



Submission

Review of the Commonwealth Government's Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

***In this document, unless quoting directly, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. For the purpose of this document, the term Aboriginal is also respectfully inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) and the AHCWA Social Services Committee (the Committee) welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the Commonwealth Government's Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper (the Discussion Paper), prepared by the Productivity Commission.

AHCWA is the peak body for 23 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) in Western Australia (WA). WA ACCHS are located across geographically diverse metropolitan, regional and remote locations. They deliver the most effective model of comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal people and are in a unique position to identify and respond to the local, cultural and health needs of Aboriginal people and their communities. AHCWA exists to support and act on behalf of its 23 Member ACCHS, actively representing and responding to their individual and collective needs.

Currently, AHCWA is the only Aboriginal community-controlled peak body in WA, and the only WA peak body represented on the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Coalition of Peaks) under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement).

In order to increase the representation of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) in WA, the Committee, comprising AHCWA Board members and independent Aboriginal representatives, is leading the establishment of a WA ACCO peak body.

This submission responds to questions raised in the Discussion Paper, and draws on AHCWA's extensive knowledge of early years policy, particularly as it intersects with health policy and the social determinants contained under the National Agreement.



General comments

The Early Years Strategy Advisory Panel includes a couple of Aboriginal people, but there is not sufficient representation given the disproportionate challenges faced by Aboriginal people in their early years, and the impact that addressing these challenges would have on Closing the Gap and improving outcomes for some of Australia's most disadvantaged children.

Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

It is a positive start that the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECPP) has been commissioned to support the development of the Strategy. However, it is important that the Strategy explicitly addresses the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities relating to early childhood. It would not be sufficient to include sporadic references to Aboriginal people and communities throughout the document, given they have unique needs that cannot be addressed under the umbrella of mainstream strategy and service delivery.

AHCWA supports the Strategy including an Implementation Action Plan, as well as indicators that can be used as an accountability mechanism alongside an Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to assess performance and outcomes from the Strategy. Such indicators must be developed on the advice of Aboriginal people with appropriate expertise. The Productivity Commission must work with the ACCOs that will be delivering relevant services to ensure that data standards and KPI structures properly reflect the impact of those services on the people and communities they are seeking to support.

AHCWA strongly supports the development of a separate implementation action plan to distinguish the actions that are developed specifically to support Aboriginal children and communities, noting the disproportionate disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and young people (i.e., so that they can be easily differentiated from mainstream programs and services that aren't tailored to the unique needs of Aboriginal children).

What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

For all young children to be on track to meet all developmental domains, regardless of their developmental vulnerabilities or experiences of disadvantage.



What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

- All children, including Aboriginal children, have a strong connection to their cultural identity.
- Aboriginal children, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds, have access to culturally inclusive and appropriate holistic support services – such as services that adhere to the ACCHS Model of Care.

What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

There must be separate and unique policy priorities, with their own indicators, that specifically target Aboriginal children and families. As identified in the Discussion Paper, Aboriginal children impacted by intergenerational trauma and disadvantage have uniquely complex needs that require targeted and intensive healing and supports that are culturally safe. While some policies and initiatives that are designed for the broader Australian population may have positive impacts for Aboriginal children, alone they are not sufficient and will not close the gap in outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Additionally, the Strategy should align with the commitments and objectives of the various initiatives around the country, such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy, and the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership.

The Strategy must recognise that raising children in Aboriginal families often involves a broad network of extended family members who have equal input into a child's growth, development and wellbeing. It should also reflect the intersecting levels of disadvantage experienced by children and families who live in regional or remote areas.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

The Commonwealth Government should improve outcomes for disadvantaged children by ensuring there are culturally appropriate services (that are designed and delivered by community-controlled organisations) available to all Aboriginal children, irrespective of where they live.

In particular, community-run Child and Family Centres that provide holistic education and supports to children and their families would have a positive impact – however it is essential that these are available in all communities, not just the cities and regional hubs. It is important that complementary family support programs are available to support families to be equipped to raise their children in a safe and healthy environment, so that children can thrive.



The Commonwealth should also fund community-led continuity of care programs that follow the ACCHS model of care, providing holistic wraparound health and wellbeing services to mothers and babies. The Commonwealth could improve outcomes by ensuring all communities are funded and resourced to provide these services, and by funding Aboriginal RTOs to train Aboriginal healthcare workers so that community-controlled health services can be appropriately staffed.

What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

- Outcomes are better for Aboriginal people when services are available to them that are designed and delivered by them, led by community-controlled organisations (ACCOs). However, many communities do not have community-controlled service providers available to them. This is as a result of lacking funding and resourcing. Funding is needed to establish ACCO service providers in all communities, and to they are appropriately resourced by funding the training and employment of local Aboriginal staff within their communities.
- The Commonwealth should ensure it engages with the Coalition of Peaks in coordinating and collaborating on new policies for children and families, as well as other relevant ACCOs. In particular, it should partner with SNAICC (the national peak body for Aboriginal children). If the Commonwealth is not aware of the most appropriate ACCOs to engage or partner with, its first point of call should be to reach out to the Coalition of Peaks, whose members would be able to refer the government on to relevant local ACCOs.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

In order to be effective, it is essential that the Strategy captures the principles of the four Priority Reform areas contained in the National Agreement:

1. Building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments;
2. Building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services;
3. Systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
4. Shared access to location-specific data and information will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to support the achievement of the first three Priority Reforms.



It is also important that the Strategy is co-designed with Aboriginal people and communities who have expertise in the early childhood sector. Aboriginal people from a range of communities should be consulted, to ensure the differing priorities of the communities are appropriately reflected. The Strategy must also be inclusive of the voice of Aboriginal children and families, in order to appropriately represent their experiences and to provide strategic guidance on actions that will make a tangible difference.

Ultimately, the Strategy must acknowledge the need for adequate, long-term and sustainable funding for ACCOs to enable and support the ongoing continuity of high-quality, culturally responsive service delivery.