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Early Years Strategy
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RE: Wesley Mission Queensland (WMQ) Submission to The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

Dear Ministers Rishworth and Minister Aly,

Wesley Mission Queensland (WMQ) congratulates the Ministers and their departments for their foresight in commissioning the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper and the associated consultation and feedback. WMQ is one of the diverse service providers operating across the health, community and social services sectors supporting Australia's youngest children and families to ensure they are happy and thriving. WMQ's submission to the Discussion Paper is written in alignment to the questions posed.

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

The proposed structure for the Strategy is appropriate for the content, and WMQ welcomes the accountability and partnership being sought through the inclusion of outcomes and indicators. WMQ invites the consideration of structuring the Strategy by age groups, such as pre-natal, pregnancy, post-natal, infancy and toddlerhood.

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

WMQ's Vision for Australia's youngest children is that they all flourish, regardless of their background, where they live or the circumstances of the parents or caregivers. This includes that every child has the right to feel safe and secure in their own home and that no child is the victim or witness to any form of domestic and/or family violence. Furthermore, Australia's youngest children should never be the victim of sexual abuse. The absence of abuse and violence in our society affords a solid foundation to creating an environment where children are able to develop a strong sense of wellbeing through connectedness and trust with their parents/caregivers.

A proposed Vision needs to:

- State that all children and parents/caregivers have access to information and support services, starting with pre-birth education. While this may be formal support structures, the documented benefit of peer support indicates that available support should also include peer-to-peer models.
- Position play as central to the Strategy with strong articulation and supported by evidence that play is to be valued and respected as crucial to early childhood development.
- State that every one of Australia's youngest children is accepted for who they are within diverse and inclusive communities (both micro and exo systems levels), where cultural heritage and identity is celebrated and passed down through generations.
- Acknowledge the importance of education. All of Australia's youngest children should have equity of access to early childhood education which caters for and aligns to their individual learning and support needs.
- Propose that where complex needs are identified amongst some of Australia's youngest children, it is paramount that early intervention is a free and holistic response available to all children and parents who identify as requiring that level of support.

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

Drawing on the above comments regarding the Strategy's Vision, WMQ proposes the below outcomes as an important indicator that the Strategy is well implemented.

- All of Australia's youngest children and pre-natal women have access to a safe home and community environment free from any form of abuse.
- All of Australia's youngest children have access to age-appropriate activities that support early childhood development and prepare them for the formal education system.
- All of Australia's youngest children and pre-natal women are able to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing, and where there are concerns, there are appropriate services that can be accessed in a timely manner to prevent further deterioration.
- Parents and caregivers of Australia's youngest children are able to access free services that support pregnancy, early childhood development and parenting needs.
- All of Australia's youngest children, pre-natal women and parents/caregivers have access to diverse and inclusive communities without fear of judgement or prejudice and are able to contribute to these communities.
- Available supports for Australia's youngest children, pre-natal women and parents/caregivers are holistic in nature and offered within a connected service delivery landscape, rather than fragmented and difficult to access.
- All of Australia's youngest children are physically well and having their developmental milestones assessed and where necessary early intervention provided.
- All of Australia's youngest children, pre-natal women and parents/caregivers have a positive sense of self.

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

WMQ supports and encourages the Commonwealth to continue their engagement with diverse stakeholders and in particular to source lived experience commentary. WMQ's service design and quality improvement processes are strongly informed by lived experience; the benefits of which are immeasurable and continue to guide our efforts. WMQ urges that inclusion needs to be extended to the children and families who exist in circumstances that prohibit their involvement through more mainstream channels. It is these experiences, perceptions and considerations which must take center place in policy and strategy considerations as they will likely differ to those of professionals or more advantaged Australians.

The following views in relation to specific areas/policy priorities, are provided:

1. Place based responses

WMQ urges the Commonwealth to prioritise place-based responses to Australia's youngest children through needs-based planning, complemented by population level and social determinants of health data. We know from experience that there are significant differences in communities throughout different geographic regions and that a one size fits all approach simply doesn't work for our communities. As part of this, any place-based response needs to be co-designed with the community and offers a holistic support and community connection. Children and families thrive within diverse ecosystems.

2. Safeguarding and protecting children

Our comments in Question 2 aligns with the Visions of the National Office for Child Safety, the ten National principles for Child Safe organisations, the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse, 2021-2030 and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (Safe and Supported).

WMQ does believe that "child safety is everyone's business" and our system interfaces and experiences, reinforce the need for children and families to access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early; that risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed; and that children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing.

Arising from this experience WMQ foreshadows the need for the proposed Early Years Strategy to deliberate on preventive and early intervention strategies, yet to also deliberate on the intensive supports' children require when in statutory care.

3. Early childhood education and care

WMQ knows the value and outcomes derived from early childhood education and care and this sector will be an important lever to deliver required outcomes from the Strategy. WMQ assesses two priorities for consideration within early childhood education and care:

- i. The contribution of the workforce must be valued through appropriate industrial relations instruments, remuneration and conditions. Professional wages and conditions for educators must reflect the responsibility and importance of these roles for our whole community, particularly as society navigates diverse social and economic demands on families/carers.
- ii. The appropriate support and funding for children with additional or specialised care needs can be appropriately supported through the early childhood education system.

4. Technology and social media

The use of technology and activation in social media continues to increase and has a strong foothold in our community. As part of this Strategy, WMQ encourages the Commonwealth to consider what support Australia's youngest children and their families may require when navigating technology and social media. This includes support and education in keeping Australia's youngest children safe online, in addition promotion of the importance of physical activity, sufficient sleep and time outdoors.

5. Family law systems

The current family law systems are complicated and expensive for families to navigate. Consideration needs to be given to how the current system might be streamlined and more cost-effective for families needing routes to explore separation, divorce and/or co-parenting arrangements. As a part of this, it is also paramount that the significant impact of domestic and family violence on Australia's youngest

children is explored, and appropriate support strategies implemented for families to access in a timely manner. Further, Commonwealth and State jurisdictions must critically examine their levels of investment into both preventive, early intervention and acute responses. WMQ supports the continued focus on teaching Australia's youngest children what a healthy relationship is and what behaviour simply isn't tolerated within an intimate relationship or family.

Question 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?

The following is presented:

- As above, the Commonwealth needs to assertively seek to have the voices of these communities heard and understood as part of developing this Strategy and these partnerships and relationships need to be sustained and maintained through all phases. Diverse stakeholders must be supported to present emerging issues and solutions specific to their communities' unique challenges and needs.
- Universal education and support programs for pre- and post-natal women are essential and need to be provided in accessible locations.
- As part of the proposed focus on the industrial relations for early childhood education and care, there needs to be a practice standard designed and implemented requiring staff working in these settings to have been trained in trauma informed practice and have an understanding of the impact of intergenerational trauma. So often the children who have experienced trauma are labelled as the 'naughty child' and further excluded due to a lack of awareness regarding the significant impact of trauma. Where traditional early childhood education systems are not suitable, access to alternative options is essential.
- Children and family's interface with diverse health, social and community service systems and the trajectory for children is often compromised through lack of access to affordable housing.
- As mentioned, child safety is "everyone's business" and this Strategy must be aligned with other significant Commonwealth strategies and departmental outputs. Establishing and prioritising focus areas pertinent to child protection and child safety could lead to the consideration of more collaboration and joint case-management models with non-government service providers, who are often more approachable for vulnerable families. Examples include the Complex Needs Assessment Panel on the Gold Coast which is based on a joint case-management model and incorporates collaboration of government and non-government services in support of the child and their family. WMQ would be available to talk in further detail on this approach.
- This Strategy must prioritise how to lessen significant wait times and substantial out of pocket expenses experienced by the parents/caregivers of our youngest children as they seek to intervene early and stop further deterioration of a child's health and wellbeing with a particular focus on mental health and access to Allied Health practitioners. A failure to intervene early creates a longer-term adverse health impact.

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

Coordination, collaboration and coherence across departments and jurisdictions is critical to achieving a well-designed Strategy. WMQ like other submission respondents would be wanting to see greater impact being achieved, innovation being fostered, genuine dialogues being established and maintained, durable solutions being tailored and integrated and progressively more fostered strategies being developed.

WMQ proposes the following potential focus areas:

- Build diverse relationships and consultation mechanisms with government and non-government stakeholders across the diverse systems that seek to create thriving young children.
- Create information and knowledge sharing platforms and publish data pertinent to the policy development landscape.
- Inform stakeholders on the communication, collaboration and coordination strategies and mechanisms at the interjurisdiction level (Commonwealth, States, Territories) and intra jurisdiction level (between different State and Commonwealth departments) and at the intra department level. Interested and vested non-government organisations such as WMQ always seek to understand governmental interfaces and roles and responsibilities.
- Maintain appreciation for the diverse non-government service providers in this policy landscape and seek to understand the associated funding models, challenges and opportunities.
- Deploy systems thinking, engage all funders and planners of the systems of care that impact our younger children. This is particularly so for the complex Policy and Strategy development at hand as parents/carers and young children often have diverse socio-economic needs straddling a range of sectors and government and non-government responsibilities.
- Develop and maintain a communications strategy advising of governance or coordinating mechanisms, meetings, networks, committee, or advisory structures.
- Maintain a focus on codesign and leveraging the lived experience of families/carers and young children to foster a “real life understanding”.

Question 7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

WMQ considers the below principles to be essential for the Strategy:

- Child-centered and family inclusive practice
- Trauma informed
- Child and family inclusive (both in understanding the problem and co-designing a solution)
- Invite diversity and inclusion and genuinely seek to genuinely understand these perspectives
- Strengthening core skills and capability of parents/caregivers, sector employees and the community
- Partnerships with diverse stakeholders
- Outcome/evidence informed
- Proactive prevention and promotion
- Accessibility
- Reducing stigma
- Common language

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

The following gaps have been identified by WMQ as needing to be considered as part of the development of the Strategy:

- The need for mental health support for children under the age of 12 and their families/caregivers.
- Mandatory education for early childhood teachers regarding trauma informed care and intergenerational trauma.
- Best practice frameworks in intergenerational trauma.
- Research on existing models of service that genuinely work to give children a better.
- Support for children who have a parent experiencing a mental illness.

Wesley Mission Queensland welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback into the Early Years Strategy development and regard this as a sentinel Policy for our youngest children. We will remain invested in the milestones and outcomes and would welcome any invitation to provide further consultation or participate in relevant advisory or reference groups. Should you wish to discuss the contents further, please contact Michelle Skinner or Kris Sargeant.

Yours sincerely,

