

26th October 2019

**Dr Joanna Flynn AM
President Berry Street
1 Salisbury Street,
Richmond VIC**

cc CEO Michael Perusco

Dear Dr Flynn,

Greetings – thank you for the fine work you do on behalf of Berry Street and the child and family welfare sector.

I have been a supporter of Berry Street for over 20 years. Over the last few years I have provided some services to Berry Street as an Independent Assessor on redress claims. I am sorry to feel the necessity to write to you with regard to the advertised closure of the Open Place services delivered with Berry Street.

I was CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare from 1997 to 2009 throughout the time of establishing the need, the funding, and the development of Open Place. From 2011-2015 I was the Manager of VANISH the Victorian service for adopted people and their families, continuing to work with Open Place. From 2015 until present I have been an Independent Assessor for Berry Street for clients with redress issues – again working with Open Place. Hence for a period of over nine years I have been engaged with Open Place in a professional capacity.

At the time that Berry Street became the host auspice organisation for Open Place a great deal of preparatory work had occurred with all stakeholders to ensure the process was respectful and collaborative and the outcomes were the best possible for care leavers and appropriate for Berry Street.

I have been surprised, and to be honest, somewhat appalled at the current precipitous announcement from Berry Street to withdraw from providing the Open Place service and the subsequent process put in place by DHHS. It appears to me that the current process parallels the sort of abandonment experience that care leavers (Forgotten Australians) and the professionals who have worked with them have repeatedly received throughout life. Again the authorities in control are pulling the rug out from under them and new decisions are being made about their lives without due inclusive consultation and process. The current process ignores the learning we have all done together about working collaboratively with our colleagues and friends who have been in, and suffered in, care institutions.

I would have expected more from Berry Street than an unexpected media release, and can only imagine what shock; anger and despair must have resulted amongst care leavers and those who work with them from this sudden announcement and lack of due process. To make the decision to cease operating Open Place in such a quick manner and to then give mere lip service to collaboration and helping Open Place, leaves many of us at a loss to understand what has caused the Board and CEO of Berry Street to act in this heartless manner: it is both patronising and poor practice.

I am still well connected in the child and family welfare sector and am aware that I am far from being alone in holding these opinions about the recent Berry Street actions.

One rationale given by Berry Street is that they now want to focus on child based services; surely the care leavers who now use Open Place were themselves often the children of Berry Street and other child welfare organisations, Berry Street was in loco parentis, and this current process must feel like yet another abandonment from those professionals who have the responsibility for their ongoing care and wellbeing.

The second rationale given by Berry Street is untested. It appears that Berry Street is not prepared to see how they could work harmoniously with Open Place, the National Redress Scheme and Knowmore. My recent work undertaken in 2019 with a client of Berry Street who is accessing the National Redress Scheme involved both working with the client and professional consultation and collaboration with Berry Street, Open Place and Knowmore. At no time did I perceive a conflict of interest. I would be interested to see the evidence on what concerns the Australian Government expressed and to explore ways to constructively deal with them.

If it is in the best interests of Open Place to move to another provider that wants to work with care leavers surely a better understanding for the Berry Street reasons could have been shared and discussed with Open Place. A higher order process would have included Open Place from the beginning, and involved a long engagement of careful consultation with workers and clients, before a joint position was arrived at and a decision was jointly announced by Open Place and Berry Street.

It appears that DHHS is now considering the possibility of far reaching changes which would make it even more important that any change process is undertaken in a slow and careful way. The 1st July 2020 is barely eight months away. It took considerable time to develop the current service with consultation with all stakeholders, and that was with Berry Street who had been involved in working with care leavers long before Open Place was developed. To ask Open Place to suddenly co-design a new service at a time when those concerned must be reeling with shock seems to me to be quite inappropriate and unprofessional.

The information that has been shared with me seems to give little acknowledgement and respect to the excellent and expert service that Open Place has developed. In my long career I have seen services moved amongst providers and there is a high risk that

good professionals and clients will be lost in the process and certainly knowledge, expertise and trust will be lost. This is very unfortunate as this expertise and experience has been hard won over a long period of time.

I can only imagine the anguish amongst those people who have worked so long and so hard to build Open Place to feel that their precious service can be bundled up in some manner, without any commitment to the wisdom they have developed, and passed on to another unknown service provider. On the face of it the proposed consultation and development of a new service appears confused and inadequate. The way that the consultation process is outlined could easily be read as a forced an inappropriate 'review' of Open Place without any fair rationale or due process given – how very confusing that must be both for those who operate Open Place and those who use it. It is very unprofessional to undermine a service in this way that has operated extremely well for the last nine years.

I regret the need to write in this way and I offer my acknowledgement to the workers at Open Place for the fine services they provide across Victoria and to the clients who so courageously seek services.

At this late stage I would ask that Berry Street devote full attention and the necessary resources to assist Open Place and DHHS with the current challenging and difficult situation for which the Board holds some responsibility.

**Yours sincerely,
Coleen Clare**