



## MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

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Dear Sir/Madam

The Northern Territory (NT) Government is committed to a shared vision and policy framework to improve services for the wellbeing and safety of all children, young people and families as detailed in the Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory 2023-2033 (<https://rmo.nt.gov.au/updates/10-year-generational-strategy-for-children-and-young-people>)

In line with this commitment, the NT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, attached for your consideration.

The NT Government agrees that there is a significant opportunity to streamline government policy and services in the early years. Even within the area of education and care, the way in which families are supported and services are funded by governments creates fragmentation for delivery. The NT is currently undertaking a review into preschool, and one of the key emerging themes is the need to bring education and care together for children and families and break down any bureaucratic barriers for this to occur.

There is a lack of clarity in relation to funding and responsibility for the early years nationally, with varying levels of support to services and families provided across jurisdictions. This exacerbates the issue of equitable service provision to all Australians when small jurisdictions like the NT neither have the economies of scale nor the revenue base to provide support to the early years to the same degree as larger jurisdictions. Greater equity needs to be achieved so that all families can access quality early education and care services, integrated with broader early years services, wherever they may live and ensuring that support and intervention is provided to those who most need it.

Further, in the broader area of program delivery, particularly in remote communities, the jointly developed Coordinated Investment Framework demonstrates the necessity for a coordinated approach between governments to support the planning, funding and delivery of services with an overarching vision to improve outcomes for children in the NT. This approach is a direct result of the previous Productivity Commission findings on expenditure on children in the NT.

The NT would like to emphasise the risk that silos will continue to occur if approaches to strategic policy making are not joined up. It should be noted that the concurrent development of a vision for early childhood education and care has significant relevance and should be integrated. The success of any early childhood education and care reform is contingent upon bold consideration of the broader system of government, including social welfare to enable workforce participation and integrated service delivery.

I would welcome further discussions at the officials' level to highlight some case study examples on service duplication and challenges on the ground to inform further considerations for the development of the Early Years Strategy. Should you wish to discuss further, please contact Ms Agnes McGrath, Senior Director, Early Years and Primary in the Department of Education: [agnes.mcgrath@education.nt.gov.au](mailto:agnes.mcgrath@education.nt.gov.au) or (08) 8999 5708.

I look forward to continuing conversations on a shared vision and policy framework that would enable and facilitate cross-government, inter-agency and inter-sectoral cooperation, coordination and collaboration in delivering better outcomes for Australia's youngest, most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Yours sincerely



EVA LAWLER

5 MAY 2023

# Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper – Northern Territory Submission

## a) Proposed structure of Early Years Strategy

The Northern Territory (NT) is supportive of the proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy. The proposed structure will be underpinned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Nest which is framed by wellbeing outcomes and allows for alignment from the national strategy to the NT.

The NT considers that the vision, outcomes, policy priorities and indicators should align with other national priority reforms and minimise duplication of reporting requirements against performance measures where possible. References and linkages to current strategies, reforms and policy priorities would support the Early Years Strategy to consolidate and provide clarity to governments and departments on their direction.

## b) Vision

The NT considers that a child and family centred vision would encompass wellbeing, education, health, safety and child development from prenatal care through to the early years. These interrelated factors attribute to providing the greatest potential for improved outcomes for Australia's youngest children, particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances. It is imperative that the vision complements and aligns with the existing national strategy and vision work across these policy areas.

The NT notes the list of related Australian Government initiatives provided at Attachment A of the Discussion Paper and would also like to highlight the following additional initiatives that are also framing our service delivery:

- the draft national Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care
- Closing the Gap
- Australia's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan 2022–2032
- National Framework for Universal Child and Family Health Services
- National Framework for Child and Family Health Services – secondary and tertiary services
- National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019–2024
- National Obesity Strategy 2022–2032
- National Medical Workforce Strategy 2021–2031.

## c) Outcomes

The mix of outcomes that are important to consider for the strategy include wellbeing, education, health, inclusion, safety and child development. In the NT's context, outcomes in these areas will help to address significant developmental gaps that continue to exist for Aboriginal children, particularly those who reside in geographically remote areas. The 2021 Australian Early Development Census results demonstrate that:

- one in 2 NT children who start school, particularly in very remote areas, are not ready
- the rate of NT children 'On Track' on all 5 domains decreased from 42% in 2018 to 39% in 2021
- the rate of NT Aboriginal children 'On Track' on all 5 domains decreased from 18% in 2018 to 16% in 2021.

Although governments and related departments have invested considerable effort in attaining improved outcomes, the challenges on the ground are substantial. To work toward meeting the Closing the Gap

target of 55% of Aboriginal children 'On Track' across all 5 domains by 2031, a localised and place-based approach is required.

In the NT, services are provided to a highly diverse population, with young children and families dispersed across 1.35 million square kilometres and small community populations ranging from fewer than 100 to over 2,000 people. During the wet season, extreme weather conditions can affect access to these communities. Essential services like healthcare and education not only rely on the availability of skilled workers, but also travel and access to harsh environments with limited infrastructure and housing availability.

Due to the NT's unique contexts, universal and flat rate funding models are insufficient to achieve comparable outcomes in remote and very remote communities. The vast and proportional levels of vulnerability and disadvantage, geographic remoteness, small population and thin markets means that service provision in the NT is particularly costly in comparison to other jurisdictions. Remote communities rely heavily on investment from all levels of government to access essential services, economic development opportunities, local employment and social benefits. Any focus on remote areas should be on whole-of-life outcomes, generational change and place-based approaches.

The NT has a strong commitment to delivering early years outcomes in a co design model. This involves local decision making and local capacity building to transition to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. The collaboration and coordination with Aboriginal community bodies will be essential to any program development and future success.

The NT supports integrated service systems and streamlined service delivery models that would simplify service access for communities, minimise red and beige tape for service providers and address funding silos across Australian Government departments, which can often have adverse effects to achieving outcomes. The development of an early years system of support that follows the child from antenatal care to school enrolment and is accessible and easily navigated by parents would be an optimal outcome, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

The siloed approach that is outlined in the Discussion Paper is evident across the NT and presents ongoing challenges in the administration and management of services, particularly in remote and very remote communities. This includes the inequitable distribution of services and funding across communities, for example, some communities have duplicated early childhood education and care (ECEC) and health programs and services in competition with one another due to insufficient population to warrant them all, while other communities have insufficient access to these programs and services.

In a remote NT context, the need for quality ECEC has wider social implications than parental workforce participation, which drives market provision in urban and metropolitan populations. Consideration of how to improve the provision of targeted initiatives that focus on supporting communities and parents to engage in the journey of their children's learning and development outcomes is the priority in remote contexts.

Outcomes will also need to be balanced and consider the current workforce issues and limitations across the NT, particularly in remote and very remote settings. Workforce capacity and capability is critical to the success of any strategy, as the workforce is key to achieving improved outcomes. This includes efforts to address industrial matters such as pay, recruitment, training and conditions of employment. While key national workforce strategies have been accelerated including Shaping Our Future National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy and Implementation Plan; and the National Medical Workforce Strategy 2021–2031, they are long term strategies that, in themselves, will not relieve current workforce pressures in the short term. These workforce pressures are even more prevalent across the NT and, in particular, remote and very remote contexts.

## d) Policy priorities

### **Funding arrangements**

Current funding arrangements are a barrier to promoting more efficient integrated and place-based service provision. This is particularly relevant in remote and very remote communities where the cost-of-service delivery is high due to factors including remoteness, high levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and the complex needs of children and families.

Funding models require sufficient flexibility to support service integration and place-based approaches that will deliver outcomes. That is, the terms and conditions of funding should not create a barrier to developing place-based solutions to achieving outcomes, particularly those that are community led. There is a need to build adaptable and flexible governance models that, while maintaining accountability for resourcing, enable services across all organisations to collaborate and share resources, including staff, to work most effectively to service their community.

### **Workforce**

The availability of a skilled workforce supply is critical to achieving improved outcomes, particularly in regard to the NT's remote context and proportional levels of vulnerability and disadvantage. Aboriginal Territorians, young Territorians and those experiencing long-term unemployment are a potential source of labour, however, particularly in remote locations require intense wrap-around support in training on and off the job. Strength based approaches to working with Aboriginal Territorians may include greater incentives for employers who hire or train Aboriginal employees, and/or investment in wrap-around supports from home-to-work-to-home for Aboriginal Territorians.

Housing supply shortages experienced in the NT also affect the ability to attract and retain highly skilled workers, and recruitment and retention broadly in all parts of the NT, particularly in regional and remote locations.

### **Prevention and early intervention**

Prevention and early intervention are critical to achieving positive outcomes for all children, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and children who speak a language other than English. This will need to have a combined approach across all sectors of government and non-government for success.

### **Strengthen locally controlled services**

The community control continuum reflects and fosters local decision making, community capacity and aspirations for service delivery and accountability. Current efforts to strengthen locally controlled services are often hindered by siloed funding arrangements and makeshift approaches in order to meet different reporting requirements. A consistent and considered approach to strengthen locally controlled services first and foremost would ensure it underpins the pathway to connect community engagement to improved outcomes.

## e) Principles

The principles developed to guide the Early Years Strategy should clearly articulate how the Australian Government will work with all levels of government, non-government organisations, service providers and communities to foster collaboration and ensure that programs are fit for purpose and meet the needs of all children and their families. Alignment with existing early childhood strategies and vision work is essential to underpin better coordination and consistency for governments, service providers, communities and families.

It should be noted that the key principles set by National Cabinet for the National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care are equity, affordability, quality and accessibility. Additionally, the National

Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People: 2020-2030 focuses on equity across populations.

Consultation by the Australian Government with communities to enable local decision making will facilitate improved working relationships between Aboriginal communities and government agencies. This will support self-determination and fit for purpose policies and practices. It is a pathway to strengthen locally controlled services, build capacity of sectors within community and to develop and deliver highly responsive programs and services. The key principles underpinning local decision making are outlined in the Northern Territory Local Decision-Making Framework Policy.

Culturally safe partnerships, practices and services should be a key principle of the strategy. This includes reviewing systems and enabling organisations to embed culturally-safe, child-safe and inclusive practices and policies. This is a key element of Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory 2023-2033.

#### **f) Evidenced-based approach**

The NT supports the intention to use a strength-based approach to developing and implementing policy priorities. Using clearly articulated evidence to inform the development and implementation of policy priorities will help promote credibility of the strategy. Additionally, consideration of how the strategy itself can support opportunities to build evidence bases across the early years.