



KIDS FIRST™

**Commonwealth Community
Sector Consultation
Submission**

**A stronger, more diverse and
independent community sector**

NOVEMBER 2023

ABOUT KIDS FIRST AUSTRALIA

Kids First Australia is a proudly independent child, youth and family services provider and early years education specialist. Our vision is for all children and young people to thrive in strong, resilient, and safe families and communities. We resolutely believe that all kids deserve a bright future.

We provide services across Australia through our Whitelion Youth programs. These programs are delivered for Kids First through our recent merger with Whitelion. Whitelion began in 1999 with the vision to 'stop the revolving door' for young people leaving the justice system.

Whitelion's focus on youth justice became a core strength recognised by governments, the youth sector, corporates and the general community as making a real difference to young people's lives. By integrating the programs delivered by Whitelion, Kids First now offers support from (pre) birth to young people aged 24.

Our philosophy is grounded in the knowledge that keeping faith with our partners – be they clients, other community members, service delivery organisations or funders – is the foundation of our success. Trust is what enables us to understand the specific needs and priorities in our community and to deliver innovative, carefully targeted programs that address the whole of the family, through an early childhood and youth focus. Our success lies in listening and responding in a timely manner, which we can do because we are part of our local communities for the long term. Flexible and responsive granting processes enable us to be nimble, adaptable, relevant and stay embedded in the communities we serve.

Informed by evidence, our sector leading programs are designed to strengthen family relationships, support healing and recovery from trauma and ensure children can thrive, now and into their future.

We have taken this approach because it is proven that the most salient environmental influences for infants and young children are their caregiving relationships and the degree of stress that they live with. All children need stable relationships, responsive caregivers and attention to their emotional wellbeing and social competence so that they can flourish.

Our philosophy is that the most effective service delivery addresses the needs of the whole family. It is:

- Place based. Kids First is committed to the communities it serves. We are there for the long term and work to develop trusting relationships with both communities and local providers of complementary services. By creating service responses that are designed in conjunction with local communities, we believe our programs can be replicated and easily adjusted to address the suite of needs of other communities.
- Collaborative and co designed. We involve young people, families, local service providers, government representatives and research partners in the design and evaluation of our programs. Self determination is a vital principle in order to enhance personal agency. Our programs recognize the importance of giving children, young people and families a voice, rather than making assumptions about them, their context and their behaviour. Privileging children, young people and families' self determination is highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma – this means providing choice, options, information and agency so they can make informed decisions.
- Based on the best of overseas and local models: We research the evidence of program initiatives world wide and adapt them for Australian conditions. This inevitably means evaluating pilots and adjusting them to enhance the outcomes.

- Researched and evaluated through trusted partnerships with independent bodies including University of Melbourne, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Charles Sturt University and the Centre for Community Child Health. Government and philanthropic partners have funded these evaluations. Our practice is to use evidence to innovate from initial trial programs to ensure the best fit for our communities.
- Embedded in partnerships with complementary service providers. This ensures our programs are part of a comprehensive suite of wrap around responses to the needs of every individual family.
- Funded by donors, business, the philanthropic sector and government and a key role we play in these partnerships is providing a link to the lives and concerns of families and young people most at risk. We work to counter negative or inaccurate perceptions of at risk people and build community awareness.

We have a proud record of innovation based on evidence and evaluation

Kids First occupies a unique space within the early years, youth and community services landscape with our strong focus on developing, testing and delivering innovative evidence based services. Our strength is that we act on the results of early evaluation and innovate programs to be even more effective in meeting the needs of our communities. It is our strong belief that all children and young people will benefit from taking the evidence base for intensive intervention into universal settings and co located services. Co design with clients, community members and partner organisations is a fundamental component of this innovation. The programs discussed below all illustrate this approach.

We know that the early years are critical

Children's experiences in their first years are a major determinant of their lifetime circumstances and well being. Early life experiences have a fundamental influence on brain architecture, gene expression, and physiology.

The impact of the early years is especially pronounced for children who experience neglect, abuse and toxic stress. Prolonged exposure to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse and traumatic experiences early in life have been established to cause profound long term adverse effects on brain and physiological development[1]. Pre birth neglect, including physical, emotional and mental health trauma experienced by the mother, has also been shown to cause profound negative impacts on the foetus that translate to adverse long term impacts for the child.

A recent statement from Victoria Police, for National Child Protection Week, states that exposure to family violence can have significant long term impacts on children and youth including poor mental well being and academic outcomes and behavioural problems.

A Crime Statistics Agency report found three out of four children exposed to family violence had a future interaction with the justice system within five years as either victims or perpetrators.

"Children who witness violence in the home, or see one parent being completely controlled by another, suffer stress and anxiety from the experience. We cannot assume that the trauma of family violence is something children just get over eventually, when the facts show the opposite." [2]

[1] Tseng, Y., B. Jordan, J. Borland, T. Cancy, N. Coombs, K. Cotter, A. Hill and A. Kennedy (2018), Changing the Life Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children – Report no.2: The first twelve months in the Early Years Education Program: An initial assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers.

[2] <https://www.morgenews.com/victoria-police-highlights-child-impact-of-1076897/>

Our vision

Kids First's vision for early childhood education and care for 0-4 year old children is an environment where all children thrive in resilient, strong and safe families and communities. No child is left behind. No parent/care giver is left unable to find the support they need to care for their child in a loving, supported and safe environment.

Similarly, our vision for young people is that no young person is left behind and all young people have the right to equitable opportunities to reach their potential.

Further, we believe the most effective result for all children and young people will be achieved where there is a whole of government approach and where there is a focus on collective rather than individual outcomes.

Our relevant experience relating to your enquiry

In this submission we focus on the results and lessons from signature programs that demonstrate many of the characteristics of good practice identified in your discussion paper. Further detail illustrating specific responses to your questions is provided where relevant. Our key programs are:

1. Early Years Education Program (EYEP)TM

For six years, Kids First designed and implemented a unique Early Years Education Program (EYEP)TM, at our West Heidelberg centre in Victoria. The EYEPTM successfully worked with children who experienced acute disadvantage to support their emotional, social and cognitive development. The program provided high quality education and care for children who live with significant family stress and social challenges so that they could commence school developmentally equal to their peers, and with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for ongoing successful learning.

An independent randomised control trial, the first of its kind in Australia, was conducted alongside EYEPTM's delivery. This research showed that, when compared to their peers, children who participated in EYEPTM had made gains across their IQ, resilience and emotional development factors. Their families responded better to stress and experienced less of it.

EYEPTM was characterised by:

- individualised, holistic education and care, based on a relational pedagogy
- integrated tertiary level intervention
- sustained and intensive engagement
- multi-disciplinary professional knowledge, skills and expertise
- safe, welcoming spaces.

2. Our current phase of innovation: a universal Early Years Education Program – Kindergarten Model (EYEP-KP)

Kids First believes that all Australian children and families should have access to high quality, holistic education and care, underpinned by a robust practice framework and evidence based service models. We live and breathe this ethos in our own early years centres and have taken the powerful and practical components of the EYEP™ and created a new model that can be universally applied in kindergartens, filling a critical gap for the sector.

Our EYEP™ Kindergarten Model is based on a strengths based, trauma informed, relational pedagogy approach. 'Relational pedagogy' refers to the intentional practice of caring teachers interacting with students to build and sustain positive relationships.

Our EYEP™ Kindergarten Model:

- Combines the innovative and transformational aspects of EYEP™ and Kids First's practice expertise in school readiness services
- Draws on sound pedagogical principles, supported by insights from the latest early years education research and literature
- Recognizes the importance of giving children and families a voice, rather than making assumptions about them, their context and their behaviour
- Privileges children and family's self determination as highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma. This means providing choice, options and information so they can make informed decisions
- Meets and exceeds the requirements of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

The aims of the model are:

- Children have strong, authentic relationships with their classmates, families and educators, and a shared sense of belonging
- Children are active, engaged and capable learners, and are supported to enter primary school
- Families have strong protective factors so that they can moderate risk and adversity and promote healthy childhood development and wellbeing.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute is evaluating the model. The second year evaluation report has shown high classroom quality with our kindergartens delivering the EYEP™ Kindergarten Model scoring higher than Australian comparison data across Emotional Support, Classroom Organisation and Instructional Support domains. These results are very promising.

3. Caring Dads

Caring Dads is a groupwork program for fathers who have used domestic and family violence. Developed in Canada in 2001 by the University of Toronto and Canadian agency Changing Ways, the program has been implemented throughout Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and brought to Australia by Kids First.

The program consists of a 17 session, empirically based manualised group parenting intervention with:

- A family violence lens for fathers
- Systematic outreach to mothers to ensure their safety and freedom from coercion
- Ongoing, collaborative case management of fathers by existing service providers and other professionals involved with the fathers' families.

Within Australia, Kids First led a three year research trial of Caring Dads (2017-19), undertaken by the University of Melbourne. The program and evaluation, which was funded by the Victorian Government and Gandel Philanthropy confirmed promising international findings about this program.

Building on this evidence, Kids First has partnered with Odyssey House Victoria (OHV) to deliver an adaptation of Caring Dads. The program, KODY responds to two aspects of the evaluation findings, which are supported by international research and are of significance for work with men who use violence. These elements are:

- the use of alcohol or drugs by a high proportion of the men using violence and
- specific support to the children of program participants.

A research project by University of Melbourne is being conducted alongside the implementation of KODY to inform the further development of men's behaviour change programs nationally and internationally. An Australian Research Council Linkage Grant funded this research. In addition, a PhD project is planned to extend the research program. The doctoral student will research experiences of children engaged with KODY, with the aim of developing knowledge about effective and feasible strategies for their inclusion in healing and recovery programs.

Reflecting the international implications of this research, a reference group has been established to advise and oversee the project. Members are drawn from research partner organisations, the Centre of Research Excellence to promote Safer Families (an international collaboration of researchers, practitioners etc, and international experts such as Assoc. Prof. Katreena Scott (University of Toronto), one of the developers of Caring Dads.

4. Early Help

Early Help was funded by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) for family service delivery organisations in specific local government areas across Victoria to design and trial an Early Help Family Services (Early Help) Model.

The aim of the Early Help trial is to provide evidence based, inclusive, early help to families to support their children to thrive and reduce the need for intensive family and statutory services. The trial seeks increase accessibility and acceptability of support to families with emerging needs. Providers of the trial were required to partner with universal services to support recruitment of families to the model. The interventions to be delivered as part of the model include:

- Individualised short term support such as counselling and parent coaching to build parents' confidence and capacity to respond positively to parenting challenges
- Support to navigate and connect to specialist services such as speech therapy
- Universally targeted groups providing evidence based parent education to build parents' knowledge, skills, and confidence
- Flexible funding to support families in crisis or facilitate their participation and connection to the community
- Community activation by connecting parents to informal supports such as peer support groups based on mutual interest, recreational, sporting, or other social activities
- Specialist advice and consultation to support universal services staff to build their capability and skills to support families accessing their service.

Kids First has been funded to trial an Early Help model in the local government areas of Mitchell and Whittlesea. To support the implementation and delivery of the model, Kids First has established consortia in both regions. To implement and deliver the Early Help Model, Kids First have established two Early Help Hubs.

Hub 3756 (the Mitchell Hub) is located within the Wallan Community Services Hub, and Hub 3757 (the Whittlesea Hub) is based at the Epping Community Services Hub. Both Community Services Hubs bring together a range of organisations that deliver integrated, universal and early intervention services. In addition to delivering the Early Help Model from these Hubs, practitioners are embedded within and/or provide outreach to other universal settings, based on demand and need.

In May 2022, Kids First commissioned the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to undertake an evaluation of our Early Help Model. The Early Help Model evaluation commenced in August 2022 and is scheduled to conclude in June 2024.

Some of the markers of optimal program delivery (as evidenced in our practice) include:

- Holistic wrap around support provided to the families of the children to overcome stress and engage as equal partners with Kids First in their child's learning
- Strong partnerships with local government and other local services to provide integrated wrap around support
- Ongoing training and professional development for educators including training in relational pedagogy, trauma informed practice and attachment theory
- A strengths based, trauma informed methodological approach
- Embedding of Family Coaches within the core staffing of early years centres to provide integrated support to families

Family Coaches work in partnership with the broader universal and secondary service systems to integrate necessary supports and services into the centre to facilitate engagement with families. Family Coaches identify families with emerging needs early to reduce the need for intensive family and statutory services downstream. This support is particularly helpful for families at critical transition points such as the birth of a new baby, children beginning kindergarten or transitioning to school. In addition, the Family Coach also provides consultation and support to the educators and teachers to build their capability and skills to support families in improving their parenting skills and actively engaging in their child's education.

- Educators working with children to incorporate the voice of children into the programs
- Seeking feedback on the curriculum and program content and ensuring it is relevant to the families and their cultures
- Co participation strategy to allow children, families and community members to meaningfully shape the early years space and environment
- Families attending with their child as part of the orientation process, to support building a trusted relationship with the primary educator
- Multiple channels for families and program participants to keep in touch, including online learning platforms to provide the latest information and resources and email newsletter updates
- Multiple opportunities for families to provide feedback, including participant reference groups, regular surveys, event feedback and complaints
- Regular reporting back to families on feedback provided and action taken
- 'Parent/family workshops' for families to learn from experts and share their experience with others.
- Parent Advisory Groups for each centre comprising parent representatives and supported by the Lead Teacher of the centre. Parent Advisory Groups provide input on all matters relevant to the development of the curriculum and delivery of the service from a parent/community perspective.

5. Our Whitelion youth programs

These programs are designed to build positive connections and pathways to work for young people at risk who are aged 14–24. Young people at risk are defined as those who have lived in out of home care, impacted by homelessness, youth justice system and disadvantage. Young people in these systems often leave school early, live with mental health issues and the impacts of trauma, substance misuse and have experienced family violence.

The youth programs work across five service streams:

- Mentoring
- Employment
- Outreach
- Alternative education
- Intensive support (case management).

Of the 1,655 young people who received intensive support through Whitelion programs in 2019–20, their top five support needs were:

1. Education/training
2. Community connection
3. Mental and emotional wellbeing
4. Employment
5. Housing

Our Whitelion's programs focus on these areas. Key characteristics of the programs include:

- Recognising that young people want to have a say in not only issues facing them today, but also future focused problems that they will inherit, such as climate change and aged care

- Taking an inclusive approach to mental health issues. Orygen's[1] definition of the mental health situation for young people is they are often too unwell for primary care, but not unwell enough for state based services. The complexity of mental health issues means that they cannot be viewed or responded to in isolation. For the young people we work with, many who have experienced significant trauma, there is a complex interplay between access to education, employment and housing affordability impacting the presentation and treatment of mental health issues. A holistic and integrated approach is required in new initiatives. We support community mental health strategies such as the mental health coach model endorsed by Beyond Blue where coaches are trained and work under clinical supervision to offer low intensity cognitive behavioural therapy.[2]

[1] Orygen. Def n ng the M ss ng M dd e Accessed-171220202-
<https://www.orygen.org.au/Po cy/Po cy-Areas/Government-po cy-serv ce-de very-and-workforce/Serv ce-de very/Def n ng-the-m ss ng-m dd e/orygen-def n ng-the-m ss ng-m dd e-pdf.aspx?ext>

[2] Beyond B ue (2020) New research shows menta hea th coach ng reduces anx ety and depress on symptoms Med a re ease. Accessed- 21120202-
<https://www.beyondb ue.org.au/med a/med a-re eases/med a-re eases/new-research-shows-menta -hea th-coach ng-reduces-anx ety-and-depress on-symptoms>

- Providing alternative, intensive education options that take account of those young people for whom traditional schooling is unsuitable. The young people we work with tell us that schools are not preparing them with the life skills they require. In the last financial year approximately 16% of our clients requested assistance with financial and budgeting skills and 15% were provided support with independent living skills. Our alternative education programs in South Australia and NSW show that young people who are disengaged from school and/or have complex needs require intensive support not just in terms of schooling but to also manage the many other challenges they face. Our alternative education programs offer both 1:1 support and group work, and the group work sessions enable young people to learn and often practice life skills together. In our RISE program in NSW, our Coordinator spends just as much time working with young people on life skills and providing intensive support as he does educational attainment. In our Engine Room program in SA, a teacher, and a youth worker both run the program, and additional FLO case managers also support each young person. This ensures that all goals can be worked on – everything from Centrelink appointments, to getting a licence, referrals to mental health services, achieving educational outcomes or getting support into work or another form of education or training.
- Placing strong emphasis on the need for young people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Government, community organisations, businesses, education, and service providers all need to make a commitment to engage with young people, hear their ideas and opinions and support them to lead solutions. All relevant agencies and services should have built in mechanisms to hear the voice of young people.
- Incorporating peer models wherever possible. When undertaking research for our Youth Engagement Strategy, the literature highlighted the importance of peer models. This could range from having peers supporting peers within specific programs, as well as having young people lead youth engagement strategies within organisations. One example is YACVic giving control to young people to lead approaches to tackling youth issues through their Young Thinker in Residence program. This type of idea could be replicated in multiple sectors and settings, not just within the youth sector.
- Participating in coalitions designed to further the needs of at risk young people. An example is the Smart Justice for Young People coalition, working to create change for young people who come in contact with the justice system. The current focus of this coalition is the Raise the Age campaign to change the age of criminal responsibility and the age of incarceration. The raising of the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age up to 14 years as recommended by International Human Rights law, is a national issue needing strong support and advocacy from the states. The impact of a juvenile record can prevent young people getting employment and participating equally in community life.

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

1. Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership

1.1 What would a partnership between CSOs and the government that achieves outcomes for Australians being supported by the community sector look like?

The partnerships through which Kids First Australia works to change the life trajectories of children and young people are underpinned by the philosophy that keeping faith with our partners – be they community members, service delivery organisations or funders – is the foundation of our success.

Trust is what enables us to understand the specific needs and priorities in our community and to deliver innovative, carefully targeted programs that address the whole of the family, through a focus on children and young people.

Our partnerships are characterised by:

- Listening to our communities and end users and co designing our programs with them. Privileging children, young people and families' self determination is highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma – this means providing choice, options and information so they can make informed decisions.
- Place based solutions, with strong, open trusting relationships with local organisations, including local government and locally based service providers.
- Evidence based solutions, drawn from researching the strongest local and international models
- Independent evaluation and re setting our program design and delivery if required to meet changing needs
- Advocacy on behalf of our families and young people, correcting negative and inaccurate views about them.

Strong partnerships with government and CSOs should include:

- Open and frank communication between parties without fear or favour, and with no power imbalance, acknowledging that CSOs will bring the voices of their clients into the conversations
- Early engagement – for example, the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF)'s practice of market sounding with the sector to determine the needs of communities, and sector ideas and capacity, before designing and issuing granting rounds
- Funding of all activities, direct and indirect, including capturing client voices, digital data collection and management, and independent evaluation
- Flexibility within and across grants, and within acquittal and variation regimes
- Consistency of methodologies and terminology within and across governments
- Commitment to building an Australian evidence base, drawing on our own diverse communities, stories and realities, rather than reliance on overseas evidence and models.

1.2 How can CSOs and government streamline the sharing of information, particularly through utilising technology to effectively engage, distribute, share, influence and inform in a timely and efficient manner?

Government can facilitate and support CSOs in utilizing technology to collect, manage, store and share information safely by recognising and adequately funding CSOs' investment in information technology as a critical enabler for the design and delivery of programs. Currently, the collection of digital data, and related costs associated with digital safety and cyber security, are unfunded, but form a substantial component of a CSO's on costs. In addition to directly funding technology and digital investment, support might be in the form of shared or bulk access to software licenses, free access to databases and data analysis tools for research purposes, and to secure data storage. This may particularly assist smaller CSOs.

The use of consistent data and reporting platforms and systems across jurisdictions, and between departments within jurisdictions would minimize outlays on software licenses and reduce inefficiencies and duplication of effort, particularly in reporting and acquittals. (See also responses to Q. 2.6 Reporting and Q. 3.4 Acquittals, below).

1.3 How can government ensure the community sector, including service users and those not able to access services, have an opportunity to contribute to program design without imposing significant burdens?

Client voice needs to be embedded into the culture of CSOs, but also of funders (ie government, as well as philanthropic organisations). This would include funding the involvement of community members and end users in all aspects of program design and delivery, as well as inclusion in decision making on grants and variations. Involving the voice of end users in program and grant development processes will enhance the efficacy of program outcomes.

Kids First Australia, through our Whitelion services, has embedded the voice of young people in all aspects of program design, delivery, and operations. Whitelion formalised its approach to youth participation in 2020 with its first ever Youth Engagement Strategy and establishment of a National Youth Council which has shaped Whitelion responses to government enquiries, acted as paid Whitelion spokespeople, reviewed internal forms and designed a feedback campaign. Young people have also been trained to participate on staff interview panels.

Because client voice should be integral to a CSO's operation, it follows that engagement and embedding client voice should not be regarded as burdensome to the individuals nor to the organisation. Participation needs to be facilitated through adequate, ongoing, core funding of engagement activities, as well as funding skills training to enable community members and service users to participate with confidence. These in turn will need to be facilitated through covering expenses such as transport, catering, and childcare. This funding is an investment in ensuring that program design is informed by lived experience.

2. Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services

2.1 What would adequate and flexible funding look like?

Funding should be based on a business case identifying the value of the program, realistic costs, and benefits. Funding needs to take into account:

- Costs of developing a business case to strengthen the initial pilot
- Costs involved in adequate and authentic consultation with communities and end users at conceptual stage, and throughout implementation this includes ensuring that marginalized and hard to reach groups have a voice, and that client voice should be embedded in the business of the CSO, not seen as an add on
- Fully indexed funding of salaries, licences, rent and consumables involved in delivering the programs
- Administrative overheads and back of house costs, including the costs associated with the collection, analysis and security of digital data
- Evaluation costs.

Market Sounding

As mentioned in 1.1 (above) Kids First Australia welcomes the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF)'s practice of market sounding with the sector to determine the needs of communities, sector ideas and capacity, and realistic program costs, before designing and issuing granting rounds. We encourage the Commonwealth government to adopt this approach.

We attach, for reference, our Market Sounding response to the Victorian Government Early Intervention Enabler Fund (see Attachment 1).

Business Cases

We welcome the approach adopted by the WA Department of Communities to fund agencies to develop business cases and recommend that this be adopted by the Commonwealth and other State and Territory funders. For context, the WA department recognises that some organisations may need support to develop initiatives and models prior to implementation and has set aside funding to be provided as Business Case Development Grants of up to \$50,000 (ex GST) for the development of business cases to demonstrate the viability of new models and initiatives over a period of up to six months. Following the assessment of business cases, discretionary grants for implementation may be available at the discretion of the Department of Communities.

Calibre of CSOs

The government might also consider, at least in part, an 'untied funding' approach, as used in the most recent Impact Philanthropy round, which bases 80% of grant funding on the calibre of the organisation. We recognise, however, that untied use of taxpayers' funds would require rigorous anti corruption, probity, and risk assessments.

2.2 What administrative and overhead costs are not being considered in current grant funding?

A mature organisation requires, at minimum, 20% on costs infrastructure to function effectively.

Currently, grant funding does not adequately consider:

- Quality assurance and risk management
- Marketing and communications
- Staff recruitment, training and retention
- Research and development of business cases prior to program funding
- Digital data collection, storage and security
- Evaluation costs noting that rigorous, independent evaluation is critical to ensuring that programs are achieving their objectives effectively and efficiently, and that learnings from evaluation informs improved outcomes for clients

Full costs of community and service user engagement / client voice, including the costs associated with engagement activities and building skills. These are core costs, not bolt ons.

2.3 How are rising operational costs impacting the delivery of community services?

The impact of inflation and high interest rates is passed on by suppliers to CSOs through back of house expenses including insurances, software licenses, rental of office space and leasing of equipment. This is in addition to rising cost of living impacts on consumables used in program delivery, e.g. catering, food relief, stationery, and other supplies.

Even taking supplementation into account (see 2.4 below), increased salaries, license fees and other back of house expenses has resulted a funding gap in 2023 of \$600,000 for Kids First Australia.

2.4 What have been your experiences with, and reflections on, the supplementation and change to indexation?

While the supplementation was welcome, it did not cover the full amount of the minimum wage increase flowing from the Fair Work decision. This has contributed to recruitment pressures as staff have left the sector for better paid jobs.

We recommend that the Commonwealth adopt the approach adopted by the Victorian Government, which will introduce an agreed funding formula to calculate community sector funding increases for 2023 24 and beyond. The Victorian Government has negotiated extensively with the community sector peak VCOSS to develop the formula, which takes account of obligations imposed by Fair Work Australia (80% of the increase) and CPI (20%). The same formula will be used for all future funding increases. (Refer to VCOSS media release, Attachment 2).

Indexation (CPI) needs to be explicitly documented and defined in contracts and funding agreements. It also needs to be made explicit that where indexation is not applied, targets will be reduced commensurate with the real cost of program delivery. In addition, government funding agencies across jurisdictions need to take a consistent methodology and approach to applying indexation.

2.5 How can CSOs and the department work together to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds?

The department can work better with CSOs to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds by:

- Adopting the practice of market sounding with CSOs, as used in Victoria, before decisions are made about grants (see 2.1 above)
- Transparency about what is funded by which department, and with what eligibility criteria
- Funding program evaluations, and working with CSOs to use the findings, together with dynamic acquittal information to inform planning and decision making, with a focus of outcomes, rather than inputs and outputs
- Funding CSOs' digital data collection, analysis and security so that real time client data, and projections of future client needs are available and accessible
- Listening to client voices including consumer representatives on panels assessing grant applications and interviewing for tenders
- Opening the market to newer providers bringing new ideas and innovative approaches, rather than closed tenders inviting only the established players (the usual suspects).

2.6 How can government streamline reporting requirements, including across multiple grants, to reduce administrative burden on CSOs?

The administrative burden on CSOs would be greatly reduced if governments at all levels were to adopt a single reporting system, with consistent metrics. These would cover the size and reach of the organisation and funded program (measured by number of staff members and number of clients) and no more than three outcome measures which are evidence based and focus on end user impact. In addition, a word limit requiring short and sharp responses reduces the reporting burden.

Reporting on an individual contract or funding agreement may take up to half a day, depending on the availability of data, and the need to synthesise information from several sources. Depending on the number of agreements, and the frequency of reporting required, this can add up to a considerable amount of staff time.

This reporting burden is exacerbated for small CSOs. For example, we are aware of a small organisation with an annual turnover of approximately \$8M, and 21 grant funded contracts, all with different reporting requirements. Assuming each contract might require half a day to report on, and that reporting is required quarterly, this organisation might spend 42 days a year on reporting.

Typically, a mature CSO delivers a number of programs with funding, or in kind support, from all three tiers of government, and may also receive grants from philanthropic organisations and support from businesses. For example, the Victorian Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) uses a number of different reporting modes for its funded agencies delivering Children's and Family services. These range from at least four different web based platforms through to manual spreadsheets, depending on the funded program.

In Kids First's experience, philanthropic organisations have different reporting requirements. Some provide a word template to complete, others require logging into a platform where outputs and outcomes are updated. Some organisations also request uploading of receipts or other materials. The most onerous reporting involves a small amount of funding: Kids First has been required to write an acquittal for a grant of \$1000! Some larger philanthropic organisations, however, provide positive reporting experiences in that the measures are very clear and agreed to from the outset. They are tailored to the project, rather than being generic measures. They also have platforms that are easy to use and they give adequate notice that the upcoming reporting period is due.

Our Whitelion programs also partner with business, such as providing employment and internship opportunities. Additional reporting on progress to these organisations is required.

3. Providing longer grant agreement terms

3.1 What length grant agreements are CSOs seeking to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery?

Kids First operates with grants from one year to six years. It is our strong view that anything under two years will not result in effective program development, planning, recruitment, training and service delivery. At least four or five years is needed to fully trial, adjust and complete implementation of many innovative, responsive programs.

Four years' funding – Caring Dads

For example, the Caring Dads program has been funded for four years. This enabled Kids First to trial the original Canadian model for three years. The evaluation of this pilot was used to adapt the program as KODY by partnering with Odyssey House Victoria (OHV) responding to the need to focus on the use of alcohol and drugs by the men in the program and to specifically engage with children of Caring Dads participants to monitor the safety of family members and any progress made towards respectful and non abusive parenting.

Being able to run the trial for three years enabled a thorough evaluation of all elements of the program and to establish the extent to which the program was resulting in desired behaviour change. Given the complex and entrenched behaviours that the program targets, this longer period was needed to be able to identify whether the anticipated benefits were being realised. The pilot has shown that behaviour change is slow, although evaluation data shows both men and their partners believe parenting practices have improved. There has been a clear change in participants' understanding of the impact of their behaviour, which may be seen as a pre cursor to changing violent and coercive actions.

Six years' funding – EYEP and EYEP-KM

Our initial Early Years Education Program (EYEP™) was developed and trialled over six years. It provided three years of care and education, 50 weeks per year, five hours per day each week. This program was the subject of an Australia first randomised control trial (RCT) undertaken by the University of Melbourne and a qualitative study by Charles Sturt University.

We knew that our initial, highly targeted model contained the building blocks for a universal early years model that could deliver positive outcomes for all Australian children aged 0–4 and their families, no matter their start in life. Therefore, we took the best practice learnings from this program and trialled it within one of our universal kindergarten programs. Our EYEP Kindergarten Model was the result. The enhanced program, being a substantial modification from the starting point, required an additional three years to reach its potential. The enhanced program involved adding various wrap around services to Kids First centres, requiring all the attendant planning, recruitment, partnership development and implementation on the ground.

Our enhanced program, EYEP KM, is now the subject of a further three year evaluation by Murdoch Children's Research Institute (2021–23).

3. Providing longer grant agreement terms

3.1 What length grant agreements are CSOs seeking to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery.. continued

Two year funded trial – Early Help

The Early Help program pilot was funded for two years. The initial evaluation of this program indicates it is likely to take at least three years, if not longer, to achieve full implementation of the program.

Formative and summative evaluation findings reflect that after the initial twenty four months funding, the Early Help Model is still in the early stages of implementation in both the Whittlesea and Mitchell locations. There is preliminary evidence that the model contributes to increased family awareness of parenting support services, and has improved family functioning, financial literacy and parenting confidence for a very small cohort of Early Help families.

While emergent findings are promising, the model's success is contingent on developing successful partnerships with relevant stakeholders in both sites and identifying appropriately skilled Family Coaches to implement the model. Continued investment in the Early Help Model is required to:

- Provide the necessary time for implementation of the model to improve
- Ensure that the model is responsive to the needs of families
- Adapt the model where necessary.

It is more likely that the anticipated outcomes of the Early Help Model will be realised if appropriate time (estimated at 3 – 5 years) is dedicated to strengthening implementation .

3.2 What timeframes should the government aim for, at a minimum, to provide final outcomes on grant variations/extensions before the current grant ceases?

The government should provide a minimum of six months' notice of a grant cessation / variation / extension. This, in our experience, would allow sufficient time to:

- Wind up programs with lapsing funding, and first and foremost, ensure that clients are adequately informed and supported out of the program
- Give adequate notice and support to staff whose contracts are not being renewed, or in the event of variation or extension:
 - Negotiate extended contracts with staff
 - Negotiate new or varied partnership agreements
 - Recruit additional staff
 - Identify and procure additional resources and operational sites if and as required.

The nature of employment in the community sector tends to be program led. This is one of the constraints in the sector in terms of being able to attract and retain staff with the level of skill and experience needed to deliver innovative, effective programs.

Our staff are employed to work on specific contracts. A minimum of six months lead time is necessary for our organisation to be able to assist staff to either transition to other programs, for Kids First to apply for new funding opportunities to utilize their skills, or for the staff to look for other positions.

3.3 What funding flexibility do CSOs require to enable service delivery and innovation?

Flexibility in funding (including the structure of funding agreements), acquittal and variation processes are essential to ensuring that CSOs can make innovative and timely responses to new and emerging needs. Program evaluations may identify and recommend adjustments and enhancements which will result in improved outcomes for end users if adopted early and with adequate resources.

In Kids First's experience, evaluation findings have resulted in evidence based enhancements and innovations within our programs (refer to the case examples previously cited). Greater structural flexibility in the granting regime is an enabler for innovations such as these to occur.

Ideally, funding agreements should be focused on the achievement of program objectives and outcomes for end users, based on an evidence based business case. However, funding agreements should allow flexibility for organisations to be agile and innovative in adapting and reallocating funds in response to new and emerging needs within the community. This may mean moving funds within the agreement to address the emerging needs of a priority client group (for example in the event of a natural disaster, a humanitarian crisis, or a local economic shock such as employer ceasing business). There should also be flexibility to enable funds to be reallocated between agreements, for example from administrative or operating support funds into capital or asset management.

Flexibility to reallocate funds within a longer term funding agreement would also allow for innovative program and clinical interventions to achieve improved outcomes for the identified client group without the need for the CSO to return to government to apply for a formal variation to the terms of the agreement.

CSOs and end user representatives should be consulted in the design and structure of funding agreements so that funds are released when they are likely to be required, rather than on the achievement of milestones or points within the financial year. For example, programs providing material support to families may require more money at Christmas, or at the start of the school year.

3.4 What flexibility is required by CSOs in acquittal processes to support and encourage sector innovation?

Acquittal processes need to focus on outcomes, with acknowledgement that many programs run by CSOs involve long term change; for example behaviour change, which will be described qualitatively rather than in input and output measures. Rigid reporting templates with drop down menus and generic measures are not appropriate for describing innovations or adjustments to the program that are made in response to presenting or emerging needs, or because of evaluation findings.

In relation to our youth programs, we know that outcomes developed without the input of young people often end up becoming the measures that we are required to work towards with our clients and this is often unsatisfactory. Not all young people will meet their goals, even those they have set and are committed to. We want to improve how we measure outcomes, to understand and tell the story of why things happen and to be supported by government funders to do so, especially when goals are not realistic or achievable.

We therefore support the development of a common outcomes framework to measure improvements in the lives of young Australians. This will ensure government and the youth sector work collaboratively with unified purpose.

Mid point or continuous evaluation of programs may recommend adjustments that are required to ensure that outcomes are achieved, including changes to program design and delivery, staffing numbers and / or roles, training, delivery modes, and communication. Acquittal processes need to be structured so that responsiveness and innovation within the program, and their impact on outcomes for the end users, can be captured and presented in a way that demonstrates impact, and informs and enables program replication and improved policy and practice.

Many of our programs have benefited from formative and summative evaluation, enabling Kids First to innovate and adjust programs to enhance outcomes. Examples include our EYEP program, which was reimagined to take the activities into kindergarten programs for all children, and our Caring Dads program, which now includes emphases on drug and alcohol use by men and the specific needs of child family violence survivors in their own right. These evaluations are another example of effective, innovative partnerships that rely on flexible acquittal processes.

3.5 How can government improve the variation process, with consideration that CSOs must demonstrate alignment with the grant agreement and provide evidence of value-for-money outcomes?

Kids First acknowledges the need for CSOs to demonstrate alignment with program objectives and provide evidence of value for money in the delivery of its funded programs and services. It is important that the process of seeking a variation to the funding agreement is not a barrier to CSOs being responsive to changed program needs or evaluation findings, and does not place a handbrake on innovation in program delivery.

Over the life of a funding agreement, particularly a longer agreement funding services to vulnerable people, variations may be sought to:

- Capture new or adjusted program outcomes but no change in budget (for example, the reallocation of funds to different target end users)
- Adjust the grant amount to respond to increased demand, program enhancements or extension of the program, for example in response to emergencies or evaluation findings.

Timeliness and agility on the part of both parties are essential to an improved variation process and can be achieved with clear and unambiguous information about the types and forms of variation, and the process, with transparency about the delegations and authority within government to approve variations. This could include:

- Clear information about which types of variation require a Deed, with transparency about the degree of complexity and monetary thresholds required for a Deed of Variation rather than a Letter of Variation
- Realistic and transparent information about the approval process and timeframes, so that program delivery is not placed at risk by delays, for example while approval of a variation is sought by a Minister or senior official.
- A sound and open working relationship with relevant department staff to discuss need for variation, and a relationship manager to 'shepherd' the variation process.
- In the case of major variations to large or complex contracts, consultation with community or end user representatives.

4. Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of Community Service Organisations

4.1 How can the government ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding?

Kids First Australia is a well established organisation, with many successful and ground breaking programs. Yet we receive only a very small amount of Commonwealth funding and have experienced difficulty breaking into what is in our experience a closed marketplace. Government needs to not just consider new and emerging entities but look to a greater breadth of established organisations, rather than continually turning to a handful of long standing partners.

Government can ensure opportunities for all agencies by funding consortia led by experienced CSOs with which it has previously not partnered significantly.

One way in which government can ensure additional organisations have access to funding is through supporting proposals for programs that feature partnerships led by established organisations which it has not previously funded significantly. Kids First recognises the need for partnerships in all our work, and the Commonwealth government could benefit from funding us to lead consortia that includes small, new and existing place based CSOs. Some examples of programs funded by state, local and philanthropic agencies follow.

Bringing partners in to create programs

Kids First Early Help Hubs bring together a range of organisations that deliver integrated, universal and early intervention services. In addition to delivering the Early Help Model from these Hubs, practitioners are embedded within and/or provide outreach to other universal settings, based on demand and need.

In Whittlesea Early Help Hub the partners are Kids First (Lead Partner), Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, DPV Health, Whittlesea Community Connections and the City of Whittlesea. In Mitchell Early Help Hub the partners are Kids First (Lead Partner), Wellways, Family Care and Mitchell Shire Council.

The Kids First Early Help team has operational oversight from the Kids First Child and Family Services Manager and is clinically supported by a Kids First Practice Lead. Both the Whittlesea and Mitchell Hubs are led by the Early Help Coordinator who is responsible for managing a team of multidisciplinary practitioners (Family Coaches) at each site.

The Whittlesea Hub consists of three Family Coaches employed by Kids First, DPV Health and Whittlesea Community Connections. In addition, the Whittlesea site includes a variation of the Early Help Model focused on meeting the needs of First Nations families. An Aboriginal Family Coach is being employed by Bubup Wilam, an Aboriginal Community Controlled Education, Health and Wellbeing organisation (and core member of the Kids First consortium in Whittlesea). The Aboriginal Family Coach is based at the Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in Thomastown (Bubup Wilam) and reports to the Centre Manager at that organisation. One day per fortnight the Aboriginal Family Coach co locates with the team based at the Whittlesea Hub and on the opposing fortnight with the Wallan Hub.

4.1 How can the government ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding? .. continued

In Mitchell, there are three Family Coaches. Similar to the Whittlesea site, Family Coaches are employees of consortia members (Kids First, FamilyCare and Wellways). The Early Help Lead also works directly with families in a Family Coach capacity in both Hubs.

Recognising the importance of wrap-around service delivery

Informed by the implementation of our EYEP KM program, Kids First has introduced the following services in various Kids First centres. While these are established services in the main, they could easily include new providers. They have proved to be highly significant in the success of our programs, enabling some of our centres to be rated as "Exceeding" national standards:

- Maternal and child health and immunisations
- Pre school mental health consults
- Access to Early Learning (AEL)
- Integrated Family Support services (including drug and alcohol, family violence and sexual assault, addiction support)
- Parenting programs, such as Tuning into Kids, Circles of Security
- Mothers in Mind our mother and child play based group program aimed at helping mothers whose personal trauma has made parenting difficult (resourcing them to be the mothers they want to be). This includes play groups that work with parents to understand the developmental needs of their child and build their skills and experiences through attachment and play
- Informal opportunities for parents to connect and reduce isolation, such as a coffee club or parenting group
- Supported playgroups.

4.3 How could larger CSOs support smaller CSOs? What are the barriers to providing this support?

Kids First recognises that families' needs cannot be met by one organisation and that client outcomes are greatly enhanced when they are considered holistically. For families with multiple and complex emerging needs, evidence shows that engagement with universal services, such as early years education and care, financial services, allied health, housing, education, employment and/or vocational and social activity engagement opportunities, improves outcomes in child, youth and family safety, psychosocial and family functioning and physical and developmental wellbeing. Partnerships are core to Kids First's DNA. Our organisation is known for building partnerships to achieve the best possible outcomes for vulnerable and marginalized families. This is evidenced through external auditor's stakeholder interviews during our recent external HSS and ISO audit reporting. A partner reported:

"Kids First is collaborative and transparent. They are not territorial and not afraid to share findings of what works well as they want all families to benefit."

4.3 How could larger CSOs support smaller CSOs? What are the barriers to providing this support? .. continued

The importance of sound governance structures

Across all service areas, Kids First has MOUs and service level agreements in place and is a member of several local alliances and formal partnerships. We work closely with partners to overcome the challenges which can be posed by partnership work, such as unclear communication, role delineation and clarity in decision making processes; addressed through a shared goal, vision and ensuring a clear partnership governance structure is established.

A good example is the Governance Model for the Kids First Whittlesea Early Help Hub (see appendix A).

Barriers to supporting smaller organisations include the complexities involved in establishing and operating the required partnership and consortium arrangements. These are time consuming and involve sensitive and often lengthy negotiations and protocols. Good will, transparency and commitment to the shared objectives are critical success factors. These all take time and resources and should be funded.

An example of how Kids First has successfully negotiated this complex arrangement is our Early Help program. As the Lead Agency, we are responsible for:

- Executing the funding agreement with the Department
- Reporting and acquittal requirements associated with the program; inclusive of the administering and acquittal of flexible funding
- Ensuring the program is implemented within the required timeframes and framework of Implementation Science and evaluated in partnership with the Department.
- Coordination of consortia binding agreement execution
- Chairing the Governance Group
- Chairing the Implementation/Operations Group
- Chairing the Parent Advisory Group
- Membership on the State wide Advisory Group
- Providing administrative/secretariat support to governance structures
- Undertaking activities as detailed in MOU/binding agreement
- Programmatic functions such as intake and assessment, service coordination, delivery of the Embedding Family Service in Universal Services Trial, quality coordination and brokerage/referral for other service types.

As referenced above, Kids First, as the lead agency, has overarching operational and clinical governance responsibility for the trial. Integral to this is the development of a Project Advisory Group (PAG) with a membership comprising management representatives from universal services. It is chaired by the Kids First General Manager Early Childhood and Family Services and supports local implementation including reviewing performance data and ensuring that local issues impacting on service delivery are appropriately managed.

Kids First centres provide a wide range of services for our families. This is an excellent illustration of how we work with both larger and smaller organisations to provide priority services in a local centre. Examples include bi lingual workers and addressing the cultural needs of First Australians.

4.3 How could larger CSOs support smaller CSOs? What are the barriers to providing this support? .. continued

Bilingual workers

Kids First partners with Free Kinder Association (FKA) Children's Services to access bi lingual workers and interpretation support, cultural resources, toys, and books to augment our educational programs. Kids First's Volunteer Program ensures that our early years' centres actively engage local multi cultural volunteers to ensure that families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds feel included and are appropriately consulted and supported to participate in their child's learning. Volunteers receive comprehensive induction and training and work in close partnership with our Family Coaches, which provides them with the knowledge and information necessary to refer families who need additional support to other wrap around services as appropriate.

Meeting First Australians' cultural needs

Kids First's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and access to Aboriginal Advisors on our RAP Committee demonstrates our commitment to ensuring cultural awareness and the cultural safety of Aboriginal children and families. Additionally, Kids First Aboriginal Advisors have been pivotal in fostering strong relationships with Aboriginal community controlled organisations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) and Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre. The partnership with Bubup Wilam involves Kids First supporting them to employ an Aboriginal Family Coach to provide early help support to their families and also provide secondary consultation to our local services who are working with Aboriginal families.

5. Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

5.1 What is your experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches?

Place based funding is integral to Kids First business model. We strongly support the Commonwealth government in promoting this model.

All of our programs are based on and informed by our long standing presence in our local communities. This presence has enabled us to develop strong relationships with other service providers, so that when opportunities arise for collaborative work, we are well placed to quickly develop appropriate consortia.

Kids First understands that each community has its own mix of needs. For example, Mitchell Shire, within the Goulburn area, is the fastest growing community in Australia. It is predicted to have population growth of 349% by 2041. The area is currently experiencing 100 more births a month than previously. Of them, 40% are first time parents. A lack of current and forecasted infrastructure, coupled with the community already experiencing the fourth highest rate of mortgage default, double the Australian average of domestic violence, a higher parent reported rates of childhood intellectual disability, developmental delay and learning disabilities and the highest rate of child protection investigations in Victoria places Mitchell Shire at significant risk. This is why Kids First chose to establish Early Help Hub 3756 at the Wallan Community service Hub.

Response to the needs of vulnerable women

Our ability to understand and work with emerging communities further demonstrates the value of place based funding approaches. One of those communities is vulnerable mothers.

Women who are highly vulnerable during their pregnancy due to their own trauma are likely to be most in need of support and skills to parent successfully. These may be women who have lacked appropriate attachment and nurturing, safe relationships during their own formative years and now have no healthy role models on which to build their skills. History of trauma and concomitant lack of parenting skills can result in mothers having a lack of confidence to engage with early childhood programs. They may not understand the impact of early childhood education on successful later life: Having no past positive experiences themselves, they may not value the connection between early positive attachments and confidence in learning and a fulfilling later life.

For such vulnerable women, pre natal checks are an important opportunity to engage with, and connect them with, the supports they need to flourish as mothers. We therefore strongly endorse the inclusion of pre natal services in the place based model.

Being able to connect with women as early as possible in pregnancy provides the opportunity to set in place good pre natal practices, such as eating well, getting sufficient sleep and attending all recommended health check appointments. Specialist support can be provided for mental and physical health or substance misuse issues. Connecting at this time with pregnant women with disabilities or specific cultural needs may also result in better, less stressful birthing outcomes.

The process of development and maintaining strong positive attachment relationships is ongoing throughout the first 1000 days of life, and beyond. At every milestone there can be new challenges that require the assistance of specialists. Educators need to be trained in attachment theory so they can recognise and respond sensitively to trauma through behavioural guidance techniques and modelling self regulation. Furthermore, educators need ready access to colleagues who practice in infant mental and physical health for advice and support.

5.1 What is your experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches?

Kids First has successfully fostered community connection, increased parental capacity and built the capability of our early years staff to identify and respond to need early within our centres through the imbedding of Early Help Family Coaches into our EYEP KM. Additionally, at all of our centres Kids First delivers supported play groups and pop up play groups, which work with parents to understand the developmental needs of their child and build their skills and experiences through attachment and play.

In our view, the involvement of families, and especially the main caregivers and their supports, is critical and must be a fundamental part of the program. This can only happen successfully when the program is run by a locally based and informed organisation.

Response to the complex needs of young people at risk

We recognise that our impact is greater when we work with others. For this reason, we are engaged in local, regional and state partnerships and consortiums. In this way, we can contribute to effective, whole of person service solutions where the young people are.

We engage with government in forums as opportunities arise. Through our Whitelion programs staff, Kids First is on the Ministerial Task Force for Victorian Volunteer Strategy and we are a member of the Working for Victoria Youth Coalition.

Regionally we work with Wyndham Council on a place focused response for at risk young people. We are a partner to the YSAS led Pivot program in the southern region which addresses offending behaviours and recidivism of at risk young people.

We also engage with corporates for the benefit of young people, with supported job placements and sponsorship including with KFC. These long term partnerships bring stability and benefits to both Kids First and our partners as new opportunities to work together in different ways emerge.

We believe a government strategy to engage regularly with the youth sector would be an effective way to seek input, coordinate knowledge, and enhance outcomes for young people.

We would like to see more opportunities for services to collaborate and work together a no wrong door approach and funding for non competitive service delivery. For too long, services have been pitted against each other to deliver sometimes unachievable outcomes and the best value for money. More secure and longer term government funding for contracts would also help provide more stability in the sector and to staff. While the recent budget continues investment in the youth sector, we support YACVic's budget analysis statement: "The Government should commit more long term funding to a range of community based generalist and targeted youth work programs, to meet existing and projected increases in demand for services over the next decade. Such an investment in prevention and early intervention youth work would allow young people's issues to be identified and addressed early, rather than spiralling out of control and costing more in the long run."

Evaluation and documentation enables program replication

It is also our view that thorough documentation and evaluation of place based programs will provide appropriate guidelines for replicating successful programs elsewhere. Our Caring Dads program, adapted from a Canadian pilot, demonstrates this.

5.2 What innovative approaches could be implemented to ensure grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links?

Grant funding opportunities could include reference to the extent to which the applicant has worked within the community over time and require evidence of successful partnerships. While this would disadvantage new or emerging organisations, they would still be able to apply based on partnering with long established, successful locally based organisations (see section 4 above).

In addition to traditional grant funding, innovation might include forming partnerships with donors and businesses. From our long term experience working with major donors and businesses we understand that any policy and tax levers government can provide to incentivise business participation is important, including in volunteering in youth initiatives. We acknowledge that the Victorian government has implemented a Social Procurement Framework and policy statements supporting this, including young people at risk. Incentivising businesses to offer paid volunteer work/internships will improve young people's employability. Research from the Foundation for Young Australians showed that paid work experience is a key factor in employability.[1]

[1] Foundation for Young Australians, (2020) The new work standard. How young people are engaging with flexible work. July 2020. Accessed - 21/12/2020 - <https://www.fya.org.au/our-research-2/>

5.3 Which areas do you consider have duplicative funding or gaps you think need to be addressed, and what is the evidence?

Our Whitelion staff and the young people we work with report that despite much progress, including recent initiatives such as the Victorian Homelessness Emergency Accommodation Response Team (HEART) and the Family Violence Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM), referral pathways remain complex. An example of this is in the mental health area where the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Interim report highlighted the system fragmentation and missing steps in the continuum of care. We are supportive of the Victorian government's commitment to implement all Royal Commission recommendations and hope to see sufficient funding to best support young people at risk.

Federal funding for programs for fathers involved in family violence has been piecemeal in a highly complex area that needs consistent, long term investment. Evaluation of Kids First Australia's Caring Dads program has shown that changing complex and entrenched behaviours is slow but has resulted in positive impacts on parenting behaviour as reported by the fathers involved in the program and their partners.

There also needs to be funding for programs addressing the impact of family violence on children as victims, informed by the voices of children.

5.4 Where there is a community-led change initiative, could shared accountability to community and funders (government) strengthen service delivery?

Kids First's operating model has built in shared accountability to the community and funders.

Children, young people and families have a voice

For example, our EYEP KM program recognizes the importance of giving children and families a voice, rather than making assumptions about them, their context and their behaviour. Privileging children and family's self determination is highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma this means providing choice and options and information so they can make informed decisions. Our Whitelion programs for young people are co designed and led by young people.

Self-determination is critical

The principles and practice of self determination are highly important in our work with First Australians. Kids First is committed to initiatives that evidence our deep commitment to working with Aboriginal Elders and Community in a spirit of healing and mutual respect where we are equal partners with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping new solution to enduring issues.

How to sustain families' engagement

When families are engaged it is vital to sustain their engagement. If they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the services offered, they may be less likely to stop attending. When services provide high quality interactions and sustain the involvement of parents, their children also participate in the services with the goal of improving learning, development and wellbeing.

Planning for programs at each of our centres is based on a partnership approach with the families, with our staff encouraging families to participate actively in the development, delivery, and monitoring of their child's education. We use multiple channels for families to stay up to date with their child's learning progress, including online learning platform Story Park to provide the latest information and resources, and email newsletter updates. There is a Parent Advisory Groups (PAG) for each centre comprising parent representatives and supported by the Lead Teacher of the centre to provide input on all matters relevant to the development of the curriculum and delivery of the service from a parent/community perspective.

Incorporating the voices of children and young people

Educators working with children also adopt appropriate strategies to incorporate the voice of children into the program. Kids First believes that programming should be child focused and inclusive, with educators guided by the National Quality Framework and the relevant learning frameworks, as we know that when children can influence what and how they learn, they are more likely to participate and learning opportunities are enhanced.

Kids First's goal is empowering children, youth and families' voices and creating active engagement by ensuring participation of all children and young people, with a particular focus on ensuring children from vulnerable backgrounds and their families are appropriately supported to participate in their critical early years. Based on the principles of proportionate universalism, the Kids First EYEP model has an in built capability to be scaled up for children and families requiring additional support in a seamless manner.

5.4 Where there is a community-led change initiative, could shared accountability to community and funders (government) strengthen service delivery? .. continued

Practical tools to promote engagement

In our experience not all families are willing or able to engage with the service actively and contribute to the development of the program and ongoing improvements. Parents can be limited by a range of factors such as availability of time, language and cultural factors, level of vulnerability etc., from being active participants in their children's education. The various strategies that Kids First has adopted successfully to ensure the voices of children, families and community are being heard include:

- Publications in several languages
- Parent surveys and Parent Advisory Groups (PAG).
- Informal coffee mornings for parents to come together and hear from experts on topics related to the parenting and education of their child
- One on one engagement with families requiring additional support to plan collaboratively for the education and development of their child, supported by regular review of the plans to measure progress towards goals.
- Parent information sessions at the commencement and towards the end of the kindergarten year, leading to the transition of the child to primary school.
- Drop in facilities at the centre, such as provision of computer and internet facilities for parents to access while the child attends the centre.
- Celebration of important cultural events showcasing Aboriginal and multicultural communities.

Shared accountability with partner organisations

Kids First has a strong track record of working closely with local communities and engaging effectively with them to deliver responsive services. We have long standing partnerships with Maternal Child Health services, local schools, local community and allied health service providers, and strong referral networks in the various local areas, through services such as ChildFIRST and the (Victorian Government) Orange Door. Kids First believes these partnerships drive improved access and participation of children in early years' services.

Our Whitelion programs include partnerships with corporate organisations, such as KFC, which provide employment opportunities for young people at risk.

Evaluation a key to sharing accountability with funding bodies

Kids First believes engaging in deep, longitudinal evaluation (formative and summative) is a key way to share accountability with funding bodies and program partners. By providing honest, open feedback about results and opportunities for improvement at various points throughout the program's life, the CSO gives the funding organisation the opportunity to bring its experience and knowledge to the project and work with the CSO to maximise the results of the funding. To that end, we include representatives of the funding bodies on governance committees, such as that overseeing the next phase of the Caring Dads program, KODY.

6. General questions for each focus area

6.1 If any, what are the problems or challenges you think have been overlooked?

Kids First Australia endorses the need for evidence based program design and delivery by CSOs. To date there has been a reliance on international models and bodies of evidence in community services, not necessarily because Australian examples do not exist, but because organisations are not funded and supported to conduct research and evaluation to build this base. There needs to be substantial investment in building an Australian evidence base, that captures our own data, stories, and realities, and reflecting our diverse communities.

6.2 What other solutions or changes could also be considered?

- A whole of government approach to services for children and young people, with no wrong door, rather than fragmented funding framed by inconsistent methodologies. Government directly, and through funded agencies, should utilize different and innovative ways of engaging especially with young people.
- A common outcomes framework there is a need to improve how we measure outcomes, informed by service users, especially children and young people, and their families. We need to better understand and tell the story of why things happen and to be supported by adequate and responsive funding to do this.

6.3 What does success look like?

Our approach, through strong local partnerships, and listening to the voices of our clients, is demonstrated through the four case studies used in this submission. These are the foundations for success.





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Kids First Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and recognises the continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded. It was and always will be, Aboriginal land.



We celebrate and value diversity. Kids First Australia is proud to provide support to the community in the most inclusive manner.

Appendix A: Kids First Consortium Whittlesea Early Help Hub 3757 – Governance Model



Kids First Consortium Early Help Hub 3757 Governance Model

