



27 April 2023

Att: earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au

Early Years Strategy submission

I write in my capacity as Chair of the Steering Committee for Cairns South Together, a collective impact-modelled place-based initiative located in the southern suburbs of Cairns.

Our Steering Committee would like to place on record our support for the development of the proposed Early Years Strategy.

The stated vision of Cairns South Together is for “happy and healthy young people contributing to a brighter future in Cairns South”, while our agenda includes a specific focus on children developing well in their first 1000 days. In December 2022 we launched our Community Plan which sets out the Strategies we plan to use to achieve a range of desired impacts. The latter has been determined via our Journey to Change process, which includes insights gleaned from a range of community consultations with local families, early years educators and service providers with a footprint in the southern suburbs of Cairns. It is these insights that have been used to form our response to the Discussion Paper.

However we note that our responses do not represent the official views of any service provider organisations or government agencies that may be represented in our collective’s working groups or on our Steering Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

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Enc x 2: Submission – Response to Discussion Paper; Steering Committee Membership List

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Cairns South Together Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper Submission

Who are we?

Cairns South Together (CST) is a collaborative place-based movement in Far North Queensland that brings together volunteers who are community members, partners and stakeholders who live and/or work in the Cairns southern suburbs, under a collective impact approach to working together.

The goal of CST is to improve the lives of children and their families in the Cairns South area with one of the two focus outcomes being: children are developing well in their first 1000 days and launch into early learning.

Using this collective impact model, the *Cairns South Together* Steering Committee provides the governance and leadership function for *Cairns South Together*, supported by Mission Australia as the “backbone” organisation through their Communities of Focus (Cairns South) program. The Steering Committee is comprised of 17 members, while the broader membership currently numbers 110, including individual community members and/or organisation representatives. All collective members are volunteers.

CST is supported by several Collaborative Working Clusters, which are based on the World Health Organisation’s Social Determinants of Health. One working cluster has a specific focus on Early Years and Families and there is a strong interest across the collective’s membership in the development of this Early Years Strategy.

Proposed structure of Early Years Strategy - Question 1 response:

We support the proposed structure for the Strategy and we support the intention to shape the Strategy using existing evidence-based frameworks.

We acknowledge that the proposed scope of the Strategy will be focused on the Commonwealth Government, however, we believe that there should be strong links and joint initiatives with state government strategies and policies. Responsibility needs to be clear with clear timeframes.

Local governments should also be considered in the Strategy, as families and communities are significantly impacted by decisions made by local government.

Vision - Question 2 response:

As is clearly indicated in the discussion paper, the life outcomes for children are heavily impacted by the systems and environments in which they live. Well-informed and supported family systems are crucial to supporting positive outcomes for children, with government agencies also being a significant contributor and playing a key role in ensuring that all children within Australia have strong and equitable foundations that support them to thrive into adulthood.

With the above in mind, consideration for children and the fulfilment of their basic needs should be the core priority of all decisions made in relation to social policy. Therefore, any vision in relation to the lives of Australian children should incorporate a holistic view that demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that the needs for all children are met. This is in line with the social determinants of health and ARACY's Nest.

Furthermore, this cannot be done in isolation from families, nor communities, given the crucial role both systems have in relation to nurturing children from conception through to adulthood. Well-informed and functional families need to live in safe, well-informed and functioning communities where they have equitable access to everything they need. Therefore, the vision should encompass creating the environments that support and inform families and communities to meet the physical and emotional needs of children, and to provide children with equitable opportunities to reach their potential.

Outcomes - Question 3 response:

When considering outcomes to include within the Strategy, consideration should be given to the following:

- *Commitment to ensure the fulfilment of the basic needs for all children:*

The frameworks outlined within the Discussion Paper have clear evidence-based domains that relate to what a child needs to ensure their ongoing wellbeing. ARACY's Nest provides a holistic set of domains that link to overall child wellbeing in the early years and does not lean towards any one specific aspect of wellbeing. The outcomes that are included in the Strategy should be linked to a holistic framework like The Nest to ensure that the most fundamental needs of children are being met from conception.

- *Improving public awareness and understanding of the early years:*

As it stands, the general public's awareness and understanding of the impacts that a child's experiences in the early years can have on their life trajectory is **severely lacking**. Although we could assume that many Australians in general want and expect the best for children, it is clear in general rhetoric and conversation, that the broader understanding of child development, particularly in the early years, and what negatively and positively impacts it, is limited.

Also limited is the understanding and undertaking of a level of responsibility by the general community to ensure families and children are supported to live their best lives. In addition to this, it is our experience that when "early years" is mentioned, the mind generally goes to early childhood education and care (ECEC), rather than a broader perspective and understanding of the developing brain in the first 1000 days. Although ECEC plays an important role in the early years, it appears that a reframing of public thinking needs to occur to encourage a deeper understanding of what this means and to ignite a sense of personal and familial responsibility.

It is our opinion that it would be beneficial for at least one of the outcomes to have a strong universal focus in relation to improving public awareness and understanding of the

importance of the early years. Many Commonwealth social policies, initiatives and strategies would perform better with strong community awareness and support. Although such policies and initiatives are often promoted within service sectors, the promotion to the broader community is often limited or completely lacking. The lay person will generally not engage with or may actively resist any policies they do not perceive to be relevant to them. As the early years should be **everyone's business**, ensuring that there is a sense of community ownership and support is important for the success of the outcomes.

Our recommendation in relation to this would be to develop a national advertising campaign, similar to the 'Slip, Slop, Slap' campaign, with relevant and impactful messaging that is straightforward and catchy.

- *Strengths-based (growth mindset):*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The processes to receive support are also often demeaning and diminishing and tend to perpetuate cycles of poverty and feelings of hopelessness.

We therefore agree that the outcomes included in the Strategy need to be strengths-based to encourage a more positive public perspective, and would add that they need to be developed from a growth mindset that recognises that every child, family and community has potential. A community, parent and child, although having many strengths and great potential, also needs to have equitable access to the services and supports to be able to utilise their strengths to the best of their abilities. A system that allows equitable access to all possible support required that can then be adjusted down dependant on the needs of the individual child and families, would be more suitable and less demeaning, rather than the current system which provides the minimum required universal supports and then additional supports are applied for separately. A level of accountability is still necessary, but these requirements should not be an obstacle or barrier to families and children receiving support in a timely manner.

- *Better collaboration across systems of government and portfolios:*

There are currently many initiatives within Australia being led by non-government and government agencies, which is encouraging to see, so we consider the focus on breaking down silos and working better across Commonwealth Government portfolios to be a sound one. With this in mind, outcomes relating to processes and procedures within government that will actively work towards this are important.

Additionally, any Commonwealth expectations and plans need to be filtered down to state and local government planning. There especially could be more done by the Commonwealth Government to promote and shape the responsibility of local governments in relation to the Early Years. Local governments have the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the needs of children and families within their communities and are positioned to be able to have the greatest impact.

If Commonwealth funding and grants required consideration to be given to the impact any relevant proposals have on the Early Years, this could lead to better urban and social planning that support longer term outcomes for the community.

Policy priorities - Question 4, 5 & 6 response:

The following are the key policy priorities we believe should be focussed on:

- *Basic living standards:*

To ensure that children and families are living above the poverty line and have access to everything they need to be able to thrive, there needs to be a strong focus on social policies that play key roles in relation to setting realistic basic living standards such as housing, health, social welfare, education, employment and transport. Although these domains in the reality of life are interconnected, it is clear that policies and processes relating to these are often developed in isolation to each other and conflicts in processes often create barriers that make support harder to access, which leads to families who often need the most support, to fall even further behind.

- *Private sector accountability:*

Family and community systems are not only impacted by government policies, but also by private sector policies. Regulations and standards need to be clearly set through governments and legislation to ensure that businesses within the private sector are not profiting off the hardship of children and families, nor are they actively excluding or making access to necessities difficult and being of detriment to wellbeing. There should be legislative and regulatory consequences especially where actions negatively impact families and children.

- *Equitable access to high quality ECEC for all:*

Free or affordable high quality ECEC needs to be accessible for all children and families. With this also comes the necessity to ensure that there is greater public awareness and understanding of the importance of kindergarten or preschool. It is imperative that ECEC services are supported to remove barriers to access, such as lack of transport, at no cost to families, and that they are funded sufficiently to provide adequate salary to educators. Access for additional funding to provide necessary support within ECEC classes/rooms needs to be easier and allow for additional staff to be employed for classes where there are more children with additional needs.

Within the ECEC sector there also needs to be better oversight of enrolment processes and practices to eliminate the possibility for discrimination. At a local level, there are some ECEC services who will deny access to children who have higher needs than others, with little to no assessment of whether or not accepting the child would lead to unjustifiable hardship. This is very disempowering for families who then choose to not enrol their children in ECEC at all, consequently depriving them of the preparation they need to support their successful transition to school.

- *Better access to essential services and facilities for all:*

There is clear evidence through numerous studies that children and families that have limited access to key essential services, safe places and other community facilities often have poorer outcomes than communities with lower levels of intergenerational disadvantage. Mapping has shown that essential services are often clustered and closer to more socially advantaged communities than disadvantaged communities, meaning those who need the services the most often have to travel the most distance to get the support that they need and often in multiple places. The use of existing research and numerous recommendations made from this research to determine fundamental factors and services that support communities to raise happy and healthy children should be utilised within the Strategy.

With the above in mind, urban planning policies and processes must always take the need for access to facilities such as parks, schools, hospitals, community centres etc, into consideration for all communities. Public facilities should be the same standard regardless of the socio-economic level of the community and have suitable public amenities that provide communities with spaces to come together and build social supports.

- *Trauma-informed communities:*

When raising awareness in the general public of the importance of the early years, it would be important to also raise awareness of the negative impact Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have on children's long-term development, and ultimately on communities. Improving understanding in relation to this would support the development of greater empathy and less negative and reactive responses to families and children in hardship, which lead to trauma being perpetuated by the general community. This includes raising the awareness of policy makers to ensure that there is a fundamental understanding of the possible causes of fundamental human behaviours, before policies are developed.

Professional development in trauma-informed practice for all roles within sectors that provide essential support and services to families should also be a mandatory and regulated requirement. This should also include services such as Services Australia, Police and other first responders, as well as early childhood educators, Teachers, Principals and other key personnel. Many families become disempowered when accessing services as many services, especially government services, are not person-centred in their approach but are service-centred, in that they tend to be bureaucratic and process heavy, making it difficult to successfully obtain the services needed. The processes ultimately tend to dehumanise the recipients thus perpetuating cycles of trauma and causing further harm.

- *Improved access to parent education and support:*

Providing funding to support services to increase provision and accessibility of parenting support programs would be of great benefit to the community. There are many programs available that could support parents within different circumstances, but the current level of resourcing to deliver what is needed is not sufficient. We are aware that not all parents have the mindset and/or ability to engage in a parenting program in its entirety and then actively make the suggested changes to their parenting. We therefore suggest that more integrated children and family services that are modelled on proportionate universalism be funded.

By providing families with more soft-entry options for services, and greater access to more services in one place, the barriers to support would be decreased. Soft-entry allows parents to build relationships and develop trust with services that then increases the likelihood of them seeking more intensive support when it is needed.

A possible positive consequence of providing greater access to parenting education and support is that there would be a ripple effect that would reduce misinformation passed on from parent-to-parent and published on social media platforms. If evidence-based information is being provided in a public awareness campaign, this would likely increase parent confidence and increase parenting skills.

As well as the promotion of structured parenting programs developed in Australia, there are also a number of American-developed programs that could be supported to gain an evidence-base and be adapted to be more appropriate for the Australian context, such as Circle of Security.

In addition to the above, the following should be taken into consideration:

- *Workforce considerations:*

There is a significant difference in salary between the public, private and not-for-profit sector when it comes to the delivery of essential services for children and families. This leads to a very competitive job market and makes recruitment difficult for government funded programs. Reducing this gap would support a greater spread of talent across the sector and may support an improvement in quality overall.

As has been recommended in many reviews and other strategies, we also support a review of qualifications for the ECEC sector. However, rather than making any changes that would significantly reduce the workforce, we recommend funding support to upskill current educators with certificate qualifications and ensure that Approved Providers are held accountable for ensuring the ongoing, meaningful, professional development of their staff.

- *Greater government accountability for poor outcomes for children:*

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child needs to be a fundamental consideration for all social policies that impact children across all portfolios within government. This includes the rights of refugee/asylum seekers.

Mechanisms to ensure more accountability for policies at the Ministerial level needs to be put in place to ensure that Ministers are better connected and informed in relation to their portfolios. [REDACTED]

In relation to improving coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families across Commonwealth portfolios, we suggest the following be taken into consideration:

- Ensure that policies are informed by current evidence and research. Policy should not take decades to catch up to research. Policies should be developed objectively based on available data. [REDACTED]

- Policies need to be consistently and reliably reviewed to ensure they are still relevant and that outcomes are being achieved.
- An Early Years Policy Department could be developed that ensures policies across portfolios are linked where necessary to support pooling of funding resources and to ensure there is no duplication.
- All relevant departments could have an early years KPI that they are required to report against.

- *Community co-design of programs:*

Replication of services that may work in metropolitan areas are not always successful in regional, rural and remote areas. Funded programs should be required to be co-designed by communities, or have elements of co-design. Where services are already well-established, recipient feedback should be required to be actively sought on a consistent basis and actions developed by the service to address community concerns or suggestions. These action plans should be reported as a funding requirement.

Funding periods also need to be longer to allow for genuine co-design and evaluation to occur. Funding periods are currently too short to allow for program development, implementation and evaluation. There should also be flexibility or a change in how reporting occurs. Funding should be based on outcomes that are linked with the Strategy, but also have those developed by the program based on the community needs. KPIs should not be so reliant on quantitative data, but also qualitative data (for example, the Department of Education in Queensland uses a Story Behind the Data reporting structure for the Early Years Places).

- *Rural and remote service delivery and community support:*

Serious consideration needs to be given to how rural and remote communities are supported in relation to the early years. Many current service delivery models, including those that are fly-in-fly-out or reliant on telehealth, are often inadequate, especially in discreet Aboriginal communities. Genuine co-design and provision of further support to build skills within these communities to support them to be self-sufficient would be more appropriate.

- *Listen to the community:*

The voices of more vulnerable groups within the community, including children, First Nations People, people with a disability and LGBTQI+ persons need to be actively sought and seriously considered within policy development.

Principles – Question 7 response:

In relation to principles, the following should be considered:

- The Strategy needs to:
 - be based on current research and evidence
 - ensure Human Rights are upheld
 - be guided by the actual needs of children and families, [REDACTED]



Frameworks – Question 8 response:

We would like families to be informed and be able to make the best decisions for their families. We would also like to have a framework that ensures that all the basic needs and human rights of children and families are being met. Whichever frameworks are considered best, these need to be conceptualised to support public understanding. The public need to understand what any of the domains or foundations within these frameworks look like in action.

ENDS



Cairns South
TOGETHER
Nothing about us, without us

Cairns South Together Steering Committee

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