**Submission to the
NSW Legislative Council
Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry
into service coordination in communities with
high social needs.**

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Introduction

The Smith Family (TSF) welcomes this opportunity to provide input into the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry into service coordination in communities with high social needs.

Whilst TSF absolutely endorses the ongoing use of proven scalable programs, we are pleased to see the ongoing interest by policymakers in a departure from traditional policy formulation which assumed replication of proven models in all contexts. It is heartening there is now a strong consensus amongst researchers and policy makers about the importance of service integration and coordination and the importance of 'place' as the locus of service and systems reform.

Our input to this submission is drawn from our deep experience in implementing and coordinating place based approaches. This includes more than ten years as Facilitating Partner through the Federal Government's *Communities for Children* program in nine disadvantaged communities across Australia, the now ceased *Partnership Broker* program as well as our extensive experience in working in partnership in a place based context through TSF's *Learning for Life* program. Given our focus on supporting highly disadvantaged children, young people and their families our comments are framed around this part of the service system.

Our comments specifically relate to two of the questions set out in the Terms of Reference for this enquiry as follows:

  a) the extent to which government and non-government service providers are identifying the needs of clients and providing a coordinated response which ensures access to services both within and outside of their particular area of responsibility;
  b) barriers to the effective coordination of services, including lack of client awareness of services and any legislative provisions such as privacy law.

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education focused children's charity and is committed to increasing the educational participation and achievement of Australian children and young people in need. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our belief is that every child deserves a chance and our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need, by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

TSF provides holistic and long-term support from pre-school, through primary and secondary school and on to tertiary studies. In 2013-14, TSF supported over 134,000 children, young people and parents/carers nationally. This included over 34,000 young people on an educational scholarship, approximately 5,500 of whom were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Close to 40,000 children, young people and parents/carers were supported through our *Learning for Life* programs and a further 40,000 participated in programs facilitated by TSF, such as the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* initiative.

At the centre of TSF's work, and the heart of the organisation, is a belief in the power and possibilities of relationships. For disadvantaged children to thrive, many of whom are growing up in lone parent and jobless households, they need to be connected to, and supported by, an extended family or an extended well-coordinated network of timely support. The premise and intent of the Legislative Council's inquiry align with our holistic, place based, targeted early intervention approach.

The persistence of disadvantage by location in Australia

While there has been much focus in recent years on policy and program approaches that seek to coordinate and integrate services by location, it is clear that there has been little real progress in changing outcomes for people living in many disadvantaged locations. Recent reports such as the NSW Legislative Council e-brief *"Child disadvantage in NSW"* (Montoya 2014) and Jesuit Social Services "*Dropping off the Edge"* report demonstrate clearly that little is changing despite considerable activity to address issues in these communities.

A major theme of *Dropping off the Edge 2015* is the consistency with which localities identified as extremely disadvantaged in 2015 resemble those ranked in earlier studies (Vinson et al 2015).
For example, in New South Wales, nine of the top 12 'most disadvantaged' postcodes in 1999 remain in the top 12 in 2015 (ibid).

Thus, 'place' or location is clearly associated with structural barriers that do not currently seem to be ameliorated by current service delivery arrangements. When social disadvantage becomes entrenched in a community it can lead to intergenerational disadvantage and poorer outcomes for children and families. (Denburg and Daneman 2010; Centre for Community Child Health 2011). In many of these neighborhoods there is often a narrower range of health, education and community services available and services are often more difficult to access (Arthurson & Jacobs 2004). Additionally, those existing local services can find it challenging to respond effectively to the complex needs of the families in these communities(Moore 2008; Moore & Fry 2011) and have difficulties engaging with vulnerable and marginalized families (Katz et al. 2007).

At an individual level, there is a range of data and research that show clearly that the circumstances of parents have a real impact on educational outcomes for children and young people. Factors such as socio-economic status, parental education level, sole parenthood and Aboriginality are key risk factors for early school leaving and associated long term life impacts (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2013). The data show clearly that children and young people from low SES backgrounds continue to fall behind at all stages of the education system and leave school earlier than their more advantaged peers (COAG 2013; SCRGSP 2015).

Given these data, it is clear that there are a range of structural factors and individual issues that combine to perpetuate ongoing inequality of opportunity and outcomes in disadvantaged locations in Australia, and that the range of services and supports in place to address these issues is not effectively working to change these circumstances at a systems and structural level.

Service co-ordination and integration initiatives in NSW and Australia

The Smith Family commends some of the recent initiatives of the NSW Government in seeking to enhance the integration and coordination of services for vulnerable people in NSW. Initiatives such as *Families First* (now *Families NSW*), *Stronger Families Alliance* and *Brighter Futures* are all underpinned by a focus on place and aiming to ensure that services are accessible to those who need them at the time that they need them. At the school system level, efforts such as *Connected Communities* are adopting place based principles to effect change and to tackle complex and deeply entrenched educational disadvantage.

As noted above, TSF has extensive experience in implementing the Australian Government's *Communities for Children* Initiative. We are the Facilitating Partner with responsibility for community consultation, service mapping, strategic and activity planning and supporting implementation of services for 0-12 year olds and their families in nine disadvantaged communities across Australia, three of which are in NSW.

Each of the initiatives described above has been developed and designed on the basis of extensive literature regarding the potential benefits of better coordination and integration of support services for particular cohorts to achieve particular sets of outcomes. While progress has been made in achieving change at some levels of each of these programs, they have yet to achieve sustained change across the broad range of indicators relating to child and family wellbeing. It appears that we have sound underpinning theory for these approaches, but have yet to realise their full potential in practice.

A November 2014 review of place based initiatives conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) notes that Australian place-based approaches supporting children's wellbeing continue to gain traction and resonate with government, philanthropy, practitioners and communities. However, the study notes that we are still at the early stages of understanding *what* works in relation to place, as well as *how* it works and, indeed, *if* place-based models actually make a difference to children's wellbeing. (Fry et al. 2014).

Picking up on many of the critical success factors articulated for Collective Impact approaches, the CCCH study also sets out a series of actions, which if implemented in a coordinated way could accelerate progress and leverage from existing place based opportunities and investment. These are:

- thought leadership, advocacy and coordination
- whole-of-government policy
- co-production of policy
- funding arrangements that foster collaboration, rather than competition
- investment in the right type of research; that is, well-designed long term
- evaluations to measure impact, as well as evaluation that promotes continuous learning and improvement
- better coordinated research, targeting areas where there has been an identified need for greater evidence

- network/s to share lessons and knowledge (may draw on an existing network or information exchange mechanism)
- targeted professional development to strengthen expertise and address skill gaps

TSF has direct experience of endeavouring to implement these actions. We have been working to address the complex issues impacting on educational attainment for disadvantaged students through the implementation of our *School Community Hub* model. Our work brings us into contact with the 'child and family' service system and the education service systems. Our observation is that there is little contact between these two parts of the service and an opportunity to leverage resources to support families is potentially lost. While the outcomes focus for this program relates to educational engagement, retention and advancement, the process of engaging and supporting parents is fundamental to the model. Short-term funding arrangements mean that service delivery is unreliable and frequently changing.

Consistent with the findings of the CCCH study set out above, it is our view, based on our experience of implementing place based approaches, that their full potential has been hampered by a range of factors including:

- Poor inter and intra Government coordination;
- Lack of focus on common data sets and data sharing
- Short term policy focus and funding arrangements
- Lack of focus on long term, ongoing evaluation and adaptation

The opportunities for change

As noted above, the range of activity in collective impact and place based approaches underway in NSW provides a strong platform on which to build long-term effective approaches. It is important that we continue to endeavour to deliver multi-sectoral and multi-level services to disadvantaged communities that have the end user at the centre of service system thinking. It is important that we continue to learn from and adapt current initiatives rather than revert to single outcome policy thinking.

Drawing on the evidence from various Australian and international reviews of place based approaches as well as our deep experience in implementing place based approaches, TSF considers that there is now a real opportunity to build and learn if we address the issues identified above.

Inter and intra Government coordination:

All levels of government in Australia have rightly shifted their thinking and policy focus to the potential of place based initiatives to make a difference for vulnerable people. However, to date there has been little planning or coordination of initiatives, which has led to duplication of process and services in some areas with service gaps in others. Additionally, there has been imposition of additional layers of community governance

arrangements, further taxing already laden service systems. As facilitating partner for *Communities for Children* for over ten years, we have tried to improve coordination 'on the ground'. However greater cooperation between in particular the Commonwealth and State government, and also local government <u>at the policy development and program planning stage </u>is critical to ensure that responses to support vulnerable families are coordinated and built on existing service infrastructure.

We are concerned that current discussions around increased division of constitutional responsibility for services on the ground have the potential to exacerbate rather than resolve this issue. Concern about 'cost shifting' between levels of government has the potential to result in inability to fill service gaps. This means that families and children will continue to fall through the cracks of service systems, perpetuating ongoing disadvantage.

We are heartened by the clear efforts across the NSW Government to better coordinate service delivery across departments to provide holistic person centred services.   This has been an appropriate response to the complex and interrelated issues faced by people experiencing disadvantage. We strongly encourage the NSW government to continue and further strengthen these initiatives and to consider moving to the next step of pooled funding and devolved responsibility for decision making to local community governance arrangements.

While the policy intent of whole of community initiatives is laudable, our observation is that there are still a range of practice issues to be addressed. Decisions made by one department, for example on the basis of efficiency of operation by the housing department have the capacity to substantially undermine approaches by other departments or services directly funded through the fundraising efforts of not-for-profit providers.

Common and shared data

We note the considerable progress made by the NSW Government to implement outcomes reporting across all parts of Government in accordance with the *NSW 2021* plan. This ongoing measurement is fundamental to the development of good policy and service delivery planning. We note the efforts also to improve reporting times for indicators so that more immediate action can be taken where appropriate.

This ongoing monitoring and evaluation is essential if Government funds are to be prudently allocated and to ensure that there is public accountability on whether initiatives support those who are most disadvantaged. Ensuring that data is reported both at the aggregate and disaggregated levels and is publicly available is critical if real progress is to be made on the objectives underpinning *the NSW 2021* plan.

Consistent with ensuring that there is coordination of effort across levels of government, and between government services and the not-for profit sector, The Smith Family notes the important public data reporting role that the COAG Reform Council previously played, including in providing disaggregated data on young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, low SES or rural backgrounds. The role of the Council was significant in enabling progress over time to be tracked on a range of key economic and social indicators. It is hoped that following the cessation of the Council in June 2014 COAG will develop other mechanisms for ensuring critical

progress data is made publicly available, including for different groups
of individuals whose outcomes have historically been poorer. The loss of Reform Council reporting has left a significant gap in the availability of clear, regular and comprehensive data about progress for vulnerable cohorts.

Short term policy focus and funding arrangements.

TSF supports the ongoing review and improvement of services for vulnerable people. We appreciate and understand that incoming Governments will want to apply their particular policy focus to effect change. However, services systems need to be responsive to the particularities of the community in which they operate. The loss of one component of the system can have ongoing repercussions for the system as a whole. Policy or funding changes should be made on the basis of data and ongoing consultation. As noted in the *Dropping off the Edge report,* perseverance is required and it is unrealistic to expect rapid short term improvements following brief community strengthening interventions (Vinson et al 2015).

The capacity of service systems, and the effectiveness of place based initiatives is heavily impacted by changes in service provision across all levels of Government. Policy or programme change or withdrawal can have a significant flowthrough impact for referral networks etc.

Ongoing evaluation and adaptation

It is clear that place-based initiatives are complex and require different ways of working (Fry et al. 2014). This way of working requires a new set of skills and knowledge if we, collectively, are to be accountable for change at a population or whole-of-community level. Developing and implementing appropriate evaluation methods for multi-level interventions is fundamental to reviewing and adapting practice in a planned way.

Place based approaches clearly make conceptual sense. However, there is still little evidence that they 'work' in the long term. The absence of evidence on place based reforms in the Australian context, particularly those with a focus on improving children's outcomes is a significant issue.

Further research is required to establish the overall effectiveness or impact of place-based approaches in improving outcomes for people living in disadvantaged communities. This should have a key focus on the conditions under which interventions are effective is (eg. community demographics) and effective implementation processes.

Conclusion and recommendations

Coordination across government

While there is a high level of interest in and activity around place based approaches in NSW (and Australia more broadly), there is considerable further work to do in coordination to reduce overlaps and deal with service system gaps. Coordination needs to be considered in terms of the role of all parts of the human services sector, including Commonwealth Government initiatives, State Government and the contribution of the not-for-profit sector, which is very often not resourced through either level of government.

Additionally, there is little in the way of formal evidence about the efficacy of the approach. This is particularly the case for long term research. Most of the available research relates to a description of how best to implement or support place based approaches as opposed to evaluating long-term impacts of the initiatives.

We need to ensure that our collective efforts to change outcomes for people living in disadvantaged communities are informed by effective practice and efficient processes. The Smith Family endorses the recommendation in the *Dropping off the Edge* report to establish a Centre for Community Strengthening and Program Evaluation as set out in the recommendations of that document (Vinson et al 2015). We also endorse the recognition of the crucial role that state and territory governments play in strengthening communities and support the establishment of counterpart state and territory units performing linked coordinating educational and evaluation functions.

Supporting implementation

While endorsing the establishment of Commonwealth and counterpart State agencies to coordinate service planning across levels of government, at the community level, we believe that a locally based 'backbone' organisation are best placed to coordinate implementation efforts at the local level. This has been well documented through in Stanford University's innovation review.

Our practice, and the evaluation of the Communities for Children initiative (Muir et al 2009) demonstrates the efficacy of place based approaches in which a not-for-profit organisation facilitates community consultation, service mapping data analysis, and importantly, high quality implementation of agreed programs and initiatives.

TSF is currently involved in an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant project, led by Professor Ross Homel from Griffith University and involving state and federal governments as well as a number of large not-for profits. . We believe this project provides a strong template for how effective implementation can be supported to achieve long term change for disadvantaged communities. The focus of the project is on strengthening the capacity of the *child service system* (rather than the efficacy of individual programs) and evaluation of the impact on child wellbeing. The first phase of the project will conclude in 2016 and we urge the legislative council to monitor its progress and findings. Further information can be found via the attached link.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information on this project as required.

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