



DSS: A New Approach to Programs for Families & Children

Together in 2770 Collective, Mt Druitt

This submission was written by the following members of the

Together in 2770 Collective:

The Hive Mt Druitt

BaptistCare HopeStreet

Bidwill Uniting

Jesuit Social Services

The Salvation Army

Willmot Community Group



The Together in 2770 Collective

The Together in 2770 Collective are a group of organisations and residents who have agreed to come together to focus on the priorities and aspirations of Mt Druitt residents, working in a place-based, innovative, and collaborative way to achieve long-lasting and system wide change. Mt Druitt is a diverse and vibrant community in Sydney where its people are resilient, strong, passionate, and kind. It is a community that is faced with complex social and economic issues that can lead to developmentally vulnerable children. In the past, the approach to providing support services in the 2770 postcode has been fragmented where services have operated in silos, resulting in service gaps, double-ups and a community left feeling 'handed-around'. The Together in 2770 Collective believe if we 'leave our egos and logos at the door', remain place-based, put the community first, and share our resources, we can break cycles of disadvantage and see children, families and communities thrive.

The Collective are deeply involved in the suburbs of Willmot, Lethbridge Park, Bidwill and Tregear in conducting community consultations and locally led initiatives around areas such as community connection, access to services, safety, housing, cleanliness and infrastructure. Each suburb has its own Working Group with representatives from community organisations, schools, preschools, Council, government, and residents which meet regularly to collaborate on innovative solutions to complex challenges in the community. The Collective additionally have a focus on families, particularly those with young children, and have collaborated on after school programs, playgroups, child health programs, and investment in our early childhood and care services.

Some of our participating organisations include The Hive Mt Druitt (United Way Australia), Jesuit Social Services, The Salvation Army, Bidwill Uniting, BaptistCare HopeStreet, Blacktown City Council, Willmot Community Group, and local schools and early education centres. The Together in 2770 Collective has developed a series of Insight Papers. Our Insight Paper "*A Collective Approach to Community Development and Mobilisation*" highlights our approach to community development and the effectiveness of our model (<https://thehivemtdruitt.com.au/our-approach/our-learnings/>).

Responding to the Discussion Paper

In reviewing the discussion paper, we are encouraged by the focus the Department of Social Services is placing on being integrated and responsive to community needs. With our strong track record in these ways of working, we have collated our reflections on these relevant questions and share our insights below.

Connected, co-located, and integrated services

The Together in 2770 Collective hold being place-based and collaborative as core pillars of our work. Our organisations have actively decided to work differently than the mainstream service delivery model, despite this being how organisations may be funded. We recognise that to make meaningful impact and change in communities experiencing deep complexity such as Mt Druitt, we need to work together to share resources, leverage the expertise of different organisations, and build trust with the community together to create a safe local service system where families can seek support.

We also wish to note that in order to work in this way and strive for integration, additional funding is required to do this intentional community engagement as current government grants do not consider this and staff are often doing this outside of their scope and out of goodwill.

Effective ways to connect & coordinate services for families:

- *Collective impact and place-based initiatives:* Collective Impact & place-based approaches have been repeatedly shown to be an effective way to address complex problems within communities. These initiatives by design are hyper focused on the needs of a local area through the collaborative efforts of organisations, schools, early learning centres, government, and community members. Having a backbone organisation that is funded to coordinate this work helps it to succeed, bringing the organisations together, supporting them to find a common goal and opportunities for shared projects to meet the needs of families.

Tangible examples of this from Together in 2770 include:

- *Shared engagement in community.* We engage in at least 6 collaborative engagements each week focused on building trust with children and families. These include breakfasts, a playgroup, coffee van pop ups, sports afternoons, and after school programs. There are also additional engagements in school holidays and throughout the term.
- *Warm referrals across organisations.* Due to the trust built within the community, families feel comfortable approaching staff when they need support. Our Collective leverages the trust we each have with families to introduce them to our partner organisations who may be best place to support. Families who may have been unlikely to call an intake line or walk into an organisation's building are then able to access support.
- *Placed based caseworkers/counsellors.* Offering direct family support services within the community rather than inside an office. This builds awareness of the service with families, allows families to become familiar with the workers and build trust before commencing a working relationship.
- *Regular collaborative meetings.* Each of our four suburbs has a working group where stakeholders and residents come together monthly to discuss current needs in the

community and deliver collaborative solutions. Representatives from those deeply involved organisations form The Together in 2770 Governance group who meet bimonthly to provide strategy and reflect upon our collaborative work.

- *Remove logos & labels from workers in the community.* This has worked for our collective to build trust within the community, and show the community that we are coordinated organisations working for the common goal to see families and the community thrive, not competing for exposure or brand recognition. This has been an intentional choice to change the power imbalance between families and professionals, in encouraging families to have greater agency in relationships with a service and share their expertise.
- *Funding for community engagement roles* within teams or incorporated into existing program expectations. Connecting and coordinating services requires resourcing in staff time to make these connections, find collaboration opportunities, and build trust in community. Funding for these essential tasks is very scarce in government grants and needs to be increased if we are to see a more connected and integrated service system.

Case study:

Multiple organisations from the Together in 2770 collective had been coming together to provide weekly coffees outside a school gate. These were relational in nature and not promoting a service. Two mothers were talking over their coffees, with one sharing about some troubles she was experiencing. The other mother suggested she speak to a caseworker to which the other strongly opposed stating she did not trust caseworkers and was fearful of her child being taken away from her. The other mother suggested she speak to 'Jane', the worker serving coffee who was there every week chatting with families, as she thought she might be able to help. The mother was very open and happy to speak to Jane, as she had known her for a couple of months from these consistent engagements. Jane was in fact a case worker with a local organisation and could support the mother with her situation. This demonstrates the importance of building trust and being available in the community ready to be able to support when families are ready.

How organisations could demonstrate their connection to the community:

- Share qualitative stories of the impact the organisation has had across the community
- Share consultation process to listen to community voice. How have the applicants regularly consulted with a wide range of community for their projects, captured their feedback throughout the project and how have they made changes in response to feedback.
- Investment in physical infrastructure and staff based within the area e.g. office address in the local community
- Provide proof of the collaborative work completed with other stakeholders and organisations. E.g. shared goals & principles, meeting minutes, support letters, how organisations staff work together throughout the week.
- The number of volunteers or staff employed from the local community on the team.
- Proof of the scoping work conducted in the community to ensure the applicant is not proposing work that already exists in the community.
- Prioritise funding and investment to organisations, regardless of size, that can demonstrate they hold strong connections with the local community and can demonstrate meaningful codesign and outcomes.

- How has the program or project proposed by the application been meaningfully designed for the community rather than providing a ‘cookie cutter’ program that worked in another region.
- Consider investing in organisations working with a smaller geographic scope such as a suburb or postcode to truly meet the needs of that community rather than larger regions such as local government areas as these areas have such unique and differing communities within them

Responding to community need

The Together in 2770 Collective are encouraged by the Department’s intention to ensure funding responds to the needs of communities. In our work we have witnessed organisation receiving funding that have conducted minimal, and at times tokenistic, consultation with small groups of community members and no transparency about how they have shaped their approach after the fact. We have often heard from community members that services are inaccessible, or there is no one to help, despite the knowledge of the funding given to Western Sydney for family supports. It’s evident there is a gap in the services provided, and what families want and we hope this consultation and our input can be of assistance in creating this new funding structure.

Factors DSS should consider to ensure funding reflects the needs of communities:

- Outline expectations that applicants must undertake meaningful community consultation with community members and local stakeholders to understand the strengths and needs of the community are, and design their programs in response to their insights.
- Consider a more nuanced definition of ‘community’ to be suburbs, postcodes or areas of community gathering, rather than larger regions where possible to support targeted place-based funding and maximise impact.
 - E.g. The 2770 postcode has specific needs to ‘Western Sydney’, a casework organisation can meaningfully design a casework approach for a postcode reflecting the priorities of that area rather than a large region. A suburb approach is even more intentional and effective recognising for example the suburb of Minchinbury has a different social profile and needs than Willmot within the same postcode.
- Conduct a review about what funding is already going into geographic areas and ensure there is minimal overlap of service provision, and gaps are being met.
- Consider how truly embedded organisations are within a community such as the hours spent active in that community out of the office, engaging with local stakeholders and families.
- DSS should expand the funding provided to community organisations to beyond crisis management and prioritise longer term, community engagement funding to allow for deep understanding of the needs within the communities.
- DSS should ensure that funding provided is flexible and responsive to local needs after the organisation has conducted consultation with community. The needs of communities change over time, and DSS needs to ensure that funding contracts have flexibility to encourage organisations to adapt to meet these needs.
- DSS should prioritise funding to organisations who are already working in the community, with strong community links and can demonstrate the effectiveness of their work.

- Funding should focus on the depth of effectiveness and impact within the community instead of prioritising a broad reach of programs with larger quantitative results.
- Adequate time is given to organisations seeking to apply for funding to engage in a genuine process of community consultation in order to co-design projects and initiatives that are being funded. Funding should prioritise initiatives that have been developed in partnership with community members and with First Nations leadership and consultation

How organisations can demonstrate their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community:

- Sharing their consultation strategy and processes to meet with a range of community members and how organisations plan to respond to what they hear from the community.
- How many other local stakeholders the organisation is partnering with as this will inform how ingrained the organisation is within the community.
- Provide qualitative stories outlining community members experiences and perspectives of the concerns and strengths of their community
- Taking an ecological approach to services offered and not targeting supports for children and families in isolation but taking a whole of family approach.
- A description of how an organisations work is having a greater impact across the community ecosystem outside of direct service delivery. For example, the work the Together in 2770 Collective has conducted in our suburbs with families has had an impact in school attendance, increased access to healthcare services, and advocacy in improving transport.
- The organisation's commitment to working in a place-based or relational way as these approaches place community at the centre

Example:

The Together in 2770 Collective can demonstrate we are listening to the community and meeting their needs through:

- A shared listening strategy called 'Linger, Listen, Learn' where insights from community voices are captured and shared after each engagement event. These are shared in a common location, grouped into themes, and used to guide the collaborative work.
- Being place-based and out of our office buildings throughout the week engaging with residents at community buildings, parks, car parks, schools, early learning centres etc.
- Agendas and minutes from monthly suburb working groups of organisations, stakeholders and residents to discuss priorities in the suburb and how to respond.
- Codesigned programs & advocacy efforts resulting from community voice e.g. Holiday programs for children, the establishing of a paediatrician clinic, after school programs, advocacy for improved bus networks.
- 'Impact Yarns' where we hold relational 'interviews' with community members to explore their perspective of the impact of our organisations working together in their community
- Delivering community leadership training to upskill residents and build their leadership capacity.

Conclusion

The Together in 2770 Collective are encouraged by the Departments efforts to reduce complication and reporting in their Family and Community Activity grants. We are encouraged by the intention to promote organisations to be community led, collaborative and meeting community needs. We hope the insights provided in this submission can be useful in practically understanding how we as a Collective have managed to work in this way. We would welcome any opportunity to further discuss our submission with the Department and assist in this reform.