whether the service is 'value for money'. What mothers and staff valued about the service was often closely related to resource issues: the high calibre of staff, their ongoing training, the good staff/child ratio, the existence of a family support worker etc. many of things that staff and mothers value about the service means that it is expensive in comparison with more traditional child care centres.

It may never be possible to fully demonstrate the value of a service such as this one to an external audience without a formal external evaluation, which is a very expensive exercise. To the extent that this is an issue for the broader organisation I have two suggestions. One is that senior management have some input into guidelines for the process of self-monitoring of the quality of the service. To the extent to which such an exercise can answer their questions it should be done. My other suggestion is an idea that I have not fully thought through: that Directors of BSL services be given the option of sitting down with groups of service users each year to obtain a first hand understanding of what particular service means to those using it.

**Copy of this memo (but not summaries): Toni, Janet Taylor, AlisonMcClelland, Deborah Ellkington**