



Hawkesbury City Council

supplementary  
ordinary  
meeting  
business  
paper

date of meeting: 11 August 2009  
location: council chambers  
time: 5:00 p.m.



**ORDINARY MEETING - SUPPLEMENTARY**

**Table of Contents**

**Meeting Date:** 11 August 2009

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
	<b>SECTION 4 - Reports for Determination</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>SUPPLEMENTARY REPORTS</b>	<b>3</b>
Item: 157	CP - Non-renewal of Brighter Futures Funding Agreement - (33821, 79778, 96328, 95498)	3

**ORDINARY MEETING - SUPPLEMENTARY**

**Table of Contents**

**Meeting Date:** 11 August 2009

**SECTION 4 - Reports for Determination**

**SUPPLEMENTARY REPORTS**

**Item: 157**            **CP - Non-renewal of Brighter Futures Funding Agreement - (33821, 79778, 96328, 95498)**

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**REPORT:**

This report has been prepared to advise Council of advice received from The Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust NSW (Wesley Mission) of their intention not to renew a funding agreement with Council for the Brighter Futures Project. The report requests that Council make representations in relation to this decision.

**Background**

Brighter Futures (BF) is a NSW Government Program aimed at providing support services to vulnerable families. The Program is administered by the Department of Community Services (DoCS). Funding is provided under the BF program for the delivery of a suite of services including early intervention casework services, home visitation, parenting groups, child care and practical assistance. The primary aim of the program is to assist vulnerable families in the important task of raising healthy and happy children by preventing problems from escalating into child protection concerns.

In 2006, Council entered into a partnership with Wesley Mission and a consortium of services in the Blue Mountains to facilitate a tender under the BF Program to establish the Nepean Early Intervention Project. Within this partnership, Council was acting on behalf of the Right Connections Consortium – a coalition of local family services operating within the Hawkesbury LGA.

Council's purpose in entering into the partnership with Wesley Mission was to ensure that a fixed proportion of funding received under the BF Program would be directed to the Hawkesbury. Under the partnership agreement Council (through the Right Connections Coalition) would be designated as the sole provider of BF services in the Hawkesbury. This principle of local service provision is 'evidence based' - child protection research clearly indicates that local service providers are best positioned to develop solutions to respond to the specific needs of vulnerable families within their area and that early intervention services should be available as close as possible to the neighbourhoods in which client families reside.

Council's and the Coalition's approach was also informed by the experience within the Hawkesbury which suggested that larger welfare organisations located outside of the City's boundaries have been unable or unwilling to maintain a visible and viable outreach presence within the City (even where they are funded to do so).

The Wesley Mission tender was successful. Council subsequently executed a three-year funding agreement which provided for a fixed proportion of annual BF funding amounting to almost \$600,000 being remitted to Council. Council has delegated management of the BF Project to Peppercorn Services Inc. (PSI) to provide the contracted services. In turn, PSI has negotiated brokerage arrangements with members of the Right Connection Coalition to deliver services on its behalf and has allocated a proportion of these funds to members of the Coalition.

**Current Situation**

The BF Hawkesbury Project has been successfully operating for three years. The Project is based at the South Windsor Family Centre which Council, in part, constructed to accommodate the Project. The South Windsor Centre provides offices, activity areas and a child care centre which are extensively used to deliver the BF program components. The BF Program has been rolled out throughout the Hawkesbury with

staff providing outreach services to all localities. As part of the Project strong connections have been established with service providers across the Hawkesbury including the local DoCS office. The BF Project currently employs more than 6 staff.

Since the Project's inception, PSI and the other BF partners have consistently met the contracted outputs required for the provision of BF services. At the same time the evaluation of client families participating in the Program has been excellent. Over the life of the project Council and PSI staff have not been advised of any issues regarding the project's performance, the project's compliance with funding requirements or concerns regarding existing partnership arrangements. At no time has Wesley Mission sought to enact the dispute resolution procedures provided in the funding agreement.

The current funding agreement with Wesley Mission expired on 30 June 2009. Verbal discussions with both Wesley Mission and DoCS suggested that the renewal of this contract would be 'routine' as there were no issues or concerns which would have prevented the renewal of the contract. E-mail advice received from Wesley Mission on 24 June 2009 suggested that their discussions with DoCS for the renewal of the Nepean Early Intervention Project were progressing well and that Wesley would be formalising individual contracts with project partners as soon as possible. As late as Wednesday 6 August the attendance of Council and PSI staff at the regular 'Partner Meeting' held between Wesley and its partner agencies in Penrith, Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury was confirmed.

On that same day, Council staff received a phone call from the Operations Manager, Wesley Family Services formally advising that Wesley would not be renewing its contract with Council and that Wesley was giving Council 60 days notice to terminate its BF Program and for all current BF families receiving casework and other services from Hawkesbury BF staff to be transferred to Wesley Mission. Council staff requested some clarification as to reasons for this decision and were advised that it was within Wesley's power to take this action and that information would be provided in writing confirming this decision. The Operations Manager advised that DoCS had not been advised of this decision and that essentially there was no process available to Council to question or appeal this decision.

### **Implications**

The non-renewal of the BF funding agreement has a number of implications which will be compounded by the lack of due process surrounding Wesley Mission's decision.

- For the vulnerable families currently being provided a service by the Hawkesbury BF Program, it essentially means that existing case plans being delivered by Hawkesbury BF staff will be discontinued. These case plans have been negotiated and agreed to by participating families who have established positive working relationships with Hawkesbury BF staff. The provision of services to vulnerable families is a sensitive and complex undertaking and it does take time to establish the level of trust required to deal with problems impacting on families. Some families in the Hawkesbury BF Program have been working with staff for up to two years. To date Wesley Mission have taken no steps to consult or advise families that as from October 2009 their service arrangements will be significantly altered.
- The decision taken by Wesley will mean that the local BF service delivered from a venue in South Windsor and other local centres by local service providers will be replaced by a regional service delivered by Wesley Mission Family Services whose offices are located in Penrith and Carlingford. The decision will also unravel the existing strong local service network which has been developed in the Hawkesbury over the past three years. It would be reasonable to assume that as a result, the proposed replacement service to be offered to Hawkesbury residents will be both inferior and less cost effective.
- The decision taken by Wesley Mission may impact on the employment security of up to six staff, the majority of whom are local residents. Given the current economic outlook and the recent identification of the Hawkesbury as an area of unemployment vulnerability, the possible impact on affected staff may be significant. Wesley's decision may lead to the loss of six local jobs which have been created as a result of Council's efforts in ensuring that BF funding was directed to the Hawkesbury.

**Conclusion**

As indicated above Council and PSI staff are unaware of any reasons to explain or justify Wesley Mission's unilateral decision not to renew the existing BF contract - a decision taken apparently without reference to either Council, the Department of Community Services and the clients of the service. Of more concern is the apparent lack of due process, negotiation, consultation or prior warning of Wesley Mission's intention. As such, Council has not been afforded the opportunity to enter meaningful discussion with Wesley to clarify the reasons for Wesley's decision. More importantly the manner by which Council has been advised of Wesley's decisions has prevented Council and PSI from consulting with clients and staff of the Hawkesbury BF service to minimise the anxiety and stress which this decision will generate. The decision appears to be based on what is administratively convenient for Wesley Mission.

**Conformance to Strategic Plan**

The proposal is deemed to conform with the objectives set out in Council's Strategic Plan i.e:

*"Work in partnership with Community and government to implement plans to meet the social, health, safety, leisure and cultural needs of the City"*

**Funding**

There are no direct funding implications arising from this report for Council in that the funds provided by Wesley Mission are remitted to Peppercorn Services Inc and do not appear in Council's financial estimates. However, the loss of \$600,000 in grant income will impact on the capacity of Council (through) Peppercorn Services Inc to deliver services to residents of the Hawkesbury.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That Council:

1. Write to the Superintendent of Wesley Mission, the Rev. Keith Garner, to express its strong concern at the decision of Wesley Mission not to renew its funding agreement with Council for the provision of Brighter Futures (BF) services, and the manner in which this decision was taken and conveyed to Council.
2. Request a meeting with Rev. Keith Garner as a matter of urgency and to strongly advocate that until such time as meaningful discussions and consultation can take place in relation to this issue, that Wesley Mission defer any action with regard to the termination of the Hawkesbury BF service. Council also advise Rev. Keith Garner that both Wesley Mission and Council have a shared responsibility to minimise the potential impact on clients and staff of any decision regarding the future of the Hawkesbury BF service.
3. Write to The Minister for Community Services to express its strong concern at the decision of Wesley Mission not to renew its funding agreement with Council for the provision of Brighter Futures services, and the likely impact of this decision and request that the Department of Community Services intervene in this matter to request that Wesley Mission defer any actions to terminate the Hawkesbury BF Program, so that meaningful discussions can take place between the Department, Wesley Mission and Council in relation to this issue.
4. Make representations to local State Members of Parliament in relation to this issue.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

There are no supporting documents for this report.

**oooO END OF REPORT Oooo**

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end of  
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This business paper has  
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