

A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Social Services Issues Paper on creating a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector in Australia. The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania, representing more than 150 community service organisations (CSOs), students, and individuals. We advocate for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. Many of our member organisations work closely with children, young people and their families who are either experiencing, have experienced, multiple and intersecting challenges that threaten their capacity to thrive.

Introduction

The Centre's membership comprises mainly CSOs delivering services to children, young people and families, working across the spectrum of human need, including poverty, family violence, alcohol and other drugs, mental health and disability.

As noted in the issues paper, community services are bearing the brunt of higher cost-of-living expenses. The impacts of COVID-19 and natural disasters, and a decline in volunteer numbers at a time when there is a shortage of key workers, have also presented strategic and operational challenges for our service system.

A recent Victorian government presentation on the community services workforce outlined several challenges, also common to other jurisdictions in Australia:

- The community services workforce is not keeping pace with the workforce growth required.
- In addition to increasing supply, there needs to be a focus on retention and maximising productivity.
- Workforce shortages are not uniform, with some sub-sectors experiencing greater vacancies, particularly at mid-career and experienced professional levels.
- Rather than multiple short-term and project-by-project investments, there needs to be an effective system of workforce supply and development in place.¹

These and other challenges have implications for each of the five areas identified for discussion in the issues paper.

¹ System Reform and Workforce unit, Department of Families Fairness and Housing, The community services Fair Jobs Code and wider workforce strategy, Tri-Peaks Forum presentation, 3 November 2023.

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

As a peak body, the Centre plays a crucial role in communicating clearly to government the needs of the child and family services sector in improving the lives of clients who look to them for assistance, while also working with CSOs and government to implement system reforms based on the best available evidence.

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

The Centre recently developed a paper for the Department of Treasury and Finance in Victoria which explored ways of strengthening the collaboration between government and child and family service providers. Drawing on survey results and in-depth interviews, the paper examined the challenges to establishing strong partnerships and what would enable more meaningful working relationships between our service system and government.

One enabler of better engagement between government and service system is to have a common or shared understanding of concepts such as 'outcomes', 'impact' and 'co-design'. There is a difference between outcomes from a human services perspective where the focus of service providers is generally on improving the lives of the individuals who seek their assistance, and outcomes from a government perspective which focus more on whole communities or groups over the long term.

The concept of co-design is also not always understood in the same way. Recent work conducted by the Centre involving young people with lived experience of family violence and/or the care system has highlighted the need to make sure the voices of clients and practitioners are involved from the outset in a project's conceptualisation rather than being brought in once a program has been designed to ratify the model. More meaningful engagement requires genuine co-design opportunities, drawing on sector knowledge and use of evidence, from initial conceptualisation. One example of an effective collaboration between government and service providers is the Primary Health Network (PHN) where collaboration in the form of co-design can be seen in:

- Needs assessment
- Planning and prioritising of commissioning intentions
- Designing services or deriving solutions
- Designing a procurement process
- During contract negotiation
- In monitoring and evaluating.²

² Australian Government Department of Health (2018) Co-design in the PHN commissioning context, Australian Government, <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHNCommissioningResources>

In recent years, federal and state policy and budgets have often been driven by independent Royal Commissions rather than through consultations with the sector. However, in the last Victoria state budget, the significant investment in residential care came about as a result of a successful collaboration between the government and child and family services sector over several years. The key enablers of this success were threefold. Residential care providers came together to identify the evidence base, including therapeutic-based models which work and the actual costs of service delivery. The Centre played a facilitating role in bringing together the Department of Families Fairness and Housing, service providers and an economic analyst to discuss the findings around cost and what information the department needed to advocate for residential care in the budget. Several service providers shared their financial data to reveal the day-to-day costs of running a residential care service, overlaid by the financial impacts of COVID on staffing and service delivery and the need to be working in evidence-informed ways. The data provided was critical in supporting the case to be made by the department. The fact that the Centre, as the industry peak, led this engagement was crucial in making sure department and sector leaders could come together in a collaborative, trusted and non-judgemental environment.

The recent survey and interviews conducted by the Centre highlight the need for ongoing discussions between government and sector around current gaps in service delivery and existing barriers to positive outcomes for vulnerable children. Respondents/participants are seeking regular platforms for engagement rather than one-off opportunities.

The Centre welcomes the Community Services Advisory Group (CSAG) intention to review and broaden its membership. As the peak body for service providers in Victoria and Tasmania delivering a wide range of services to children, young people and family, the Centre is in a unique position to bring a multi-sectoral dimension to the work of the CSAG and strengthen the voice of our sector. We would welcome becoming a member of this representative group.

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?

Technology is not the only way of addressing the problems identified in the issues paper and implicit in the above question. Technology fixes are costly and complex and often do not make a difference unless the culture and leadership in organisations are also strengthened. More streamlined information sharing requires capability building and promoting the relevance of the data collected to those collecting it – the practitioners. In addition to creating data systems that talk to each other across organisations and government, more streamlined information sharing could also involve a focus on building data literacy, increasing understanding of the value of data and providing strategies that embed data collection into clinical practice, supporting those collecting the information to value and get use out of it.

Government departments should be looking at data and evidence across different platforms and not in siloed approaches. One enabler of a more streamlined information sharing system would be to have better integration across government departments to enable the mental health, health, education and employment needs of carers, families, children and young people to be addressed.

As the issues paper notes, human services often receive funding from multiple sources, are required to report in different ways using different templates, and rarely have opportunities to streamline their data findings and reporting. Service providers would benefit from more streamlined reporting templates and tools when reporting on the difference a particular intervention or approach has made.

One example in Victoria of a more collaborative and streamlined approach to evidence collection across different workforces is the OPEN expansion program, funded by the Commonwealth and State governments, which brings together four peaks working across child and family services, sexual assault services and family violence to share and embed data to improve outcomes for clients. The funding bodies have encouraged the four peaks to develop their own reporting format with a broad framework for reporting.

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?

The Centre's members use a wide range of methods to engage service users in program design, implementation and evaluation. Most agencies provide specific tools and resources to enable client participation, supplemented by clearly communicated policy expectations around the importance of client input, staff training and the provision of appropriate technology to facilitate engagement. The use of online engagement tools offers convenience and easy access for participants depending on whether they have access to a computer/Internet and the necessary technical literacy to engage.

Our members provide opportunities for service user input through targeted surveys/questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, workshops, and online or paper-based feedback forms. Having a range of options available for capturing client input means more choice in participatory methods without imposing a burden.

The Centre has its own lived experience group of parents whose insights have helped shape the training delivered to child protection workers. The participatory model (Voices of Parents) we have built with these groups of parents has not only changed their lives in positive ways but has encouraged child protection practices to be more empowering of parents, caregivers and their children. The Centre also works with groups of young people with care experience (through our Raising Expectations and Peer Mentoring programs) who have helped develop training modules for residential care workers, TAFE teachers and university equity staff to improve understanding of childhood trauma and of the care system. Participation has been enabled through clear policy guidelines regarding the embedding of lived experience perspectives in our work and the trusted relationships which have been fostered between Centre staff and service users to ensure their voices can be heard in culturally respectful ways.

Place-based services generally have strong local connections to community, which enable trusted relationships to be built between service user and provider and can facilitate client participation in program design. Procurement approaches need to recognise the value of locally led, collaborative arrangements which bring together local service providers with deep knowledge of client need and opportunities in specific communities. Our members in regional areas report high levels of community

engagement in problem solving during recent flood emergencies, including important insights from parents and caregivers to create safe environments for children with diverse and complex needs during a period of considerable disruption.

One example of an inclusive model which encourages service providers to co-design their interventions with the families and communities they serve, is the Victorian Government's Partnerships Addressing Disadvantage (PADs) initiative, characterised by social impact investments which tackle complex social issues through outcomes-based partnerships. This approach specifies the outcomes which government wants to achieve and allows service providers to develop suites of interventions to achieve those outcomes. Services report on the achievement of those outcomes and are empowered to adjust their services or interventions so long as those outcomes are being delivered. Such an approach encourages providers to fully engage with clients in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs.

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

The Centre welcomes the acknowledgement that funding does not always meet the reality of the costs incurred by service providers. The questions in the issues paper mainly focus on adequacy and flexibility of funding, impact of rising operational costs, and reduction of the administrative burden.

Adequate funding and administrative load

Funding grant templates do not always encourage open and transparent budget itemisation, with administrative and operational costs often being absorbed into staff and resource costs, which hides the true operational costs of an intervention.

Activities which take considerable time are rarely funded, such as establishing a new partnership or engaging meaningfully with people who have lived experience of the service system. If these types of activities are to be effective then the project and its funding needs to allow time for the building of trust and rapport.

Evaluation needs to be part of every program funding grant and so needs to be built in as a line item in its own right with adequate time allowed for review and monitoring for the purpose of continuous improvement. Frequently evaluation is either not included in the funding allocation or is seen as happening only at the end of a program rather than as a key component needing to be embedded from the very beginning.

Another cost that is often not reflected in the budget submissions is the amount of time needed to oversight or manage the work. Funding might be set aside for a dedicated program manager role but there is rarely sufficient funding to cover the involvement of executive leadership or senior staff in supporting the work.

Several themes have emerged from the Centre's consultations in relation to streamlining funding processes:

- Re-use information that has already been captured through other processes rather than requiring repeated provision of the same content.
- Provide multi-year funding where possible to eliminate time-consuming annual or bi-annual resubmissions.
- Provide regular opportunities to engage with agencies directly to draw on their existing knowledge which can inform procurement processes and budget bids.
- Improve and simplify application forms and accompanying information so expectations are clear, the number of ineligible or incomplete applications is reduced, and only the most relevant recent information is being collected. Improve functionality of online forms so applicants can save their draft documents and come back to them, have multiple people accessing and editing from any location, and can cut and paste or re-use previous information.
- Reduce timeframes around decisions to reduce the amount of uncertainty affecting agency capacity to plan.
- Increase First Nations representation in decision making and access to funding
- Increase opportunities for smaller and regional organisations to apply as these agencies generally rely on volunteers or internal staff to complete the funding, unlike some larger organisations or consortia which may have the resources to bring in an external consultant to prepare the submission.

Impact of rising costs on service delivery

Based on our consultations with members, we have identified three main sources of higher delivery costs for agencies.

Increased cost of living expenses: In 2022, the Centre surveyed our members to determine the impact of rising costs on service delivery. Ninety per cent of the 137 survey respondents to our survey reported that the families they work with have been 'significantly' affected by the rising cost of living in Australia, with a further 9 per cent having been 'moderately' affected. The families our members work with are already vulnerable across one or more domains, often with multiple, complex and co-existing challenges, of which poverty is a key driver and contributor. This has had significant implications for the nature of supports and services needing to be provided and has contributed to the rising costs of service delivery.

The most commonly expressed impact identified by agencies in our consultations was the inability of the service provider, despite their best efforts, to meet demand. A second key impact was reported to be a shift in practice focus from psycho-social support to crisis- and emergency-focused practice. There has been pressure on agencies to continually source funds and goods and to connect families into other agencies. For example, around 71 per cent of respondents' organisations have needed to provide more families with brokerage funds for emergency items (food, medicine, educational costs, household items). Much time has been spent trying to link families into other services such as food banks and emergency relief, financial counselling and housing, with less time available to be spent

on providing parenting support. Many respondents identified the need for their organisations to be more actively engaged in advocacy work, lobbying state and federal governments for greater funding to help meet the growing demand for material and other aid.

Long-lasting impacts of COVID-19: Service providers are still feeling the impact of several years of COVID-19. To adapt quickly and effectively to the new conditions – lockdowns, families in isolation, schools closed, health services overwhelmed – agencies delivering human services needed to upgrade their existing technology or invest in new technology to continue delivering one-on-one services for clients. Providing staff with COVID-19 equipment and protection has also added to the day-to-day costs of service delivery for agencies.

Evidence-based and evidence-informed models: Another cost to service delivery has been the need for organisations to stay informed about the latest available evidence supporting improved outcomes for children and families. In many cases, agencies have invested in training staff in implementation science, innovation science and use of evidence-based programs, all at increased cost to service providers. Our agencies have led the way in implementing programs based on the best available evidence in local contexts.

Indexation: On behalf of its members, the Centre has long advocated for indexation that reflects the real cost of delivering services. Indexation needs to keep pace with inflation and cost of living increases. It is not only the quantum of indexation or its timeliness which are important but the funding certainty it provides to the human services sector; funding through indexation enables agencies to plan for the future, invest in staff and infrastructure, and provide ongoing support for service users. In South Australia, mandatory indexation applies to all multi-year funding agreements, including procurement and grants, and indexation rates for the not-for-profit sector are published four years in advance, which provides agencies with the certainty to make long term decisions and retain and invest in staff. The Centre supports indexation being applied to multi-year Commonwealth funding grants to reflect the true costs of program delivery.

3. Providing longer grant agreement terms

The Centre supports longer grant agreement terms given the time required to develop, implement and evaluate interventions, particularly when establishing new partnership arrangements or incorporating the voices of service users. Funding needs to be certain, predictable, and of sufficient quantity and duration to provide adequate time to recruit, plan, implement and evaluate.

Short-term resourcing generally means insufficient time is allocated to planning and designing, with little opportunity to evaluate and build evidence about what has worked and what can be improved. Having short grant agreements makes it difficult for service providers to establish robust partnerships, recruit and train staff, adapt to local conditions, recruit clients, establish data collecting and sharing protocols, implement the core elements of the program, and review or evaluate its success in the time allocated. When funding grants are one-off, reliance on further bids to continue or expand the initial funding envelope places a burden on organisations as they struggle to retain staff in the absence of funding certainty. Depending on the size and complexity of a program, our members favour longer-term or rolling four-year (for example) funding commitments which are more

likely to result in sustainable preparation, successful establishment, workforce recruitment and development, and evaluation activities to build evidence. Developing, establishing and embedding new models of service delivery requires time. Funding should enable ongoing evaluation, feedback, reporting and implementing for change as required.

Regardless of the decision about the duration of a particular grant, there must be a greater commitment to timely communications and transparency of decision making on changes to grant duration.

4. Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of community sector organisations

Child and family services – and human services more generally – are provided by a rich diversity of organisations differing in size, location, breadth of service delivery, mission/values, cultural background, and profile of service users. This diversity is a strength, creating options for families, innovation and creativity, and a breadth of strengths and capabilities. The different service models and organisational approaches suit different needs in different circumstances and contexts.

The issues paper presents an opportunity to make sure all organisations have opportunities to tap into the finite funding pools which exist to cater for the needs of their specific groups of service users. It is important to make sure that grant funding does not flow only to large mainstream organisations with existing resources and infrastructure but that smaller and medium size organisations can also access funding opportunities. This has been a consistent theme raised by our smaller and/or regional member organisations. Ensuring opportunities across the sector, including for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), is an important principle to factor in when considering funding allocations.

There are several ways in which government can make sure grant funding flows to more diverse groups. In the interests of greater equity, this could be done through targeted funding which is available only to specific types of service providers groups. Funders could also offer mentorship opportunities, supporting diverse providers to plan their programs and submit successful applications. Increasing funding for underrepresented groups can also continue to greater diversity in funding allocations.

Funding bodies might also need to re-think their assumptions about what constitutes evidence. Too often, government favours outputs over outcomes data, quantitative over qualitative information. Yet ACCOs are arguably leading the way with their more nuanced, strengths-based, holistic and non-linear approaches to children and families which seek to engage stakeholders in self-determined change. Greater diversity could be supported by funders allowing more nuanced examples of evidence that can show the difference a human services program is making for clients rather than relying solely or mainly on outputs or quantitative data. The Centre supports greater investment in ACCOs and ACCHOs nationally so that all ACCOs are sufficiently resourced to be able to meet local need regardless of where these communities are located, and supported to gather and share evidence of the difference they are making.

5. Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

Government, philanthropic organisations and corporates are increasingly looking to place-based approaches as a means of delivering local solutions to entrenched disadvantage. Place-based approaches can be focused on one area or operate as part of a broader initiative which incorporates multiple sites with a common purpose and characteristics.

The Centre's experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches

Many of the Centre's members offer place-based services characterised by multi-agency and/or coordinated services (collaboration), a focus on supporting clients in a specific location (tailored, localised, meeting local needs in a defined geographic area) and encouraging community involvement/co-design (prioritising and engaging local people including the most underrepresented voices).

While evidence about the efficacy of place-based service provision is still growing, a recent overview of place-based initiatives in Australia highlighted the fact that these approaches by their nature are long term and developmental.³ As a consequence, building strong, locally grounded partnerships amongst trusted organisations requires funding that is long term, flexible, and with sufficient resources to cover co-design processes, implementation, evaluation, capacity building and training, and mentoring.⁴

Place-based approaches are particularly evident in Aboriginal communities where practice has long been underpinned by the principle of being on Country (place-based) and driven by community. In its 2021 examination of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system, the Commission for Children and Young People in Victoria noted that 'best-practice initiatives are place-based, delivered on Country, and driven by Aboriginal people with decision-making control and authority over program design and delivery'.⁵

While there is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to implementing place-based initiatives, there are key features of place-based programmes and campaigns that have proven to be effective, such as the Victorian government's Neighbourhood Renewal program with its place-based partnerships and community governance, which brought communities together to tackle disadvantage in their local area.

Another example of successful place-based initiative is The Geelong Project, a whole of community, early intervention program aimed at reducing school disengagement and youth homelessness in Geelong. Its focus is on young people at risk of disengaging from or leaving school, becoming homeless and entering the justice system. An early evaluation showed the initiative to be 'a leading

³ Harris, D., Cann, R., Dakin, P., Narayanan, S. (2023). Place-based Initiatives in Australia: an overview. ARACY, Canberra.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, Our youth, our way: inquiry into the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system, Commission for Children and Young People, Melbourne, 2021.

exemplar of what is being described as “collective impact” in which a community’s support resources work collaboratively to a common vision and practice framework using the same data measurement tools’.⁶

Important elements in the success of this model include:

- Multi-disciplinary expertise provided through youth and community workers and school wellbeing staff, working with the state government and university researchers to provide the funding and build the evidence base
- Expansion from an initial core of three committed schools to encompass all schools in the initiative’s catchment area, which has contributed to the collective impact of the program
- Strong systemic underpinnings including the Student Needs Study; e-Tool box with monitoring tools, workforce development, access and pathways enhancement, co-location, formal partnerships and evaluation.

This early intervention, place-based model is transferable to other communities (with local adaptation to local needs). It is underpinned by a commitment to:

- community collaboration (through collaborative referral decision-making by school welfare staff and early intervention workers through a single point of entry)
- early identification support work (using a survey instrument that takes in all students and not only a select at-risk group)
- a practice framework which is flexible and multi-tiered (using a youth-focused and family-centred case management approach involving the young person, their family, schools and agencies working together from the same care plan)
- robust and embedded longitudinal outcomes measurement (which looks at the entire community cohort of vulnerable young people and monitors outcomes over time as opposed to an agency-focused approach against agreed targets).

Place-based initiatives which bring together multiple disciplines, sectors, agencies and workforces in a specific geographical location, would benefit from cross-sectoral pooled funding rather than one single funding stream to better support sustainability given the long-term nature of the reform being implemented.

Innovative approaches to ensure grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links

Currently, ‘commissioning and funding processes do not support place-based community-led work’ and this is what needs to change.⁷ For funding to reach trusted community organisations, funders need to actively support collaborative and multi-agency approaches rather than engage in competitive approaches which pit small local agencies against medium to larger, out-of-area agencies. It is the nature of the local connection that is going to be of most value in these funding decisions because community members are more likely to have a meaningful role – a stake – in the

⁶ MacKenzie, D. (2018). The Geelong Project: Interim report 2016-17. Melbourne: Swinburne University.

⁷ Strengthening Communities Alliance (2023). Position paper.

<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/position-statements/strengthening-communities>

design, implementation and evaluation of the program over the long term than an external out-of-place organisation with limited links or history to the area.

The Strengthening Communities Alliance, a large group of representative organisations from across the human services, argues for funding to be simplified and sustained so more communities can benefit from place-based initiatives. The Alliance calls for the co-creation of an investment framework by the federal government working with community representatives, funders, and intermediary bodies to facilitate investment across policy portfolios.

Other innovative steps suggested by the Alliance include the establishment of a national clearing house to share what works, and a nationally coordinated approach to improving outcomes measurement and evaluation approaches.

One of the Centre's regional members, whose organisation has been part of a place-based welfare conditionality project, has identified several core principles which could enable place-based approaches to work and guide funding decisions:⁸

- Recognise the existing strengths of a community when selecting the site for a place-based intervention. Basing selection on the perceived deficits of a location or community can do more harm than good when local community members are given no agency and are not part of either the formulation of the problem or its solution.
- Recognise that 'place' is more than a physical location; it encompasses a sense of shared history and reflects community aspirations, with links to a wide range of people in the community, making local agencies well placed to respond to evolving local need.
- Acknowledge the importance of service users' lived experience and their unique perspectives on the nature of the service they receive and allow sufficient time in funding timeframes for meaningful participation to occur.
- Recognise that for place-based approaches to work, community members need to see themselves in an initiative, resources need to be sufficient and governance across the partnership needs to be strong and continually being reviewed.⁹

In conclusion

In responding to the DSS issues paper and selected questions in the paper, the Centre has drawn on the experiences of our member organisations in child and family services, which not only work closely with children, young people and families to improve lives but are also committed to creating and using the best available evidence to demonstrate the success of the programs they are funded to deliver.

The Centre appreciates the opportunity to respond to the issues paper and looks forward to engaging in constructive ways in the future with DSS to better support the evidence-informed work of our critically important human services sector.

⁸ Tennant, D. (2023). Place-based interventions: What helps and what doesn't. Croakey Health Media. <https://www.croakey.org/place-based-interventions-reflections-on-what-helps-and-what-doesnt/>

⁹ Ibid.