

Discussion Paper: The Early Years Strategy, Australian Government

WA Country Health Service (WACHS) submission, April 2023

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

WACHS supports the proposed structure of the Strategy including a vision, outcomes, policy priorities and indicators, which will measure success against each of the outcomes and priority reform areas.

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

WACHS promotes the importance of the first 1,000 days of life, when the care and support provided can have a profound impact on individuals and families. We support the Strategy focus for young Australians in the critical years from before birth to age five.

WACHS strongly agrees that children and families at risk should receive additional care and support, irrespective of their medical history, cultural background, socio-economic circumstances and geographic location.

WACHS support the Strategy's vision to encompass aspirations for children across all aspects of their lives. We want all children to have the best possible environments to grow and develop, regardless of their individual and family circumstances.

All Australian children 0-5 years should have timely access to high quality general health, development, mental health and education services that are close to home.

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

WACHS supports the Strategy outcome statements relating to children's physical and emotional health, learning and development, safety, and having a positive sense of identity.

Outcome measures described in the strategy should be measurable over time, such as the Australian Development Census.

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

To address service gaps and overlaps, there should be integration and coordination between jurisdictional agencies, especially in relation to children who are at risk of poor health, development and wellbeing outcomes. This should include coordination and alignment with key agencies, regardless of funding source and reporting requirements.

Build capacity for parents and families to provide responsive and positive parenting that supports optimal development and self-regulation in children.

Ensure country families and communities have genuine input in the design, delivery and improvement of services.

Address gaps in services to improve access to perinatal, infants and child mental health for children (0-5 years) and families, including transition between services.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Enable more choice and control for consumers and communities to enhance the health, development and education of children living in disadvantaged circumstances.

Provision of quality early learning programs for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Establish policy requirements to ensure there is coordinated oversight of children at risk to prevent vulnerable children falling through service gaps.

Provide funding that ensures sustainability of primary care programs and services.

Provide good communication about availability and access to Commonwealth programs in regional areas.

Consider place-based approaches and service integration for rural and remote communities.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Establish policy requirements to ensure providers partner with families and communities to co-design service and programs.

Adequate funding for Commonwealth funded programs such as NDIS and Medicare plans to meet the needs of children and families in the early years.

Lead meaningful evaluation of the Strategy and proposed outcomes.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Include principles that align with well-established child health policies in Western Australia, as follows;

- Child-centred and focused on their current, emerging and future needs.
- Family-centred and strengths-based approaches.
- Respectful and sincere co-design for program and services with children and families
- Inclusive of diverse children and families.
- Programs are based on sound research evidence.
- Primary prevention and early intervention focus.
- Service planning and delivery is culturally safe and responsive, ensuring the rights, views, values and expectations of Aboriginal people and those of other cultures.
- Flexible and responsive child and family circumstances.

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

None identified at present.

WA Country Health Service
189 Wellington Street PERTH WA 6000
PO Box 6680, EAST PERTH BUSINESS CENTRE WA 6892
Tel: (08) 9223 8500 Fax: (08) 9223 8599
www.wacountry.health.wa.gov.au

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