

COMMENTS ON THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S EARLY YEARS STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

Response to Q1

The proposed structure comprises the vision, outcomes, policy priorities and indicators, informed by the principles and evidence. This structure in itself is not without merit but fails to explain how the various strategies and plans and initiatives identified in Attachment A will be brought together into a cohesive approach across the Australian Government.

Previous approaches around coordination have not always been successful, in part because there has not been an identified lead agency/department or because responsibilities have not been accorded to the level of government or community which can best have responsibility for achieving the desired outcomes. (The Closing the Gap strategy is a case in point.)

In addition to achieve success requires the alignment of policies, structural changes in roles and responsibilities, the redesign of funding arrangements and accountabilities and significant work in relation to the workforce, training and development, reporting and service redesign.

Response to Q2

The Early Years Strategy should include a vision and commitment to give children the best start in life – to support and strengthen the preconditions for children to learn, grow and thrive¹.

It requires an integrated, high quality and accessible system that covers the period from prebirth to school entry and includes the health, development and learning of all children. It also requires an essential partnership with parents and caregivers, integrated and coordinated services at the local level which deliver not only early childhood education and care services that are culturally appropriate, but also services for children with additional needs and support for families in their parenting and care giving roles.

The Gillard Review² has identified three themes and underlying principles to support its recommendations to the SA Government:

- Embrace all children – be universal but not be uniform; take active steps to ensure full participation of all children (in 3 year old kindergarten); cater to the different needs of communities, families and children; and enable families to make choices about the settings and services that best meet their needs
- Fairness – which means the system should support equity for all children and families, providing additional hours and supports as required to improve outcomes
- Quality – which means the system will be designed to reach or exceed current quality benchmarks and measurably improve learning outcomes

¹ Summary of Findings Royal Commission into ECEC Interim Report, April 2023 p.37

² *ibid*

- Build the connections that matter for children’s lives including data collection, adaptation, community input and support for professional development and research at every level of the system

The provision of linked, system wide data providing de-identified data sets that bring together Australian Government data with State and local government data sets would be a positive development. If this data could also be available at a population and sub population or community/LGA level this would also allow for focussed research³, more responsive interventions and improved policies and programs.

Response to Q3

The ecological models such as the Nest have been based on Bronfenbrenner , and have been used in Australia to support a number of research projects and programs in early childhood. What is attractive about the OECD Aspirational Framework is that its measures and indicators are child focussed but drawn from a broader and even more ecological view. The availability of the relevant data sets and the resources available to enhance the current data sets into a systematic approach should determine the feasibility of the preferred option.

Response to Q4

Because of the importance of the first five years of a child’s life, there are many areas requiring attention including prenatal care and maternal and child health; expanded early intervention services, paid parental leave, support for parenting and initiatives to enhance community wide knowledge about child development and associated assessment , strengthening access, affordability and availability of ECEC services, wrap around services and one intake processes so information can be disseminated without families having to tell their stories again and again; workforce availability and ongoing support and joined up training and development for all staff involved in health, early learning and family support services.

Response to Q5

The Gillard Report⁴ provides clear advice about the approach to improve outcomes for children who are born or raised in more vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances. Recommendations 24 and 25 of this Report suggest firstly that the Australian Government extends changes to the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test to include all families experiencing deep disadvantage and low rates of engagement in ECEC. Secondly, that resources be available to reduce costs (eg for transport) to enable economically disadvantaged families to attend ECEC; the direct investment in services to support community outreach and communication in areas with lack of connection or low take up of ECEC and targeted fee relief where fees are a barrier to enrolment or attendance.

³ Research findings being undertaken by the Murdoch Research Institute and the University of Melbourne and a range of organisations involved in the GenV Project

⁴ Royal Commission Interim Report

There should be a core platform of ECEC and health and family services that are available across the country, complemented by services for children identified with significant risk factors or the early symptoms of developmental delay.

Response to Q6

An essential component to responding to this question is to gain agreement to the Strategy, its proposals and measures from the broad range of stakeholders who will be involved, by necessity, in implementing the Strategy and making it a success.

This should involve a campaign involving parents and parent organisations, Indigenous organisations and non-Government organisations involved in the management and delivery of early childhood services (health, learning and development etc); and the involvement of Government Departments at Commonwealth and State levels through Ministerial Councils, IDCs and/or specifically targeted forums to solve complex problems. Children's' voices should also be part of the communication and feedback.

Regular reporting and feedback should also be a feature of the Strategy following its implementation.

Response to Q7

Any principles developed should be the subject of a second consultation process.

There are many principles which have informed earlier COAG work to reform ECEC, many of which are still relevant today. For example: support parents to actively engage in their child's learning and development from birth; expand access to ECEC and build a culture that prioritises early learning and development as the foundation for human capital development; grow the capacity of the early learning workforce to deliver exceptional early learning and care etc.

There are also principles which have been developed by the OECD, other international organisations and other States/Territories which merit consideration.

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