

Response to DSS Families and children services Discussion paper 2020

<https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FaC-reform-discussion-paper-for-publication-1.pdf>

The Bridge Greater Dandenong Libraries

(Material from DSS Discussion paper in italics)

Families and children services Discussion paper 2020

Discussion question:

Recent and emerging impacts on service delivery

1. How have you adapted service delivery in response to recent crises such as bushfires, drought, floods and Coronavirus pandemic? When has it worked and when hasn't it worked? How will this affect how you deliver services in the future? Have your service adaptations included better integration with other initiatives? P.10

How have you adapted service delivery in response to recent crises such as bushfires, drought, floods and Coronavirus pandemic?

Response: The COVID19 pandemic has had the most significant impact in City of Greater Dandenong. The Bridge team has prioritised:

- Connecting with local partner schools to determine their needs, to continue to provide support to the teachers, children and families, particularly those experiencing increased vulnerability during the pandemic.
- A high priority was given to maintaining an ongoing and healthy relationship with teachers from partner schools.
- Contacting client families who are current and ongoing clients of The Bridge Reading Buddies and Homework Help programs to ascertain their needs, provide support, resources and referrals to support during the COVID 19 pandemic.
- Reading Buddies sessions held via telephone or Zoom session (using audio only), with a child and a parent present at all times.
- Maintaining an ongoing connection with community volunteers who support The Bridge programs. A number of these individuals have found themselves at increased risk, owing to age, health conditions and increased social isolation from families, friends and social networks.
- Support for the mental health and social connection of the volunteers. Several volunteers have increased vulnerabilities and felt the social isolation from their families and networks very keenly. They welcomed the contact and the opportunity to discuss their fears and anxiety with The Bridge staff and have acknowledged the support given. They were connected into Community Craft programs, online book club, virtual Wellbeing presentations and kept up to date with Council and Library initiatives.
- Creation of Virtual Reading Buddies videos, to maintain a regular, ongoing program for the families and schools who participate in The Bridge Reading Buddies and Homework Help.
- Sustaining contact with and seeking to support the external vendors like Patient Paws Animal Assisted Therapy who have participated in delivering The Bridge programs.

- Maintaining connections and liaising with local community networks, partner organisations, government and support organisations.

When hasn't it worked?

- The assumption that everyone has access to technology and connectivity. Contact has not been able to be made with all families. Lack of a mobile phone and/or data and lack of English are two common barriers. Many people rely on local libraries, internet cafes and shopping centres for internet connection. Severe lockdown seriously impacted these people. Many families were not able to maintain their mobile phone plans or pay for usage.
- Home learning placed a lot of pressure on families who do not have adequate digital literacy and access or have communication challenges. Children in those families will be severely impacted in comparison to families who were better prepared for the challenges of COVID and lockdown.
- When telephone, video or email is the only method of contact, those people who are only able to communicate effectively face-to-face will struggle. Certain clients, because of the challenge of language or mental health or simply communication preferences could not manage the challenge of engaging with programs for their children, even when offered a lot of ongoing assistance. They just would or could not answer telephone calls or emails, over several weeks and multiple attempts at communication.
- Greater Dandenong is the most multi-cultural local government area in Australia. In addition, there are high numbers of refugee and asylum-seeker families. In times of economic hardship many people may suffer a loss in income and an inability to access services. It has been predicted that domestic & family violence may increase. These issues can contribute to an inability for families to focus on their children's literacy and schooling.
- Contact has not been able to be made with every teacher. Many are working from home and teaching remotely, managing health vulnerabilities of themselves and older and younger family members, with responsibility for their own children's home-learning. They found this time stressful and difficult. It is a very hectic, ever-changing landscape for teachers with very little lead-in time for important decisions and changes to school programming.

Have your service adaptations included better integration with other initiatives?

- Working online has enabled greater availability to support other literacy initiatives like Childrens Book Week, Reading Hour and the City of Greater Dandenong Children's Forum
- By utilising an online platform, we were also able to provide greater support to primary school teachers and library staff by presenting a professional development session with Gabrielle Wang: Understanding the Chinese culture
- We were able to link more closely with local and state-wide initiatives in the online environment.
- Online Reading Buddies videos were produced under the copyright rules negotiated nationally by ALIA

How will this affect how you deliver services in the future?

- Integration of more digital content into core programs as copyright issues are agreed upon
- Consideration of increased provision of online programs to schools – bigger event attendance was achieved digitally at events for schools. Schools that have not previously

been able to attend library events in person due to barriers like transport costs were able to attend

- Greater collaboration between libraries in providing online services – resources would be made available to our families for free

Outcomes

2. Are the proposed key outcomes for the families and children programs the right ones?

Outcomes, Certainty & Accountability, Targeting & Accessibility, Collaboration & Coordination, Capability & Innovation

- Outcomes vs output – double reporting needs to be streamlined – so that we are not losing time with families to complete onerous reporting
- Definite 5-year contracts are very welcome. Continuity of staff and funding enables longer term planning and implementation of key learnings and innovative ideas.
- Whilst we acknowledge that accountability is vital consideration needs to be given to reporting requirements. This needs to be regular but not onerous

3. How can we include strengths-based outcomes that focus on family or child safety?

- Remember always that children are the adults of the future. By spending whatever it takes to support and build strong, loving and resilient children, we will build a strong, loving and resilient future for Australia
- Children who have been disadvantaged already, deserve to have more spent on their future, to bring them to a point of equality with more privileged children. Whatever it takes. Do not try to cut corners.
- Continue the robust system of checks on all persons who work in the child and family domain. Review and upgrade those practices where necessary, while remembering it is important to maintain balance and acknowledge that all children need care, attention and displays of affection
- Maintain and strive for systems which are open to scrutiny and inspection
- Properly fund and encourage inspection and auditing of child services by independent persons
- Support and promote literacy for children and families. Research has long established the strong connection between functional literacy in its many forms and the ability to thrive and succeed in every level of education, employment and to lead a long and healthy life.

4. What tools or training would support you to effectively measure and report outcomes through the Data Exchange Partnership Approach? P.15

Response:

- Support from professionals. Provision of models and examples relevant to a particular program, or assistance in building a practical, simple measurement and reporting tool which is fit for purpose
- Acknowledgement that the domain and the breadth and variety of programs is enormous. It is not possible to use one single reporting system for every different program.
- Funding for extra time involved in the development of new tools and systems while continuing to provide core programs

- Decide on a process and be committed to it so that we do not spend so much time redoing documents
- Make training specific to the provider, individual needs are different and it's time wasting sometimes as one size does not fit all

Evidence

5. Do you already have a program logic or theory of change outlined for your program? Did you find the process useful? If you do not have one, what has stopped you from developing one? What capacity building support would assist service providers to develop program logics and theories of change? P.17

Response:

- A program logic has been developed for The Bridge Family Literacy project
- The process of creating the program logic helped to articulate the outcomes we were trying to achieve and to set clear timeline goals
- Providing the theoretical background/evidence base assisted us to develop the program logics and theories of change, and consolidated our beliefs and practices in line with evidence and academic research.
- Capacity building support in the form of expert advice and support (like OPEN and AIFs) would be appreciated, particularly if targeted to the individual needs of the Community Partner (in addition to a group training session). Time and funding allocation to cover the development of skills and documentation.

Certainty and accountability

6. As longer-term agreements are implemented, how can the department work with you to develop criteria to measure and demonstrate performance? How can the Data Exchange better support this?

Response

- Support from professionals. Provision of criteria, models and examples relevant to the particular program, or assistance in building a practical, simple measurement and reporting tool which is fit for purpose
- Acknowledgement that the domain and the breadth and variety of programs is enormous. It is not possible to use one single measurement system for every different program.
- Funding increase to cover cost of extra time involved in the development of new tools and systems while continuing to provide core programs
- Data Exchange has been a system used for many years that long term programs are proficient in reporting to and have established processes. Why does it need to change?
- The back-and-forth process of change often takes too long. It is a time-consuming process, takes away from the ability to deliver the programs to the community and is reinventing a wheel that already works

7. What does success look like for your service, and how do you assess the overall success of your service? P.18

Response:

- Children are happy. Their literacy skills are improving.
- Parents are happy. They can see their children are making progress and thriving.

- Children and parents want to be participants in the literacy programs. They see value in what we do.
- Teachers want to have regular Reading Buddies visits for their students. They like to see their students enjoying the story sharing sessions.
- Children and families connect to other library and Council resources available to them

Targeting and accessibility

8. Do you currently service cohorts experiencing vulnerability, including those at risk of engaging with the child protection system? If not, how does service delivery need to adapt to provide support to these cohorts? P.20

Response: The Bridge does currently service cohorts (work with children) experiencing vulnerability

- Ongoing partnerships with disadvantaged local schools enable staff to target and provide literacy support to children and families who are considered “hard to reach”. School attendance is compulsory, and school is often the only service that these children access.
- Families can be referred to The Bridge programs by schools, local council child and family support services, welfare agencies, and by self-referral.
- Children attending The Bridge programs have included those currently in the child protection system, those living with kinship carers and on occasion staff have referred a child and/or their family to Child Safe and the child protection system.
- Greater Dandenong is the most multi-cultural local government area in Australia. In addition, there are high numbers of refugee and asylum-seeker families. The Bridge programs are available to children and families from all cultures and backgrounds.
- The library has an ongoing, long standing connection to *Boys on the Bounce* and *Girls on the Go* programs run by DDACL (Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Ltd)

How does service delivery need to adapt to provide support to these cohorts (children)?

Response:

- The Bridge staff are currently reviewing the marketing material with the intent of bringing Reading Buddies programs to the attention of local primary school Wellbeing Officers and early years teachers so they can refer vulnerable families to after school literacy and homework programs at the libraries.
- When after school literacy programs are run in school settings, teachers are always requested in the first instance to offer program places to the children who are identified as most vulnerable and in need of support. Only after those families have been approached, are the programs made available to the general school population.
- It is important to be flexible, empathetic and supportive when welcoming new and vulnerable families into the programs, and to understand that there can be multiple barriers and difficulties which make it hard to maintain regular attendance. Gentle reminders, a lot of support and guidance can help families to establish a regular attendance pattern and create a desire to continue coming to sessions where the whole family feels welcome and comfortable.
- Support with additional funding or provision of translation and interpreter services to better communicate program and resources with families

Collaboration and coordination

9. *If you are a Children and Parenting Support or Budget Based Funded service provider, do you currently link with a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner or other regional planning mechanism to understand what other services are provided in the community and what the community identifies as their needs? How does this work in practice? Would you value the increased support of being attached to a local Facilitating Partner?*

Response:

- Already linked and funded through Facilitating Partner – Mission Australia

10. *For all providers, are there other ways to improve collaboration and coordination across services and systems? P.24*

Response:

- It is important to maintain a strong local network of service providers, which meets regularly, with excellent communication, to enable providers to have a comprehensive understanding of: the services that are available, how to make contact, how to refer clients onwards
- Facilitating Partners have a responsibility to connect services, build partnerships and to aim for the best overall outcomes for individual clients by ensuring that clients are referred across services and community partners are not operating in “silos.”
- Funded website and social media to maintain updated guide to resources, contacts and services available to the community and program partners.

Capability and innovation

11. *The capability building support offered under Families and Children Activity programs has gone through several iterations. What works well? What do you think should change?*

Response:

N/A

12. *How can the department best work with you to support innovation in your services while maintaining a commitment to existing service delivery?*

Response:

- An allocation of the total funding could be set aside for the encouragement and development of innovative practices. It could be a particular sum, or a percentage of the total funding, which must be dedicated to time for thinking and reflection, for documentation and for team meetings to discuss proposals and run trial programs.
- There should be an expectation that programs may sometimes fail or may go through several iterations before becoming successful.
- Children, families, teachers, organisational staff, Community partners, Facilitating Partners and other stakeholders could all be considered as the source for new ideas and suggestions.

- Support with the compatibility of Data Exchange and some programs – asking information that we cannot provide – ongoing issues with SCORE
- Reporting does not allow for time to innovate because of strict outcome and output reporting – consolidating reporting structures to allow for full utilisation of information we have as opposed to just needing to meet what we need to. No opportunity to explore the system and its possibilities because of constraints.
- Support funding of facilitating partners to be creative and responsive

Web: Visit the consultation website at DSS Engage (www.engage.dss.gov.au) Complete the online guided questionnaire (preferred) OR

Email: a written submission If you provide your submission online via the online guided questionnaire, you will be asked to specify whether you would like your submission to be published on the department's website. If you send your submission via email or standard post, please specify whether you would like your submission to be published online. OR

Send us a written submission: You can send a submission in writing to: Family Policy Section GPO Box 9820 Department of Social Services Canberra ACT 2601

Please specify if you could like your submission to remain anonymous.

THE CLOSING DATE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS 12 FEBRUARY 2021 P.28