



THE
AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
INNOVATION

Department of Social Services

Submission

The Early Years Strategy



We acknowledge the traditional custodians and owners of the lands in which we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders of the past, present and emerging. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.

We acknowledge the world is changing and that all of the challenges facing our society will be more deeply felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Embedding a cultural lens across all of our work must be a priority in any strategy that is created and implemented.

Contents

About the Australian Centre for Social Innovation	3
Our Experience	3
Our Position and Recommendations	6
Contact Details	11

About The Australian Centre for Social Innovation

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) is an independent not-for-profit organisation working on projects and initiatives across Australia. We bring people, communities and organisations together to collectively tackle our toughest social challenges and build the futures we want.

We are strategic partners, capability builders, consultants, connectors and facilitators, and we're passionate about partnering with people, communities, philanthropy, communities, government, NGOs and businesses to tackle Australia's biggest social challenges.

At the heart of TACSI lies the fundamental belief that people are the experts in their own lives. We believe that the best innovations come from working alongside the people who face the very challenges we're trying to solve.

Our Experience

The key insights and recommendations made in this submission are informed by our deep and continued work in the following initiatives:

Family by Family

Co-designed with families for families in 2010, Family by Family is a network of families supporting sustained change. It is family led, strengths based, peer to peer response that finds families who have been through challenging times and come out of it thriving, and invests in this lived experience to support other families going through challenging times.

Four independent evaluations demonstrate the effectiveness and efficacy of the model. Currently scaled across metropolitan Adelaide, and with successful demonstrations in NSW and the UK, the peer to peer support platform has enabled over 2500 families to make lasting change in their lives.

Further information about the response and its impact can be found at the following links:

- <https://www.tacsi.org.au/our-work/scaling-program/family-by-family>
- <https://familybyfamily.org.au/>

The Virtual Village

Co-designed as a response to the social distancing and mandatory isolation measures of COVID pandemic in 2020, The Virtual Village provides peer to peer intensive support for regional families struggling to cope, feeling isolated or experiencing poor mental or physical health. The response intentionally pairs families experiencing toxic stress or trauma with trained family support volunteers with experiences of family stress, family violence or isolation.

The response is informed by the previous 10 years experience and learning from co-designing, adapting and delivering various peer to peer responses across Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

Further information about the model and the first demonstration can be found at <https://www.tacsi.org.au/our-work/scaling-program/the-virtual-village>

Our Town

Our Town is a ten-year, place-based regional mental health initiative that aims to build the capabilities of regional towns in South Australia to develop community responses to mental health. It builds the capabilities of people in regional communities so they can co-create and deliver preventative responses to address mental health and wellbeing challenges.

By working with existing data and evidence, and informed by people's lived experience, Our Town's goal is to generate new ideas and ways of looking at wellbeing and mental health. Our Town sees communities as uniquely positioned to be able to design and implement preventative approaches to regional mental health. The initiative gives towns and regions the power to define what's right, in and for, their community, ensuring responses are not replicated like 'cookie cutters' but are fit for context and are informed by lived and living experiences of regional communities.

Currently in the third year of the ten-year program of work, participating towns are Berri, Ceduna/Far West, Cummins, Kangaroo Island, Kimba and Mid Murray.

Further information about Our Town can be found at the following links:

- <https://www.tacsi.org.au/our-work/hero-initiative/our-town>
- <https://www.fayfullerfoundation.com.au/focus/our-town>

Systemic Impact Networks

The intent of a Systemic Impact Network is to bring together different people from across a system to align their influence, resources, capital and experience to create coordinated and better outcomes at scale.

Systemic Impact Networks are an alternative to the often reported inefficiencies and lack of effectiveness in collaborations and round table efforts. With curated engagements that aim to cultivate mindsets and behaviours that build trust, difficult and challenging conversations can be had across groups that are often at odds with each other, and move into a space of active collaboration and networking for systemic change.

TACSI have held three Systemic Impact Networks, each at differing levels of maturity and collaboration.

Further information about Systemic Impact Networks can be found here:

<https://www.tacsi.org.au/news-ideas/systemic-change-a-different-approach-to-collaboration>

Discrete, short term Projects with Families and Children

Our insights are further informed by the many and various projects across Australia's seven jurisdictions, and Federally, where we have worked alongside government, community, not for profit organisations, practitioners and ultimately families and children with lived and living experience of poor outcomes. These cut across many social policy portfolios including::

- Education - early years, secondary, tertiary and vocational learning;
- Disability;
- Transport;
- Mental Health;
- Home and Housing;
- Child Protection; and
- Paediatric Palliative Care;

Amongst others. We present the following key insights and recommendations for consideration by the Commonwealth as you continue to evolve the development of Australia's Early Years Strategy.

Our Position and Recommendations

We commend the Albanese Government for their commitment to Australia's children and families, as seen in the many actions taken since elected into power in 2022. Initiatives that: extend paid parental leave; seek to ensure all children access early years education and learning; improve child care rebates for families who need it most; are significant improvements to the previous support infrastructure for Australian families and their children.

The development of an integrated Early Years Strategy, that aims to see the children in communities thrive ensuring no one is left behind, is a welcome addition to the Australian policy landscape.

Below are key recommendations and considerations that are informed by over 12 years of deep engagement with families across our portfolios of work..

- **Improving Government coordination and funding, and reducing silos is a valued action, however this needs to be teamed with deeper systemic shifts across Early Years stakeholders and actors to enable sustained change**

This will need to go beyond round table discussions across Government and delivery partners. We have seen positive impacts and demonstrated positive shifts in collaboration across system actors through the application of Systemic Impact Networks. In this instance, we would see Networks convening stakeholders across the Early Years system. The aim of this would be to:

- Share learnings and challenges;
- Map overlaps and areas for further action;
- Leverage collective wisdom;
- Develop new opportunities to collectively identify and respond to shared challenges to identify opportunities to test and scale.

Outcomes of working in this way include:

- Jointly identified leverage points across the system for connected and focused action;
- Increased collaboration;
- Reduced replication of efforts and investments;
- Greater experimentation and reflection.

- **Families want to inform and be part of policy development and the articulation of the responses that support them to thrive - investing in lived experience**

Throughout our work, we continue to see communities, families and people, when given the resources and opportunity, relish the chance to actively engage in, develop and have a role in delivering responses that they can wholeheartedly own.

The efficacy of community and 'the everyday Australian' should not be underestimated as an area of untapped 'resource' that could support: policy development; better and more sustained outcomes; whilst also addressing Australia's workforce gaps across social services and allied health sectors.

- **Social isolation as a significant risk marker and lever for change at scale**

The negative health impacts of social isolation are well documented and often likened to the impact of smoking a packet of cigarettes per day amongst other key statistics. One of the early risk factors we see in families who engage with Family by Family is social isolation (78% of all families engaged in the program experience this) and limited capacity or willingness to engage with the outside world. As families are supported to identify changes they can make to address social isolation and increase their social capital, their ability to identify and access the right supports at the right time is improved. This contributes to sustaining family resilience, as it becomes a skill they maintain post program engagement.

- **We need more than a service system**

While appropriate services at the right time are critical, and addressing levers of early education and health care are necessary, they alone will not lead to the transformation needed to ensure each Australian child has the resources to thrive. We have seen families and communities across the country speak of the importance of social capital, resources that come from our relationships with trusted others - be it family, friends, neighbours or communities - as a resource that supports them beyond the service system.

Data from the ABS suggests that social capital has been steadily declining since the 50s: in 1967, the number of Australians who were active members of an organisation was 33 per cent; by 2004 that proportion had fallen to just 18 per cent.

Without social capital to draw on, resilience drops and stress builds. This creates ripple effects that include unemployment, reduced psychosocial health and wellbeing, family breakdown, domestic violence, child abuse, neglect and a multitude of other risk factors associated with disadvantage and social exclusion. Social capital and mutual support is fundamental to our wellbeing, yet few governments in the world have the policies in place needed to grow it.

We need to re-create community for the 21st century, one that takes us beyond service systems and helps to rebuild social capital from the ground up. This can only be done by investing in policy, innovation and strategy that rebuilds capacity back into our communities.

We have seen opportunities for this new way of recreating the social fabric in demonstrations including:

- Participatory Cities - Every one, Every day (<http://www.participatorycity.org/>); and
- Civic Square (<https://civicsquare.cc/>)

These both present real life examples of how to re-create community that is relevant for how we live and work in the 21st century. Outcomes of these demonstrations align to children and families gaining early help and support through the creation of social capital within a lens of community participation and ownership. Key is community ownership vs service system responses, one that could also support young families gain early help and connection with fewer service system responses.

Opportunities like this could help Australia build the agency, leadership and skills needed into our communities so they could actively tackle issues the government cannot reach, and provide different supports that go beyond ‘service system interventions’ and crisis responses.

- **Mutual Support Platforms - enabling new ways to invest in lived experience and delivery strengths based peer to peer support at scale**

Over the 12 years of co-creation, direct service delivery, capability building alongside service delivery organisations we have continually seen the dual impact of peer to peer responses and how they create outcomes for both the trained peer and ‘end user’.

In many respects, the peer to peer relationship becomes a platform of mutual support and trust. Geoff Mulgan, in a recent presentation in Melbourne stated ‘*Mutual support is fundamental to our wellbeing, yet [few] governments in the world [have] the policy to grow it*¹.

In the face of declining levels of mutual support (as seen in the decline of social capital) we have seen governments globally increasing their investment into professionally delivered social services and crisis interventions. Internationally, the social sector is now growing at a rate that exceeds most industries ², yet it is still struggling to meet demand, and to find the workforce it needs.

With this insight, we recommend re-directing some of this investment into platforms for mutual support as an avenue to de-escalate demand for professional services, whilst also being a mechanism to support families and young children thrive in the early years through opportunities to connect with others, share challenges and learnings, whilst creating opportunities for reciprocity and connection for all involved.

- **Addressing root cause issues such as poverty and housing**

We live in a country where more children live in poverty than adults. Policy and responses that work towards reducing poverty and ensuring safe and secure housing are fundamental to enabling Australia’s youngest citizens thrive in their early years.

- **Public health, wellbeing and preventative approach to supporting children and their families thrive**

There is widespread recognition that there is no trade-off between universal, preventive and targeted interventions. In the development of a cross system Early Years Strategy, all stakeholders need to understand that a system that ensures child wellbeing will need to ensure prevention is a primary lever, as seen in public health responses.

It will be important to not fall back into the spiralling cycle of diverting funding from prevention to respond to crisis. We will need to maintain a dual approach of supporting families who are in acute crisis as well as ensuring families are supported as early as possible, ideally prevented from needing to access crisis support, to remove the likelihood of them cycling into crisis.

¹ Mulgan, Geoff. (2023). The Future of Social R&D., (Geoff Mulgan is Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London (UCL)

² Today the sector continues to grow at a rate of about 12%, compared to an average of 8% in other industries. 5 emerging social work trends (2022) Keuka College. Available at: <https://onlinedegrees.keuka.edu/blog/5-emerging-social-work-trends> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

- **Diverse and multiple forms of data to better understand the experience of families and their children across systems of support and to inform us all of what works and why**

Data is an invaluable tool in the development and implementation of any strategy. We would recommend the use of mixed data types, which seeks to triangulate big (quantitative) with thick (qualitative) data to enable the full experience of children and family across systems to support children in their early years to thrive.

This will require investment in different kinds of data and evidence to identify where and how families engage across the various Government portfolios to better understand both opportunities and barriers to engagement exist for families and their children.

- **Identify new approaches fit for context, to test and learn what works - applying a 'social' research and development approach and framework to The Early Years Strategy and contribute to leaving no child or family behind**

Globally, we seem stuck in endless loops of fail review reform, repeat. In a recent report released by the Centre for Social Impact and the Community Services Industry Alliance, *'Moving the Conversation Forward; A Decade of Reform Recommendations for the Community Services Sector'*³ Professor Gemma Carey and colleagues carefully analysed 92 Commonwealth reviews and reforms stretching over the last decade. This included Royal Commissions and Productivity Commission inquiries. She concluded that Australia is locked into repetitive and ineffective cycles of 'reform' that focus on the same things without ever fixing them.

This current approach results in problems that don't get solved, with progress towards "better" remaining intermittent, and often stalled. This occurs at the detriment of many of Australia's most vulnerable, resulting in social inequalities persisting and often worsening.

However, we see at the fringes, innovators that are finding new ways to tackle long standing social challenges, and they are succeeding despite the system around them. Whilst they are succeeding, the lack of appropriate infrastructure to enable new and evidenced work to be more broadly applied in and across our society, these innovator successes also represent missed opportunities to scale successful responses that enable better social outcomes for more Australians.

Research and development (R&D) systems, and the cluster of different organisations, services and capabilities that make them up (sometimes referred to as R&D ecosystems), have proven their value in driving commercial and scientific innovation and improvement in high-performing industries.

TACSI believes that the time has come to develop an R&D approach and system for social challenges. The development and implementation of The Early Years Strategy presents an invaluable opportunity to invest in a new way of thinking and respond to the ambition of ensuring no Australian child, or family, will be left behind.

³ Carey, G, Feb 2020, *Moving the Conversation Forward: A Decade of Reform Recommendations for the Community Services Sector*, Centre for Social Impact
<https://www.csi.edu.au/news/new-research-explores-a-decade-of-reforms-in-the-community-services-sector/>

Further information about the opportunity Australia has to create social research and development ecosystems to solve some of our most pressing challenges can be found here: <https://www.tacsi.org.au/our-work/hero-initiative/introducing-future-social-r-and-d-in-australia>

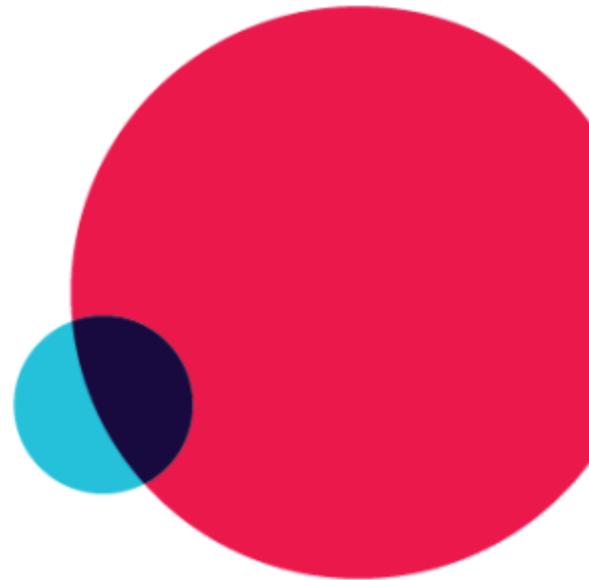
Thanking you in advance for the opportunity to provide our position and rationale to the development of Australia's Early Years Strategy.

We would welcome an opportunity to further discuss our recommendations with the Department at a jointly suitable time. Please contact:

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Sincerely

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