

Early Years Strategy

Submission

The Bryan Foundation

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Executive Summary

The Early Years Strategy is an opportunity to think about the most cherished and unifying task of any nation – how we nurture and grow our children.

Stewarding a whole-of-society approach to growing up our kids is the opportunity before the Commonwealth Government. The vision for the Early Years Strategy – the bedrock upon which we build all action – should be our vision for Australian childhood.

Necessarily delivering against this vision is a task that extends to every corner of our community and its institutions. There are duties that are rightly the province of a Federal Government, many that belong to the States and Territories and many more still that belong to civil society, local neighbourhoods and families. The Early Years Strategy should be a vehicle for national purpose - articulating the jobs a Commonwealth Government must do most certainly, but navigating a much wider landscape that sets out a shared path that all facets of the Australian community may join.

Within this mandate, we propose the Early Years Strategy should focus upon:

- Shaping the story – crystallizing a powerful and galvanizing narrative about growing up in Australia and the actions we all must take to make Australia the best place in the world to be a child.
- Creating a nurturing environment for children – children are shaped more by the environment in which they grow than the services they receive. A focus on social determinants, family and kinship systems and opportunities for kids to play and play outdoors and in their neighbourhoods must be central, not peripheral, matters for the Strategy.
- Prevention – too much of our current dis-jointed system is built upon a “wait to fail” model designed to ration services to those in most demonstrable need. This results in a late intervention system with high barriers to entry that is wrong, wasteful, inequitable and unaffordable. Getting in early to ensure every child is nurtured and early signs of potential future vulnerability addressed is the way to go.
- Promoting equity - recognising the power of early childhood to boost the life chances of every Australian and recognising that the diversity of circumstance across Australian families and communities demands a capacity for proportionate, differentiated responses based on need and local conditions.
- Joining up services – stitching the resources and opportunities we have now and into the future into a coherent child development system that is built around the needs of kids and families, not institutions. Where there are gaps in support in the first 2000 days continuum these must be filled. Building up the system of welcoming hub environments that offer both social connection and service access opportunities is a great place to start.
- Celebrating Australia’s diversity - a universal early years system does not mean the same thing for every child, it means the right thing. Given the diversity of cultures, First Peoples, geography and history of Australian communities, the ability to customise to place and people is an essential quality the Strategy must possess.
- Creating system-enabling-infrastructure – we must set up the right institutions, policy frameworks, system-level infrastructure and workforce if we hope to steward a national Early Years system effectively. This will mean some changes, including reclaiming the ECEC system as a platform via which a wide set of community

outcomes and holistic service offerings may be more easily pursued. Place-based responses have a central role to play.

- Learning and returning the benefits – creating a better national Early Years ecosystem is an immensely long and complex task. Learning as we go through continuous cycles of reflection and improvement is the only way we'll get there.

The Bryan Foundation is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the early thinking on scope and features of the Early Years Strategy and we propose 13 recommendations that address both the qualities the Strategy should possess in order to drive change as well as the matters which it should seek to address.

The Bryan Foundation recommends that:

1. The Early Years Strategy be underpinned by the concept that the early years (like education) should be viewed, and invested in, as a public good that has unrivalled positive economic and social benefits for the individual and society.
2. The Early Years Strategy champion a future state which supports: “a co-ordinated and coherent support ecosystem and a nurturing community environment that supports every child.”
3. A “best interests of Australian children” test should be considered for inclusion in policy evaluation criteria across related policy fields.
4. The Bryan Foundation recommends a vision that embodies our hopes for Australian childhood and creates the framework for action for the Australian child development system from 2023-2033. We recommend the vision also invokes the environment and social conditions that will deliver the childhood we aspire to.
5. The vision for the Early Years Strategy be composed of two parts:
 - the first part use a wellbeing (or quality of life) construct to form the basis of the vision for our children, encompassing social determinants
 - the second part describe system qualities and system outcomes of a co-ordinated and coherent support ecosystem that supports every child
6. The Early Years Strategy vision (child-centred wellbeing + system focus) emerge from a national consensus process of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments of Australia and civil society.
7. The Commonwealth occupy the role of system steward.
8. The Early Years Strategy provides leadership across eight (8) focus areas:
 - Shaping the story
 - Creating a nurturing environment for children
 - Prevention
 - Promoting equity
 - Joining up services
 - Celebrating Australia’s diversity
 - Creating system-enabling-infrastructure
 - Learning and returning the benefits

9. The Early Years Strategy surfaces the system-level reforms required to realise the Strategy's vision, with priority given to the changes required to reclaim the ECEC system for public benefit and to enable the customisation of the Strategy into local communities.
10. The Early Years Strategy embraces place-based approaches, integrated child and family centres and navigators among as specific mechanisms to promote system joined-up-ness and local responsiveness.
11. The Early Years Strategy embraces a strategic and complementary role for philanthropy as social investors alongside the public sector.
12. Our understanding of success is organised via outcomes areas consisting of multiple measures relating to multiple policy priorities.
13. The Early Years Strategy be constructed as a digital, machine readable artefact with consideration given to creating a national early years data asset that links to other strategic contexts.

Introduction

Preamble

Creating a truly universal early years system that boosts Australia's human capital and delivers opportunities for every Australian child – including our most vulnerable – is a noble national purpose. The Bryan Foundation welcomes the release of the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper and appreciates the opportunity to provide this response.

The prompt questions provided in the Discussion Paper have been used to guide the Foundation's response; and, where appropriate, additional questions or comments relevant to our mission and work have been added and elaborated.

The Bryan Foundation (TBF)

We are a philanthropic organisation whose vision is to support and empower young Queenslanders to change their lives through meaningful education.

We have a particular focus on changing life-trajectories through a focus on the early years and provide direct support for partner-organisations whose education and training programs creatively address the challenges of vulnerable young Queenslanders.

Since inception, the Foundation has donated in excess of AUD\$25 million and, as at 30 June 2022, has a corpus of approximately AUD\$50 million.

The purpose of national strategy

Strategy exists to deal with dynamic (changing) or uncertain fields; and by any measure being conceived, born and growing up is a pretty open-ended affair.

In many of the most fundamental ways, growing up is not a problem for government. It's a community undertaking.

So if the answer to the question – 'What will it take to "do" growing up better in Australia?' – is limited to 'better service delivery and tiered supports', then we miss much of the essential framing required to answer the question.

Similar to education being a public good, the first purpose for a national Early Years Strategy is to also realise 'an Australian childhood' is a public good that has benefits for individuals and society if done well, and conversely, has consequences for individuals' wellbeing and exponential costs for society (and governments) if done poorly. That's the national conversation and the social movement that the strategy needs to catalyse; and the macro-narrative under which all action should sit.

Recommendation one (1):

The Bryan Foundation recommends that the Australian Early Years Strategy be underpinned by the concept that the early years (like education) should be viewed and invested in as a public good that has unrivalled positive economic and social benefits for the individual and society.

The challenge of the current early years system is its fragmentation. It's a disjointed landscape, with many players and no obvious locus for leadership.

Under Australia's current arrangements, government funding for the early years and administration for implementation and support is scattered across departments, program streams and service streams within programs. Frontline (and supporting) services can take many organisational forms, and operate either independently, in partnership with, or as direct service provider for government, or within a commercial environment. Although portfolio and program responsibilities are divided between state, territory, and federal governments, similar looking services delivered to families and children may be operating under different governance arrangements and be accountable to different levels of government and across many departments.

The formulation of a national Early Years Strategy can and should contribute to policy coherence across this public sector space. The opportunity beckons to have a national conversation that strengthens common understandings, common language and common measurement systems leading to greater consistency across the policy and practice ecosystem (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017). 'Making it national' has also historically helped Australians to better attend to variation in investments and outcomes across locations and communities - and may ultimately provoke actions that reduce disparities in opportunities and outcomes related to these factors (OECD, 2015). Better co-ordination may also produce performance or efficiency premiums for child-focused programs and policies (Richter et al., 2018).

The second, wider, purpose of the Early Years Strategy is to provide the framework and help establish the conditions for a good Australian childhood. To enable children to thrive, families and their communities should be supported by ensuring reasonable access to universal basics, supplemented by targeted supports where needed. Physical environments conducive to active outdoor play, community spaces that enable social connection and participation, affordable housing, employment opportunities and appropriate provision of universal health, early education and social supports are necessary. And whilst these things are rightly the province of other areas of policy and, in many instances, other levels of Government, the Early Years Strategy should serve to anchor these crucial inputs around promoting the best interests of our children. Just as gender impact is a cross-cutting consideration for formulating and evaluating policy proposals across a wide sweep of public policy, so too could the Early Years Strategy establish impact on Australian children as a powerful decision making criteria.

Recommendation two (2):

The Early Years Strategy champion a future state which supports: “a co-ordinated and coherent support ecosystem and a nurturing community environment that supports every child.”

Recommendation three (3):

A “best interests of Australian children” test should be considered for inclusion in policy evaluation criteria across related policy fields.

A Vision for the Strategy

We have considered the qualities and focus that the vision espoused by the Early Years Strategy should possess. Whilst a somewhat esoteric topic, considering the ambition and function of the Strategy's vision has wide-reaching implications. We have concluded that the Strategy should root itself in our collective hopes for an Australian childhood as the true north to which our efforts should be directed. We also believe the vision must anticipate the qualities of the environment, social conditions and systems that will be required to support the Australian childhood of our dreams.

In recent years, research has emphasized the role and significance of 'visioning' and 'vision statements' in strategic planning and implementation. Articulations of vision provide guidance, inspire change, and promote organizational alignment (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Lipton, 2017). For these reasons, The Bryan Foundation considers that connecting the Early Years Strategy to a vision is critical and supports 'vision' as a powerful element of the strategy process.

The Bryan Foundation also considers that understanding the purpose for a vision statement and determining its content through a process, however defined, are consequential decisions. These decisions are deeply connected to the specific and timely context of the Early Years Strategy itself.

A rights-based vision

In responding to the Early Years Strategy element, 'vision', The Bryan Foundation has considered the elegance, breadth and international standing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and tested its own thinking about whether the Convention would be a useful basis for the vision.

The treaty outlines clear obligations for governments to protect and promote the rights of children (53 articles), and provides a mechanism for monitoring and reporting on progress. The Convention has been ratified by almost every country in the world, making it the most widely adopted human rights treaty in history. In addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there are two additional related human rights documents which Australia has endorsed: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (46 articles) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (50 articles).

Taking a rights-based approach and using these three pieces of international human rights legislation, would create a powerful vision of human freedom and possibility. It would also raise the profile of the strategy internationally, making the Government's commitment to international obligations central to the strategy rather than an addendum to it.

However the articles that comprise these three treaties only take on practical significance and meaning (their ability to produce action) when applied to a local context. The value of keeping them visible as a vision for the child in the strategy thus needs to be weighed against the primary purpose of strategy which is to focus attention and prioritise action. The Bryan Foundation considers that Australia is reasonably mature in its implementation of the human rights conventions to which it is signatory. In 2023 it generally doesn't need to harness the international legal framework of human rights in order to advance the early years cause. Across the three treaties there are 149 articles, in total, and no theoretically defensible way of prioritising some articles over others. This means that using a rights-focus as the basis for a vision may end up dissipating public and government attention across too many variables of interest, it may shift the broad social 'public good' conversation around raising children towards

a narrower legal rights frame; and it might create an unhelpfully complex accountability and reporting system.

The Early Years Strategy needs to launch from an already contextualised understanding of where this strategy sits – historically, culturally and geographically contingent to Australian families and children in 2023 – with a view to specific achievements made in the next ten years.

Recommendation four (4):

The Bryan Foundation recommends a vision that embodies our hopes for Australian childhood and creates the framework for action for the Australian child development system from 2023-2033. We recommend the vision also invokes the environment and social conditions that will deliver the childhood we aspire to.

Short and long visions

Different types of vision statements and different processes for creating them have different 'change functions'.

Short, sloganeering vision statements are a type of vision statement that is easily understood and remembered (Eggers & O'Dwyer, 2016) and connect with the notion of system-change initiatives needing an element of public campaigning to get them across the line.

For example, "Growing up great in Australia" – this type of articulation of strategic vision is concise and memorable, may be effective at communicating a key top-level message. It could function to create a sense of urgency around changing local practices by convening and catalysing reflective conversations around the message (Collins and Porras 1996; Hartnell, Kinicki, & Lambert, 2016). The risk of short vision statements is that they can oversimplify complex issues, lead to widely divergent (mis)interpretations, and don't provide comprehensive guidance for strategic planning (Levin, 2020).

The alternative – fully defined (or domained) vision statements – are used to provide detailed information on the desired future state and cover multiple aspects of the changes required to get there (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010). The affordances of these type of vision statements are that they produce more thorough understandings of the desired changes, clearer roadmaps for strategic planning, and may be mobilised across local practice architectures to produce stronger alignment across the system, however broadly defined (Yu, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2002). The risks of long vision statements are lower recall even among key stakeholders, difficulty in communicating key messages effectively, and their potential for creating ambiguity or confusion (Eggers & O'Dwyer, 2016).

Should vision statements describe the output or outcome of a strategy, or describe the type of system required to produce such changes? Or both?

A broadly-conceived and child-centred vision

Output- or outcome-focused vision statements emphasise a desired end-state and function to create a sense of purpose and direction (Kotter, 1996; Davies, 2016). Within the context of an Early Years Strategy, the output- or outcomes-focused vision would be a positive, or aspirational, description of the salient features of Australian children from birth to 5 that the strategy intends to support.

Section (f) of the *Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper* references a number of evidence-informed frameworks that are used to guide policy and practice for the early years and asks a question about gaps or additional evidence required.

The value of a framework, generally speaking, is whether it stimulates the change / stimulates the new ways of thinking that the system wants, at the level of the system at which the framework operates. The Bryan Foundation considers that any of the frameworks mentioned – the general *OECD Wellbeing Framework*, the *OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework*, Bronfenbrenner’s *Ecological Systems Theory* model, and ARACY’s wellbeing framework for children and young people, the *NEST* – would provide a consistent frame of reference for holistic child-centred conversations.

All of these frameworks use wellbeing as a construct to allow for the broadest concept of child development, as opposed to narrowly focused programmatic measures, and thus also support the concept of growing up as a public good. Well-being encompasses multiple dimensions, including physical, mental, emotional, social connectedness, and environmental aspects (OECD, 2011; Dodge et al., 2012) and this multidimensional perspective offers the possibility of a holistic evaluation of public policy impacts at national scale, beyond traditional economic indicators like GDP or income (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Social justice theory suggests that a “just” society should prioritise policies that promote the well-being of the least advantaged members of society. Adopting wellbeing as a construct for vision, as a prioritisation tool for action and a set of measures for evaluation, allows policymakers to better understand the distributional impacts of policies on different segments of society and address disparities in access to the public goods (Rawls, 1971; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

Focusing on wellbeing also encourages a shift towards more sustainable and long-term policy planning. Wellbeing at population level is responsive to intervention, but the interventions need to be multi-faceted and need to be sustained over time. By considering the broader implications of policy decisions on social, environmental, and economic factors, governments can develop strategies that promote the well-being of not only the present but future generations (United Nations, 2015).

If all these frameworks provide strong support for an Early Years Strategy that seeks to promote the early years and growing up as a public good; on what criteria could any one of them be chosen? One risk that arises when asking the question ‘which framework?’ is the potential pre-occupation of key stakeholders with that choice, and a drain of attention away from the real work towards the refinement or reification of models. Another risk is the potential for the choice to be viewed as organisationally advantageous for one group of stakeholders over another.

In terms of the content, The Bryan Foundation considers that the choice of *which* framework is perhaps less important than the notion of having a preferred or consistently referenced one. A common language creates an inclusive and accessible communication framework that facilitates a better understanding of different perspectives (Westley et al., 2006). This shared understanding can lead to the development of collective strategies and more coordinated efforts to address systemic challenges (Emery & Trist, 1965).

The degree of institutionalisation of the common language or framework, or the ease with which the framework could become a normative reference point in the Australian context, should be the deciding factor in considering broader adoption to the Early Years Strategy context.

In this regard, the Early Years Strategy underpinning framework’s ability to align with the wellbeing framework *not* mentioned in the discussion paper, but starting to become visible within the emerging policy themes and draft descriptions from the Treasurer’s *Measuring what*

Matters second consultation paper (Commonwealth of Australia 2023), may be the most germane criteria for selection. Or else a wellbeing framework developed from and already used in Australian early education context, such as ARACY's the NEST may have a competitive advantage.

Recommendation five (5):

The Bryan Foundation recommends that the vision for the Early Years Strategy be composed of two parts:

- **that the first part use a wellbeing (or quality of life) construct to form the basis of the vision of the child, encompassing social determinants**
- **the second part describe system qualities and system outcomes of a co-ordinated and coherent support ecosystem that supports every child.**

Regardless of the specific choice, The Bryan Foundation considers that the evidence framework should determine the scope and content of the child-centered aspects of the Strategy's vision to ensure coherence. For instance, if the NEST's wellbeing framework for children and young people were chosen as the preferred evidence-based framework, then the child-centered vision for the overall Australian Early Years Strategy should be derived from its language and conceptual structures:

- feels loved and secure; aware environment is protected
- emotionally and mentally well and supported; physically healthy and active
- feels heard, plays, opportunities to have a say
- belonging, positive sense of self; positive cultural and spiritual identity
- feels provided for
- goes to school or early education; enjoys learning.

A vision of the system

Output- or outcome-focused vision statements are necessary, but are they sufficient to the task of changing systems? They often lack specificity about how the system will achieve the desired outcome and thus potentially lead to disengagement and organisational inertia on the part of key stakeholders (Hartnell et al., 2016). To address this, more system-oriented statements are required, ones which work to foster a sense of organisational clarity and actionability on the process changes required to achieve that end-state (Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

Lessons from Australian schooling: one approach to visioning

In the Australian schooling and education context, the past three decades have been guided by a series of separate joint declarations from Commonwealth, State, and Territory Governments, each setting a vision for schooling in Australia. These include the *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* (1989), the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century* (1999), the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008), and the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (2019).

Each declaration has fostered collaboration, engagement, and consensus-building among a wide range of stakeholders, including state and territory education ministers, education experts, professional associations, unions, teachers, and community members. Extensive

public consultation has been crucial, and the declaration development processes have helped raise public awareness and understanding of education's importance in driving social and economic progress.

Each declaration iteration has represented a maturation of the national conversation, both in terms of increasing comfort with a 'national' agenda in state-based education delivery and in shaping the next focus areas for coordinated national action or reform. For example, the shift from the *Adelaide Declaration* (1999) to the *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) broadened the goal of schooling to include what 'governments and sectors' would do, namely provide greater access to high-quality schooling and address inequity. This conceptual thread develops further in the move from the *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (2019), which explicitly focuses on the system: "The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity."

In 2019, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* provided a stronger commitment to action in the early learning sector than previous national declarations. This commitment was a key recommendation of the 2017 report *Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*.

Research suggests that truly effective 'visions' combine elements of overall strategy outcomes with system drivers, providing clear and inspiring goals with guidance on how to achieve them (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Lipton, 2017). Studies have also shown that such statements can be particularly effective in inspiring change or alignment of work when crafted through a participatory process involving input from diverse stakeholders (Hooijberg et al., 2010). Reflecting on this research, and considering the history of Australia's education declarations, The Bryan Foundation advocates for a similar approach in the Early Years Strategy.

The *Early Childhood Education and Care Vision*, currently being developed collaboratively between the Australian Government and states and territories, is obvious and related work. Could its terms of reference be expanded, or could its processes be used to develop another related vision that is broader in scope and covers the full remit of the Early Years Strategy?

Recommendation six (6):

The Bryan Foundation recommends the Early Years Strategy vision (child-centred wellbeing and system focus) emerge from a national consensus process of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments of Australia and civil society.

If the Early Years Strategy is conceived of as an evolving document, designing and running this process, could be the first action of the strategy.

Focus areas

The current system supporting children and families in Australia is fragmented among various actors across federal, state, territory, and local government levels, as well as different agencies, sectors, and organisations. Divergent policies and funding priorities result in uneven access to quality services, impacting not only the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery but also the trust and confidence of families and carers. This fragmentation particularly affects vulnerable children, who are more likely to experience the consequences of a lack of a nationwide early childhood framework.

Fragmentation at the strategic level is evident in the multiple active national strategies or plans, with inconsistent formats and nomenclature of strategic planning elements. Each of the national strategies or plans, listed below, has been developed in good faith using the language and approach of key stakeholders. Each plan or strategy is underpinned by different types of intergovernmental agreements, outcomes and performance reporting arrangements:

- *An Early Childhood Education and Care Vision* being developed collaboratively between the Australian Government and states and territories to better support parents' workforce participation and deliver improved early learning and child development outcomes.
- The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration which commits all governments to improving educational outcomes for young Australians including a commitment to strengthening early childhood education.
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy which provides a framework to strengthen collaboration and improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (zero to 5 years-old).
- Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 which recognises all levels of government are responsible for supporting people with disability to reach their full potential, and outlines a vision for a more inclusive and accessible Australian society where all people with disability can fulfil their potential as equal members of the community.
- National Autism Strategy which will guide a more coordinated, national approach supporting autistic people at each stage of life cover key reform areas including access to services, healthcare, education and employment. It will help to.
- National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030 which outlines the approach to improving health outcomes for all children and young people from all backgrounds and all walks of life.
- National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy which outlines the requirements for an effective system of care for children and provides a framework to guide crucial investment in the mental health and wellbeing of children and their families
- National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028 which aims to reduce the prevalence of FASD; reduce the associated impact of FASD and Improve the quality of life for people living with FASD
- National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement which commits governments to work in partnership to improve the mental health of all Australians, reduce the rate of suicide toward zero, and ensure the sustainability and enhance the services of the Australian mental health and suicide prevention system
- National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 which outlines the overarching, long-term approach to prevention in Australia over the next 10 years.

- Treasury Wellbeing Framework which provides broad context and direction for considering wellbeing in policy advice and the next generation which will be Measuring what Matters, an Australia-specific application of the OECD wellbeing framework.
- National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality which elevate and prioritises actions that will achieve gender equality and guides whole-of-community action to make Australia one of the best countries in the world for a gender-equal society.
- National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 which addresses the issue of gender-based violence in Australia and outlines the pathway to improvement in the domains of prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing.
- Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 which is Australia's framework to reduce child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts.
- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy which guides investment in the mental health and wellbeing of children and families.
- The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children which is an approach to support the safety and wellbeing of children and includes a priority to implement an integrated approach to service design, planning and delivery for children and families.
- The Productivity Commission inquiry into Australia's ECEC system which will make recommendations to support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development.
- The Preschool Reform Agreement (PRFA) (2021-2026) which aims to strengthen the delivery of preschool and better prepare children for the first year of school, with a focus on improving participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children from vulnerable and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. An action of the agreement is identifying key measures of preschool outcomes, with implementation anticipated from 2025.
- The First 1,000 Days which aims to help everyone in the community play a role in ensuring our children get a happy and healthy start to life. The Australian Government is partnering with experts to provide a range of resources.
- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which includes outcomes related to ECEC: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years'; and, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years'. The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership has been established to consider Closing the Gap commitments.
- The Connected Beginnings program (a Closing the Gap initiative), which operates in sites across the ACT, NSW, NT, QLD, SA, Tas, Vic and WA, supports children from birth to school age and pregnant women to access culturally appropriate services, and aims to meet the learning and development milestones needed for a smooth start to school.
- The Early Learning Teaching Trial (a Closing the Gap initiative) which aims to strengthen young children's literacy and numeracy learning through explicit instruction in the year prior to school. The trial has a focus on improving outcomes for First Nations children as they get ready for school, with trial sites in NT and Vic.
- The Intensive early childhood education and care model trial, being led by the Parkville

Institute, currently at 4 sites across Victoria and Queensland. The model is for children from birth up to 3 years and aims helps disadvantaged children to bridge the gap to school readiness.

- The Stronger Places, Stronger People which is a community-led, collective impact initiative in 10 communities across Australia. Communities receive funding to support a local project team to address local challenges to ensure children and their families have strong futures.
- The Reimagine National Action Plan 2030, 10-year road map, which supports the human services sector to be a responsive, easy to navigate and holistic early childhood development support system for children with developmental delay and/or disability.

These multiple overlapping programs of work (which do not even go to the next layer of state- and territory-based strategy, plans or initiatives) were all constructed respectfully, through participatory consultation, but taken together are contributing to a sense of poor coordination, and unclear roles and responsibilities across a range of public sector strategic work.

The solution to strategic fragmentation is not another strategy; at least not another strategy that looks like these ones.

It is different work entirely.

The Commonwealth as system steward

The Bryan Foundation considers that an appropriate approach for the Ealy Years Strategy to take is a systems-thinking one; and that Federal Government must occupy the role of system steward, the facilitator and catalyst for change within the system.

Systems-thinking involves recognising the systemic forces that surround specific focus areas; forces such as government policies, market forces, underlying structures that entrench inequities or power imbalances, embedded social narratives or community mental models and paradigms; normed relationships and ways of working, (Kania, Krame & Senge, 2018; Coffman, 2007; Cabaj, 2018). And stewardship is the practical and ethical solution to the complex and dynamic nature of the field; and the fiscal and administrative decentralisation that comes with the Australian version of Federalism.

Recommendation seven (7):

The Bryan Foundation recommends the Commonwealth occupy the role of system steward.

To pursue a system steward role, The Bryan Foundation considers that the Commonwealth Government should exercise leadership across a number of interlinked policy priorities, enumerated below.

Recommendation eight (8):

The Early Years Strategy provides leadership across eight (8) focus areas:

- **Shaping the story**
- **Creating a nurturing environment for children**
- **Prevention**
- **Promoting equity**
- **Joining up services**
- **Celebrating Australia's diversity**
- **Creating system-enabling-infrastructure**
- **Learning and returning the benefits**

1. Shaping the story

A coherent and compelling public narrative has the power to unite fragmentation of effort and is the foundation for successful policy implementation and public engagement. Recognizing the value of "narratives worth changing" or "narratives needing changing" is crucial for social transformation processes (Cobb, 2013). As shared stories that define and give meaning to social groups, narratives play a critical role in driving social change. Counter-narratives can be used to challenge existing power structures and inspire collective action (Ganz, 2009; Polletta, 2006; Benford & Snow, 2000).

The Bryan Foundation believes that investing in a public good, such as raising children, should not be solely defended through an appeal to economic benefits. Limiting our arguments to economic analyses can restrict our capacity for moral, ethical, and creative action (Judt, 2010). Traditional economic analyses, while useful in some contexts, fail to capture the full breadth of non-economic aspects of quality of life, gloss over inequalities, conflate market valuation with citizenship, and neglect the value of uncompensated economic activities such as home-making and child-minding.

The story of the Early Years Strategy is that the next generation is the great social work of today. Having children and raising them to be responsible, empathetic, and productive members of society ensures the continuation of society. When we provide the necessary supports to parents and families to do this work well, we contribute to a better future for all.

Good stories require good storytellers, and whole-of-government strategies need whole-of-government leaders. Therefore, the responsibility for the Early Years Strategy should vest within a new cross-Government portfolio with strong support from central agencies and links to comparable structures in states and territories. Indeed, Australia may be ready for a Minister for Children (0-5), symbolising the nation's commitment to a unified approach to early childhood development.

2. Creating a nurturing environment for our children

As discussed in the early sections of this submission, children are shaped as much or more by the environment in which they grow than the services they receive. A focus on social determinants, family and kinship systems and opportunities for kids to play and play outdoors and in their neighbourhoods must be central, not peripheral, matters for the Strategy.

The Early Years Strategy cannot grow to embrace all of health, housing and employment policy but it can reach into those spheres and influence the way they support or otherwise the development opportunities of our children. Similarly play environments within the local neighbourhood, access to greenspace and the qualities of local streets are the province of local authorities, but incentives, standards and co-investment can contribute to creating great neighbourhoods for our children to be active in, explore and connect with neighbourhood friends.

Explicit investment in, and a national framework for, welcoming local hubs and child and family centres – including in integrated school environments – should be an outcome of the Strategy. A forward program of development or renovation of sties around the country, matched by secure recurrent funding for the “glue” roles that make these hubs special should be included.

3. Prevention

Our current dis-jointed system could best be characterised as a “wait to fail” model designed to ration services to those in most demonstrable need. This results in a late intervention system with high barriers to entry that is wrong, wasteful, inequitable and unaffordable. The runaway costs of the NDIS are in part driven by the downstream costs of missed early intervention opportunities in the first years of life. Whilst unintended and regrettable the scale of these cost impacts presents a powerful case to reinvigorate a truly universal early intervention system delivering fast, early support with very low barriers to entry for children with suspected risk profiles. This early support system should power a greatly expanded maternal and child health system which delivers relationship-based care to families with clear, fast pathways to development and disability interventions and supports. The savings from moderating high cost, late intervention services funded through the NDIS would substantially or entirely offset the costs of an expanded early support system.

4. Promoting equity

Perhaps 20% of public expenditure across Australia's states and the Commonwealth is driven by programs and payments addressing issues of marginalization, and likely even more. As a nation we have become complacent about poverty and welfare dependency, believing it is an enduring feature of society that can be managed but not meaningfully reduced.

The Early Years Strategy presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle poverty, welfare dependency, and exclusion in Australia. It should emphasize that the overall outcome of the strategy is "a coordinated and coherent support ecosystem that supports every child." This means it must promote an equity agenda, directing resources and attention where needed, ensuring equal opportunities for all children, and addressing disparities in access and quality based on socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and other factors (Sabol et al., 2020). The strategy should also provide guidance for credible, scalable, and affordable approaches that work to reduce poverty, multigenerational disadvantage, and address environmental and political challenges threatening children's future well-being. Taking action to protect and improve the world for future generations upholds the principle of intergenerational equity and demonstrates a commitment to the public good.

The outcomes and evaluation framework of the strategy should support a focus on the public good and report on the state of equity within the system as its proxy. Public goods, as defined in the classic formulation, possess two key characteristics: non-excludability and non-rivalrousness (Samuelson, 1954).

A good or service is considered non-excludable if, once provided, it is either impossible or prohibitively costly to prevent others from accessing or benefiting from it. In other words, when a non-excludable good is available, everyone can use it, regardless of whether they have paid for it or not. For example, a non-excludable early years health, education, or housing service would be accessible to all children and their families.

A good or service is considered non-rivalrous if one person's consumption of it does not diminish its availability or quality for others. This means that multiple people can use or benefit from the good simultaneously without reducing the amount available to others. In the context of early years services, this means that one child's or family's use of a health, education, or housing service should not reduce the availability or quality of services for others.

In terms of measurement, comparing the availability of services across different geographical areas or socio-economic groups can help determine whether a service is non-excludable.

Indicators such as the number of service providers per capita, the distance to the nearest provider, or the waiting time for service access can be used to assess accessibility.

Examining the cost of services relative to family income can help assess whether a service is non-excludable. If the cost of a service is prohibitively high for certain income groups, it may effectively exclude them from accessing the service. Measures such as the proportion of income spent on the service or the availability of financial assistance can be used to assess affordability. Society as a whole, rather than individual parents, should bear the responsibility for financing and providing early childhood education and care. This would involve significant public investment in infrastructure, resources, and support for educators (Heckman, 2006).

Comparing the quality of services across different providers or socio-economic groups can help determine whether a service is non-rivalrous. Indicators such as staff qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and adherence to quality standards can be used to assess service quality. Quality standards and regulations: The state should establish and enforce high-quality standards and regulations to ensure that all children receive a consistent and high level of care and education, regardless of which provider they attend (Phillips et al., 2017).

5. Joining up services

In simple terms, with systems, the whole surpasses the sum of its parts. When applied to health, education, or human service systems, this suggests that a connected network of services and programs will produce better outcomes for individuals than if those services and programs are disconnected.

As system steward, the Commonwealth must step beyond its agency programs, and focus, instead, on changing the relationships, distribution of power, institutional norms, and attitudes that have influenced decision making in the early years space up to this point in time. The fragmentation of effort, as seen in fragmented service delivery, is a symptom of this missing system-steward role.

Service integration demands a top-down commitment from the Commonwealth to unite various stakeholders, streamline processes, and work towards creating a seamless early years support experience for families and carers. This is not primarily about consolidation of services, though that may well occur; it is more about building relationships, fostering collaboration, communication, and coordination among different agencies, departments and stakeholders.

Research in the field of systems change highlights the importance of a common language as a key factor in driving effective collaboration and coordination among diverse stakeholders (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This is particularly important in complex, multi-actor environments, where diverse perspectives and terminologies can lead to misunderstandings and misalignment (Huxham & Vangen, 2005)

The Commonwealth will need to mobilise the resources needed to support change processes, including funding, expertise, and other forms of support, and also building the capacity of organisation and the confidence and capability of humans to participate in and enact change processes. This may include providing training, technical assistance, and other forms of support.

Having said that, it may be that the creation of the Early Years Strategy and the participatory processes required for its development will perform some of this function, facilitating communication, aligning objectives, and promoting the development of shared mental models essential for successful systems change (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2015). As more system

actors adopt and use the shared language, the value of the network increases exponentially, leading to greater connectivity, information sharing, and collective action (Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

A special focus on catalysts that join things up

Place-based approaches represent a unique application of the broader concept of joined-up government services and are the most promising way to organise efforts to respond to disadvantage and to deliver early childhood and lifecourse strategies in complex and vulnerable communities. This makes intuitive sense. Poverty is highly geographically concentrated. Putting these places at the centre of policy and program design allows coherent and strategic thinking about how to improve social conditions and life opportunities for local people.

By focusing on the specific needs and assets of a particular community, place-based approaches tailor support services to local contexts, and rely on strong collaboration and coordination among various government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community members. This joined-up approach ensures that resources, programs, and services are integrated and aligned to address complex, interrelated local challenges holistically (Walker & Brown, 2017; Nelson & Roberts, 2020). By prioritizing local leadership, community engagement and local knowledge, place-based approaches promote a more responsive and adaptive form of governance, which maximizes the impact of public services (White and Adams, 2019).

Place-based approaches contribute to the development of social capital and community cohesion, which are critical factors in promoting overall community well-being (Anderson & Lewis, 2019). By fostering collaboration and partnership among local stakeholders, place-based strategies strengthen social networks, build trust, and create a shared sense of purpose within a community (Oliver & O'Connor, 2018). Smith et al. (2021) argue that this increased social capital can facilitate collective problem-solving and decision-making, enhancing the overall effectiveness of service delivery.

The Australian Government is establishing a National framework for place-based working and the cross-linkages with the Early Years Strategy are strong.

At smaller, neighbourhood, scale integrated child and family centres, hubs and integrated school models achieve the same outcomes as can community navigator roles where well supported.

Joining-up infrastructure that operates at the community level (place-based approaches), the neighbourhood level (hubs and integrated schools) or the individual level (navigators) must be a central feature of our future Early Child Development system.

Recommendation nine (9):

The Early Years Strategy embraces place-based approaches, integrated child and family centres and navigators among as specific mechanisms to promote system joined-up-ness and local responsiveness.

6. Celebrating Australia's diversity

There are few more culturally embedded, personal and human things than giving birth to and raising a child. And given the diversity of cultures, First Peoples, geography and history of Australian communities, the ability to customise to place and people is an essential quality the Early Years Strategy must possess.

Put simply - a universal early years system does not mean the same thing for every child, it means the right thing. The challenge before us is to create a national scale system that has the agility and flexibility to work from a generic set of supports and services and engage locally to give form to the right mixture of solutions delivered in the right way.

Place-based planning, links to existing place-based initiatives and co-design with key groups including families raising children with a disability and First Nations families are essential approaches. An explicit and sophisticated framework via which this national / local quality of the Strategy may take form should be a priority in its design.

7. Creating system-enabling infrastructure

To deliver the joined-up, nurturing early child development system we aspire to will take some system-level change.

Most obviously this will require the ECEC system to be reclaimed as a platform via which benefit to children and families is the primary objective. Currently there are suffocating constraints that prevent public investment in the system to create the kinds of holistic offerings our children deserve, including in areas such as:

- Delivering health, family support, developmental support and culturally relevant services as part of an integrated ECEC offering
- Creating intensive models for children with trauma backgrounds or others needing extra support
- Providing parent support services such as maternity care and maternal mental health from ECEC sites.

To enable the kind of customised, locally responsive system we need there are several reforms that are well scoped and derived from the place-based change agenda. These include:

- **Local data availability** – the creation of local level data dashboards that aggregate publicly available data sets that illuminate the wellbeing of local kids and their families and allow progress tracking over time at the population level.
- **Investment coordination** – mechanisms to track and coordinate investment relevant to children and families from across the public sector and other sources to maximise impact and coherence of the spend and ensure it responds to local priorities.
- **Shared local decision making**- devolving accountability to well founded local decision making groups to set priorities, identify and develop solutions and then support those solutions with investment prioritised from the existing spend.

Without these reforms our hopes of First 2000 Days pipelines, integrated child and family centres, holistic school models and multidisciplinary ECEC services are sunk.

Recommendation ten (10):

The Early Years Strategy surfaces the system-level reforms required to realise the Strategy's vision, with priority given to the changes required to reclaim the ECEC system for public benefit and to enable the local customisation of the Strategy into local communities.

Social investment reform - philanthropy

Australian communities are increasingly recognizing that the endemic social challenges such as economic inequality and poverty; discrimination and inequality based on culture, race, gender, sexuality and other identity formations; differential access to education, healthcare or other social services; human rights violations – all of these challenges do not exist in a vacuum,

and are unable to be solved by any one piece of government, or any one sector or state, or any one institution.

Public-private partnerships, which leverage the resources and expertise of both the private sector and government are a powerful force for social change (Klijn & Teisman, 2003) and the increasingly blurred boundaries between philanthropy and government have opened new avenues for collaboration and innovation in addressing social challenges. Philanthropic organizations have a particular role in acting as catalysts for innovation, and have enormous capacity to support new ideas and new ways of working with the public sector (Bridgespan Group, 2020). Such partnership models enable governments to tap into the agility and flexibility of the philanthropic sector while upholding their commitment to public welfare.

Philanthropic organizations can commit to multi-year funding and support, allowing the public sector to develop and implement strategic plans that extend beyond election cycles. This long-term investment can ensure that transformative initiatives have the time and resources needed to succeed, leading to lasting improvements in public service delivery and quality of life.

Furthermore, philanthropy can help build the capacity and resilience of community sector institutions, investing in the development of human capital, organizational systems, and performance management. These investments in institutional strengthening can help the sector become more adaptive, responsive, and effective in the long run.

The Bryan Foundation has a vested interest in how the Strategy acknowledges, represents (makes visible) and ultimately positions philanthropic giving within the birth to 5 support space. The Foundation believes that philanthropic funding is a legitimate, sustainable and important source of income for the advancement of public policy and creation of a better Australia: what might broadly be termed private action for the public good.

The Bryan Foundation actively fosters collaboration and cross-sector partnerships by supporting work that breaks down silos and allows for deeper forms of cooperation and coordination. Philanthropic investment dialogues, for example, are one type of forum we support, a place where philanthropic organizations, impact investors, and other stakeholders meet to discuss and collaborate on ways to increase investment in social and environmental impact. We are a key stakeholder in *The Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children*, a ten-year dialogue that brings philanthropy and Government together around a shared agenda for the Early Years. Initiated with \$200M in shared four-year commitments from Government and philanthropy, philanthropic partners in the Investment Dialogue will spend more than \$1 billion over the next 10 years on driving change for our children. The dialogue aims to bridge the gap between traditional philanthropy and impact investing by creating a space for knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and collective action.

Currently government and philanthropic partners are invited to establish governance to progress a shared agenda for Australian children. From this agenda co-investment opportunities will be identified and clusters of partners would negotiate to progress them. Policy and system reform opportunities will be identified, and initiatives launched to address these. The resulting portfolio of projects and reforms arising from the Investment Dialogue will be monitored by a small secretariat (funded by philanthropy) with learnings shared to inform the next round of decision making by Dialogue partners.

Recommendation eleven (11):

The Early Years Strategy embraces a strategic and complementary role for philanthropy as social investors alongside the public sector.

8. Learning and returning the benefits

The first result in systems change is the development and use of learning and prioritizing continuous learning and adaptation in strategy fosters a culture of experimentation and innovation (Cabaj, 2019; Argyris, 1977; Senge, 1990).

The Bryan Foundation considers that the early years eco-system currently delivers broadly what it's designed to deliver and if we want to change early years outcomes, then the current system, itself, must change. There is significant work to be done surfacing these factors in order that the perspectives and aspirations of different stakeholders may be made visible, at which point we can start to co-create a shared understanding of what needs to operate differently.

The Bryan Foundation recognises that such thinking is not new, in either theoretical terms or in an applied sense in Australia. In particular, the work of the *Early Years Catalyst* that emerged from the *2020 National Early Years Summit*, and supported by *Social Ventures Australia* (SVA), completed a foundational [mapping](#) of many of the mental models holding the current system in place, in order that we might better understand existing networks of relationships and identify leverage points for change. The systems mapping process generated a range of complex and intellectually challenging findings, highlighting the inherent complexity of the many systems that influence early years outcomes.

The Early Years Catalyst is already scoping next pieces of work which are to better understand how the mental models can be influenced and then co-design a strategy for implementation. In addition, this work, the Bryan Foundation would advocate for an additional focus be added to the base-mapping activity. This would be to illustrate, perhaps through scenario-based exemplars, how the interactions between families, organisations, service providers and funders support the models being presented. That is, to add the practice of service delivery and support into the map. This work – identifying practical change points in co-ordinated service delivery or supporting the process for identifying these changes – should be a key early focus of the national Early Years Strategy.

Specific reform opportunities

Among the many specific opportunities for reform and improvement that might be embraced through the Early Years Strategy, we nominate the following as warranting special focus:

- Parental engagement and support: Enhancing the involvement of parents and caregivers in their child's education and well-being, and providing resources to support them in their role.
- High-quality early childhood education and care: Ensuring access to affordable and high-quality early learning programs that cater to the diverse needs of all children and reclaiming the ECEC system as a platform into which investment in wrap around services and other supports can be made.
- Establishing a universal entitlement to two years of pre-school education.
- Recognition and support for a high quality early education and care workforce as a fundamental element of quality early childhood system: Professional development for educators and Improving the skills and qualifications of early years educators through training and professional development opportunities.
- Expanding and supporting a national child and maternal health system that creates a pipeline of supports from pregnancy and birth through the early years in a relationship-based care model.
- Integrated services and supports: Strengthening collaboration between agencies, such as health, education, and social services, to provide a more comprehensive range of support for children and families.
- Expanding significantly explicit integration modalities such as place-based initiatives, integrated child and family centres and First 1000/2000 days service pipelines.
- Galvanising and expanding to network scale integrated child and family centres including school-based models.
- Expanding access to health and nutrition services: Promoting access to preventative healthcare, screenings, and nutrition services for young children to ensure their well-being and development.
- Recognising childminding / caring highlights the importance of informal care settings in promoting child development and well-being.
- Cultural competence and inclusivity: Fostering culturally responsive and inclusive practices in early years settings to support the diverse needs of all children and families.
- Early identification and intervention: Identifying children at risk of developmental delays or other challenges and providing early intervention services with very low barriers to entry to support their growth and development.
- Changing the lifecourse of children in our most vulnerable and welfare-dependent communities
- Child protection and safety: Implementing policies and practices to ensure the safety and well-being of children in early years settings and beyond.
- Reconnecting children to play, in particular outdoor and neighbourhood play, as an essential part of childhood.
- Housing stability and affordability: Ensuring access to safe, stable, and affordable housing for families with young children. Refugee and newcomer support: Providing tailored services and resources to support the unique needs of refugee and newcomer families with young children.

Outcomes: how might we understand success ?

There is a direct relationship between the strategic vision of the Early Years Strategy and the outcomes that a strategy seeks to secure. The vision articulates outcomes in totality, in the form of a desired future state, and this articulation then guides the development of the strategy's initiatives which effect the necessary changes.

The Vision section of this submission has already discussed how 'wellbeing' is generative as a construct for framing early years outcomes in terms of public goods (Brown & Soskice, 2015), much more so than focusing only on economic benefits, which narrows policy goals (Biesta, 2010).

In keeping with the role of the Commonwealth Government as system steward, the Bryan Foundation suggests that relevant system outcomes / objective statements could be expressed in terms of:

- public perception of the change narratives at political and community level;
- equity of service provision at population level (for example, improved or expanded access)
- the effectiveness of connections across service provider and support locations (for example system linkages or cross-sector and interagency planning)
- the creation or improvement of supports (system-enabling infrastructure) for more effective service delivery (for example shared measurement systems or linked data platforms);
- the methods for learning, responding, and returning benefits to the system (for example, scaling or feedback mechanisms).

As a general rule, The Bryan Foundation would prefer 'Outcome Areas' as being better than outcomes, because we want to move off unitary indicators and narrow line reporting. In this formulation, each outcome area would map back to a number of policy priorities, and be supported by a number of measures, at both a population and individual level. Each outcome area then, has its own balanced scorecard made up of a range of relevant information. An important principle, is that the burden of data collection be minimised and wherever possible, data is generated and managed in the undertaking of daily work.

In terms of time-boundedness, the Bryan Foundation would advocate for defining a small set of time horizons in the outcome space: short, medium and long-term.

Figure one (below) illustrates the logic of the tight coupling between the Early Years Strategy evidence framework, the vision for change, and the intended outcomes of the strategy. Many early years evidence frameworks take an ecological approach to their subject matter, outlining both proximal and distal influences on children, including family and community. In their two part structure, such ecological models support The Bryan Foundation's expectation that the Early Years Strategy vision will also comprise two parts: a vision for the type of system we want to have, and a vision for the experience of the child.

Recommendation eleven (12):

Our understanding of success is organised via outcomes areas consisting of multiple measures relating to multiple policy priorities.

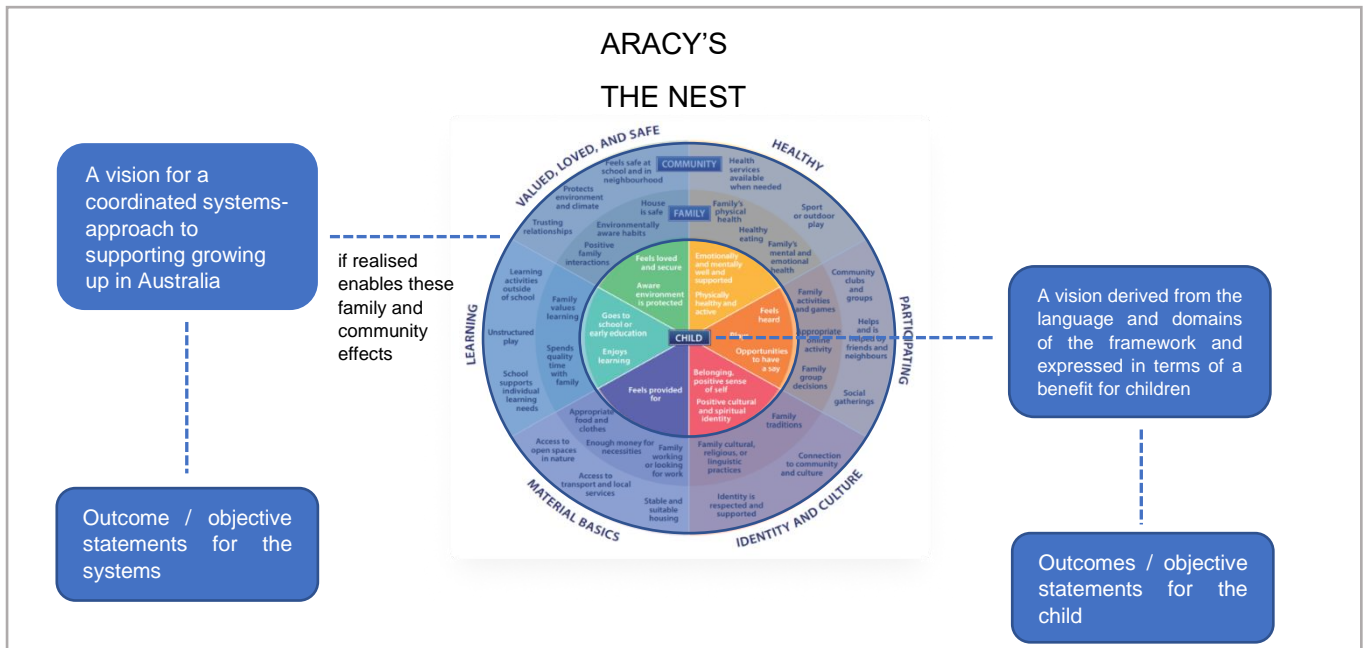


Figure 1: The logic of tight coupling between an example EYS evidence framework, the vision for change, and the intended outcomes of the strategy

Structure and presentation

The proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy includes a vision, outcomes, policy priorities and indicators which will measure success against each of the outcomes and priority reform areas. All these structural elements are reasonably standard and The Bryan Foundation supports their inclusion.

In their presentation, strategies establish relationships between elements, either as a grouping of related concepts or as part of a logic for change. Elements may also be sub-ordinated to one another, as in hierarchical levels of action like “priority, strategy and actions” or hierarchies of influence like “primary and secondary drivers” or time-based hierarchies as in “interim indicators and outcome measures”.

The Bryan Foundation considers that the relationships a strategy establishes between elements, and the manner in which information is presented / encoded is consequential to reception. Stakeholders are influenced by the presentation and organization of information, via anchoring or framing effects, or the re-enforcement of confirmation biases. (Kahneman, 2011). Overly linear or structured representations of change in strategic planning may support path dependencies, where early actions in a program logic overdetermine future choices, hindering the recognition of complex, emergent relationships and patterns (Mintzberg, 1994; Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001) and limit the exploration of creative alternatives (Sydow et al., 2009; David, 1985).

Digital first and machine readable

Numerous government plans and strategies related to early years development exist in Australia, often in the form of lengthy, text-heavy documents. For example, *The Australian Disability Strategy* is 72 pages, the *National Preventive Health Strategy* is 85 pages, and the

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration is 24 pages. These three strategic directions alone amount to 197 pages of tightly formatted prose.

The Early Years Strategy could take a different approach to significantly enhance usability and effectiveness, replacing a long PDF document with a common data architecture, and adopting machine-readable formats. By breaking down each strategy into a collection of statements (e.g., vision, policy priorities, objectives, indicators, system actions, etc.), each individually identified, described, and related to others, the strategy's structure would become a product of user interaction.

Machine-readable strategies enable stakeholders, such as The Bryan Foundation, to personalize their view of the strategy, by filtering content through the lens of their interests, such as philanthropy or place-based approaches. When strategy is machine readable, statements within the strategy can be compared, and unambiguously mapped to one other. The mapping is more straightforward with identified statements than with traditional strategy documents. The mapping need not be restricted to “outcome A is the same as outcome B”: mapping can encompass similarity, specialisation (“outcome A is a special case of outcome B”), prerequisites, alternates, and whatever else may be appropriate.

Moreover, machine-readable strategies promote extensibility and interoperability with other systems. Partners, agencies, and stakeholders can extend the Early Years Strategy specifications to suit their organizational needs, adding new components or modifying existing ones without compromising the parent strategy's integrity. This flexibility is achieved through well-defined interfaces, protocols, and programming patterns that encourage loose coupling between system components.

Adopting a machine-readable, common data architecture for early years development strategies in Australia could lead to improved collaboration, more efficient use of resources, and ultimately, better outcomes for children and families.

More about the benefits of a machine readable strategy.

One of the rationales for an Early Years Strategy is to reduce or remove silo-effects. Converting all currently active national strategy and plans into machine readable format would support the visibility and extraction of the early years work already taking place in other agencies and strategic contexts. Comparisons between documents can be substantially automated which would reduce the risk that the Early Years Strategy duplicates existing work, assist in identifying potential conflicts and identify gaps in measurement or service delivery.

This approach streamlines communication of priorities and progress, significantly promoting effective collaboration across different levels of government, departments, and organizations (Gil-Garcia & Sayogo, 2016; Janssen & Kuk, 2016; Ansell & Gash, 2018).

Strategic integration and machine readability have analytical and reporting implications. These methods support the creation of shared performance dashboards and reporting tools, offering a more comprehensive view of public sector performance and progress towards shared strategic goals. Additionally, it enables governments to utilize advanced analytics and artificial intelligence tools to gain insights and determine next steps across a vast range of national work.

Recommendation thirteen (13):

The Bryan Foundation recommends the Early Years Strategy be constructed as a digital, machine readable artefact with consideration given to creating a national early years data asset that links to other strategic contexts.

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