

# A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector – Public Submission

Life Course Centre Submission to the Australian Government  
Department of Social Services – A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector Issues Paper

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The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence  
for Children and Families over the Life Course

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## Life Course Centre

This submission is provided by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre).

The Life Course Centre is a national research centre investigating the critical factors underlying deep and persistent disadvantage to provide new knowledge and life-changing solutions for policy, service providers and communities.

Our Centre is administered by the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland and is a collaboration with the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and The University of Western Australia as well as leading international experts and key Australian government, non-government, community, business and philanthropic partners working at the front line of disadvantage.

The Life Course Centre brings together multiple research disciplines, data, methods and partners to investigate experiences of deep and persistent disadvantage by Australian children and families over the life course, to identify strategic interventions at specific life stages and transitions that can make a real difference, and to inform the development of personalised and community-based solutions that can help to break the cycle of disadvantage.

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## Our Submission

The Life Course Centre welcomes the opportunity to provide a public submission to The Australian Government Department of Social Services – A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector Issues Paper.

Our submission is grounded in the work of our ongoing **Data for Policy** initiative, which has played a leading role in bringing together researchers with government and community sector leaders to explore ways to collaborate and fully utilise administrative data to address deep and persistent disadvantage and maximise life opportunities via key institutions such as education and employment.

In order to better understand the causes and life course consequences of disadvantage, and to develop effective interventions to address them, our research requires access to integrated longitudinal data on children and families. This enables our researchers to investigate people's interactions with government and community services over time, and to identify the critical time-points at which interventions can be most effective.

A lot of positive progress has been made in developing infrastructure and datasets comprising linked administrative information on children and families in Australia, but there are still challenges remaining and strategy required – including in the field of community sector data. The Life Course Centre has played a key role over the past 10 years in negotiating access to highly sensitive administrative data on Australia children and families. These are government records that have been tightly held and not previously utilised for research, but we have helped to change this with our strong partnerships approach with data custodians.

We have also worked closely with several community organisations over the past 10 years to support the development and assessment of programs and services that seek to address and reduce disadvantage. We have observed that while they have a wealth of experience, they often have limited resources, short-term funding cycles and lack capacity (in both time and linked data) to evaluate their program outcomes.

In particular, many of the community organisations we have worked with are looking for a means to link their data with Commonwealth and State data systems to enable effective evaluation of their programs. While they may collect quality data on their clients and invest in data development and curation, they have no means to assess outcomes once clients leave their programs.

Our submission addresses two key areas of focus in the Issues Paper. It reflects the discussions at our most recent Data for Policy Summit, held in Canberra in August 2023, and also supports the submission provided by our partner **Mission Australia**.

One of the key themes of our recent Data for Policy summit focussed on ways to progress data linkage systems that can link non-government data with Commonwealth and State data systems. **We believe this type of partnership and data linkage is fundamental for achieving a stronger community sector.**

### **Area of Focus 1: Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership**

Co-design during the grant life cycle is critical to ensure effective programs. This includes co-design with community service organisations, members of the community who will use the services, policy makers and academic experts.

**Case study:** Our evaluation of the Try, Test and Learn (TTL) Fund for the Australian Government Department of Social Services was an example where this was tried with some success, but where more could be done to improve the process. Our TTL evaluation report provided new evidence and insights into what works to reduce long-term welfare dependence by examining how a Priority Investment Approach (PIA), and appropriate early intervention, may enable at-risk groups to build skills and capacity, to take opportunities to participate in the labour market and live independently of welfare. TTL adopted a co-design approach that aimed to collect quality data and evaluate outcomes using linked administrative data. As noted in our report, the evaluation highlighted problems with accessing and analysing the data, including problems with comparability, validity and reliability of the DSS Data Exchange (DEX) – data routinely uploaded by community organisations to DSS for monitoring and evaluation. For details of some concerns about DEX in relation to the TTL evaluation, please see Appendix C of our **Final TTL Evaluation report**.

Liaising with communities early in the co-design process and working with them to design programs prior to awarding funding is important. TTL aimed to do this. It included an Expression of Interest (EOI) stage from interested sector members to assess areas of need and initial program plans and ideas, followed by a more intensive co-design phase to design the program and assess the funding needs and time frames.

But good data also needs to be collected to evaluate outcomes. As noted above, the DEX needs review and update to ensure that the data collected by community organisations are fit for purpose for evaluation needs – including that measures are collected in a standardised and rigorous way to ensure comparability across community sectors, and timely evaluation of outcomes.

Organisations need to be trained and resourced appropriately to support collection of the data, and technology and infrastructure systems need to be redesigned and updated to ensure efficient, effortless, digital collection of measures. Ideally, these data systems would be collected in a way that enables linkage to other data systems such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) or National Disability Data Asset (NDDA), for more extensive analyses and evaluation.

**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?**

The Life Course Centre supports the submission provided by our partner, **Mission Australia**, which highlights the need for adequate grant funding contributions, sharing across governments and community sector organisations to enhance insights, and efficiencies gained through agreement on stable and coordinated minimum data sets.

We support the following recommendations made in the **Mission Australia** submission:

1. The Federal Government should include explicit provision for data collection, analysis and sharing activities in grant funding.
2. The Federal Government should lead a process including state/territory governments and CSOs to build data sharing protocols, mechanisms and opportunities across government and non-government agencies.
3. The Australian Centre for Evaluation should work with CSOs as well as agencies to build evaluation into program design from the outset.
4. The Federal Government should work with CSOs and state/territory governments to design and implement consistent national minimum data sets with outcomes and service data, to be coordinated across governments by service type (similar to the Services Homelessness Services Collection managed by the AIHW).

**Area of Focus 2: Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services.**

The real cost must include appropriate resources to evaluate outcomes. This means funds to adequately support administrative burden of designing and collecting evaluation data, training to ensure data are valid and reliable, and support to the evaluators (either DSS or external experts).

Communities of practice that enable organisation to share resources, knowledge and experience may help provide shared learning across the sector. A fund to support community organisations to come together to discuss and share learnings may help build expertise and support smaller organisations with fewer resources and experience.