

Response to Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

Background

The Social Economic Empowerment Department (SEED) [website can be found [here](#)] welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Early Years Strategy.

Established as a department of Brave Foundation in 2022, SEED brings together government, philanthropy, the not-for-profit sector and academia with the aim of creating collaboration opportunities to inform holistic and enduring policy development for Australian families, particularly in the first 1000 days.

The impetus for establishing SEED came from the experience of founder and former Chief Executive Officer of Brave Foundation [REDACTED] and the growing awareness of the need to advocate for systemic change.

Brave Foundation has a team of mentors who work closely with expecting and parenting young people to help them navigate through increasingly complex systems. The role of the mentor can vary from helping the young person access a birth certificate for themselves, a bank account, Centrelink payments, connect to health services, transportation, education and work force opportunities as well as more targeted services to help with mental health, family safety and child protection if appropriate.

The experience of working with young parents in Brave Foundation highlights that families who would benefit the most from support are the ones more likely to miss out. It also highlights the important role that a mentor or navigator can play to help connect vulnerable people to appropriate supports and to navigate increasingly complex systems.

Despite navigator roles being of growing importance to help vulnerable people navigate systems and access support, there is little recognition and commitment for ongoing funding for such roles. An exception to this is within the aged care system in which the Australian Government has invested significantly to support senior Australians to access the aged care services they need and navigate through the system¹.

Linker/ navigator/ mentor roles have emerged as a strategy to address systemic problems with social and community services, explicitly designed to help people navigate the complexity of the service system. Research by dandolopartners in 2022 sought to identify common characteristics of linkers and the core attributes that define how linkers work².

The systems people encounter and the issues they face cross over many departmental responsibilities, whereas funding for services to support vulnerable groups tend to come from individual agencies.

SEED's aim is to bring together a wide range of stakeholders, including young parents, to shed light on these issues, develop and test ideas, with a view to proposing policy approaches to address systemic issues facing vulnerable families, starting with young parents.

SEED has an Advisory Council comprising experts from relevant sectors and engagement with a Policy Round Table of senior public servants from across the Australian Government as well as from two state governments. SEED also has a Lived Experience Reference Group, enabling the voices of young parents to be heard directly including when testing possible policy approaches. There is also work underway to explore the system interaction of young parents and where the costs for elements of the system sit. This analysis will look at the costs to government of supporting young parents through the income support system and by doing so make the case for early investment for

¹ [33 - Home Care – Connecting senior Australians to aged care services - Budget 2021-22 fact sheet \(health.gov.au\)](#)

² [Understanding 'Linkers': new role to help navigate social services \(paulramsayfoundation.org.au\)](#)

long term avoided costs.

SEED is building a policy framework that aims to address systemic barriers initially for young parents, extending to all families over a 10-year time frame. The policy framework, with a working title of the 'One Door Intergenerational Framework', involves three stages across the decade, the first being navigators to work within existing organisations in a hub like environment to bring together and outreach to the supports young parents need. Remote, lighter level support could also be offered. A second stage would see the payments system (Services Australia) brought into the hub. A further stage would see this model extended to all families, focusing on the first 1000 days with the period pre- and post-birth envisaged as a key opportunity to engage with most families.

SEED proposes its 'One Door' approach across 1000 days will result in a community which:

- Nurtures parents, so they can nurture their children;
- Values the caring role of all parents;
- Invests in parents and children early, recognising when they succeed, our communities do too;
- Upholds the rights of both parent and child; and
- Harnesses the power of place.

The model would build in data collection and measurement to look at outcomes for families engaged in the process, thus enabling the case for investment to be strengthened. Concurrently, evaluation of navigator's experience in overcoming systemic obstacles and barriers will be translated into recommendations for systemic improvements and reform for families across the coming decade. Throughout the process, the experience of the navigators as well as the families engaging with them, would provide key inputs to continually improving the model as well as for developing the next stage.

The focus is initially on young parents, broadly defined as those who had a baby prior to turning 20, and who are currently under 25. Births to teenage mothers have declined significantly in recent years and in 2021 there were 5,102 babies registered to 5,055 mothers aged under 20.

Taking a view over time, in 2021 there were 47,500 young parents who were under 20 at the time of the birth who are currently under 25, 6 per cent having been 15 at the time of the birth, 10 per cent 16, 18 per cent 17, 27 per cent 18 and 39 per cent 19 years old.

The cohort is one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in Australia, a disadvantage that has increased over time³. The disadvantage tends to exist before the pregnancy and birth rather than be as a result. The cohort has very high costs to the income support system and, compared to other parents, more insecure housing, be at greater risk of mental illness, more at risk from violence and their children are more likely to enter the out-of-home care system⁴. Given all this, a policy approach initially targeting this group is by definition testing the approach on a group with high levels of disadvantage and risk factors.

³ B. Bradbury, *Disadvantage among Australian young mothers*, Australian Journal of Labour Economics, 2006

⁴ Think Impact & Equity Economics, research in progress

Response to Discussion Paper

Broadly, SEED welcomes the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper and the opportunity to provide input.

SEED strongly supports the development of a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy as a roadmap that sets out a shared understanding, can shape holistic Government policy, ensures we have a common agenda and drives Government actions.

SEED is supportive of the Commonwealth's role in outlining a broad strategy that focusses on Commonwealth responsibilities while acknowledging the role of state and territory policies and programs and their points of intersection with Commonwealth activities.

SEED is strongly supportive of an integrated approach that aims to reduce program and funding silos across Commonwealth departments and better integrating and coordinating functions, as evidenced by the SEED Policy Round Table, convened by PM&C across six federal departments (including Services Australia) that intersect with young parents, as well as two state governments.

QUESTION

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

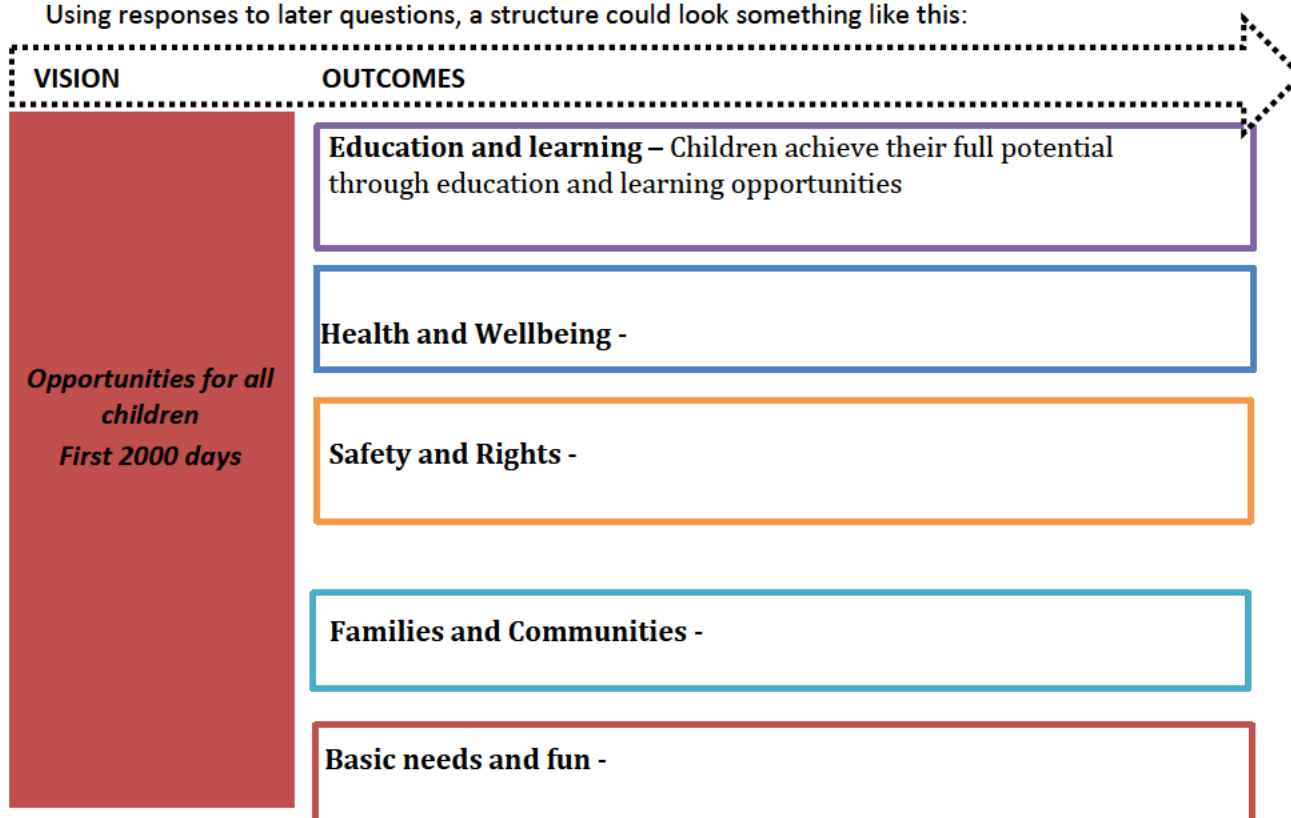
The overarching vision with outcomes for how the vision will be achieved is a good starting point.

A suggestion is to include the systems that support each outcome area and what measures exist for each system. This is the approach of the Outcome Framework for Australia's Disability Strategy, a structure that is easy to follow and logically steps towards identifying policy priorities.

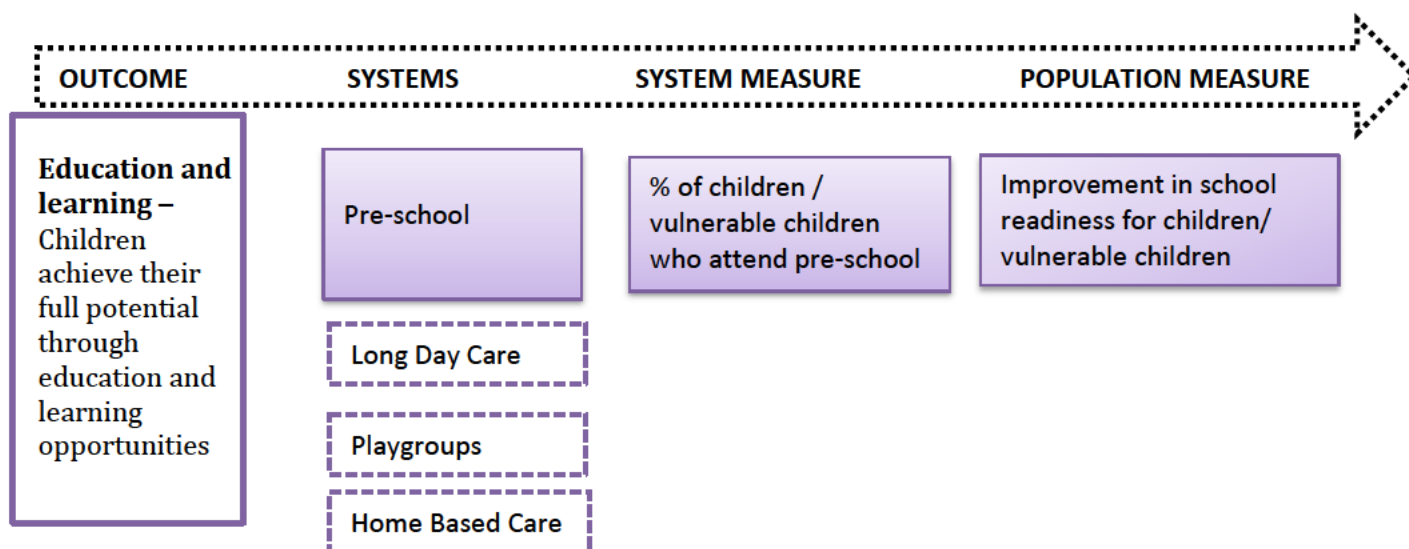
The proposed structure may be strengthened by including a feedback loop whereby evidence feeds back into further iterations of policy priorities.

A set of underlying principles will be necessary in order to make judgements on actions under the Strategy.

Using responses to later questions, a structure could look something like this:



For each Outcome, track the systems and measurements/ indicators.



This approach enables identification of system and population measures where they exist and also points to where there are data gaps. A strategy to address those gaps could be part of the Strategy.

The next step would be to identify potential Policy Priorities for each Outcome area, using a set of principles to prioritise them.

Over the life of the Strategy, findings from measurement/ evaluation/ evidence could then loop back into each priority area to provide information for ongoing consideration of priorities, successes, and new directions.

QUESTION

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

SEED’s view is that the vision should be a simple statement that is easily remembered and that the rest of the strategy points to.

For example, something along the lines of:

Opportunities for all children
Every child in Australia has the opportunity to flourish
A society where every child can fulfil their potential
Every child in Australia is valued and nurtured in the first 2000 days, so they can flourish

Since the strategy is aimed at the first 5 years, but highlights the particular importance of the first 1000 days, a vision could refer to that time in a child’s life, such as:

The first 2000 days

QUESTION

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

In Australia’s Disability Strategy, outcomes are identified and linked to the systems that feed into those

outcomes. Actions are then developed that influence the systems and measurements can be determined and/or developed. It's an easy structure to follow and makes sense.

Taking a similar approach, outcomes to be included in the Early Years Strategy could include:

- Education and learning
- Health and wellbeing
- Safety and rights
- Families and communities
- Basic needs and fun

For each of these outcomes, systems could be identified that support each outcome. For example, systems supporting education and learning include Early Childhood Education and Care, playgroups and pre-schools. Measurement (existing and potential) can be looked at in each of the systems; where the responsibility sits for each (Commonwealth, state/territory, mixed) and potential actions identified to address issues within systems. This approach would also strengthen the shared commitment to outcomes from different levels of government.

QUESTIONS

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?
5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?
6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Given the multiple system offerings that exist for families in Australia, from universal to targeted to tertiary, the missing element seems to be for families to be able to access appropriate services when they need them.

Through experience and ongoing consultation, SEED has formed the view that the starting point (or missing piece in the puzzle) is to have a network of navigators to help the most vulnerable families access services they need, most of which probably are already out there.

One of the key things is being able to identify the various support needs of families across the first five years.

Given this is primarily a Commonwealth strategy, a starting point could be to look to big ticket, semi-universal, national systems as an overarching avenue to identify those who need more support.

Each year around 300,000 families have a baby in Australia and around 45 per cent of those are first time parents. A large proportion engage with health providers before, during and after the birth. A large proportion also engage with Services Australia, sometimes for the first time. Both these semi-universal engagements are an opportune time for families to be engaged with, supported, joined to services they need and helped with system navigation.

This new approach could form around a campaign with a universal message that all babies are valued and families supported, regardless of location, background, culture and other factors.

In Finland for example expectant mothers are given a baby box by the government. It's a starter kit of clothes, sheets and toys and the box itself can be used as a (safe) bed for the baby. It's designed to give all children in Finland, no matter what their background, an equal start.

Something like the Finnish approach could be used by the Commonwealth Government to give the message about valuing babies, children and the people that support them. Through an almost universal mechanism of some sort, families could be more readily engaged with, provided with information about supports and, for those at the more vulnerable end of the scale (for example very young parents), connected with a navigator to help them through this period of their life.

One of the strengths of the navigator approach is that it is not a one-size-fits all. Rather the navigator can respond to what it is that the family needs and connect them with services that will generally already exist.

Another strength is that the approach is likely to be modest from a budget perspective.

With a navigator network to help the most vulnerable families, supports for families across the first five years could be mapped at a local level. Navigators would connect with families and stay connected through the first 1000-2000 days, depending on the need.

The navigator network themselves would become an important source of information on needs within the system. The experience of navigators would be drawn upon to identify local level gaps and situations where needs were not being met. Concurrently, evaluation of navigator's experience in overcoming systemic obstacles and barriers will be translated into recommendations for systemic improvements and reform for families across the coming decade.

This sort of approach would be an opportunity for the Commonwealth to lead and collaborate with other Commonwealth services across agencies as well as state/ territory government services.

QUESTION

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Principles would be useful to guide choice of policy priorities. Principles could include:

- Respect for all children and families
- Equal opportunity for all children and families
- Approaches that put the child at the centre rather than siloed into agency responsibilities (collaborative approaches that reduce silos between agencies)
- Approaches that make better use of existing resources
- Value lived experience, including being informed by children
- Be collaborative and informed by all levels of government, not for profit, academia and philanthropic sectors
- Be guided by strengths based language, which emphasises the child, not their circumstances
- Looks to life moments across 1000 days for primary prevention, to influence social and economic outcomes.
- Think long term and enduring, to provide solutions and supports for as long as it takes.

QUESTION

8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

SEED is very much of the view that lived experience needs to be brought to the table. A proposal such as that proposed by SEED could be developed at a strategic prototype with multiple evaluation feedback loops and rapid transition through discovery, design, implementation and scale phases.

The proposal could be used as a way of testing the vision, outcomes, policy priorities and principles set out in the Early Years Strategy.

The approach brings together different levels of government with organisations external to government. The approach highlights collaboration, innovation, with no one being left behind.