



*everyone's family*

**Inquiry into Human Services: Identifying whether effectiveness of human services could be improved by introducing greater competition, contestability and informed user choice.**

**Submission on the Productivity Commission's Issues paper**

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## Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into introducing competition and informed user choice into human services. We recognise the vital role that the human services sector has to play in the wellbeing of the Australian population. Innovative approaches to address the challenges faced by the human services sector in the dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century can only be positively informed by this inclusive approach. By placing emphasis on improving the outcomes, effectiveness and efficiencies of human service delivery, the Australian Government will contribute to bridging the gap that exists due to entrenched disadvantage and improve the overall welfare of all Australians.

Our comments in this submission relate particularly to The Smith Family's experience in implementing large scale prevention and early intervention community programs to support improved outcomes for children and young people growing up in poverty and for whom the risk of transmission of intergenerational poverty is high. Our views are informed by our experience in both metropolitan and regional/remote communities across each state and territory in Australia.

## The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education-oriented charity and delivers programs in 94 communities across all states and territories. In 2015-16 we supported 127,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their parents/carers.

The Smith Family currently supports over 33,000 students on a long-term *Learning for Life* scholarship aimed at improving three key long-term outcomes for the young people we support. These are: school attendance, advancement to year 12 and engagement in employment, education or training post-school. Approximately 19% of these are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

We are the Facilitating Partner for nine federally funded Communities for Children sites. In this role we apply systems thinking to facilitate a place based, whole of community approach which aims to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children and families in disadvantaged communities. Key functions include service co-ordination and integration and commissioning of services. Changing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a key focus for the Smith Family.

We have, in consultation with local communities developed a number of programs seeking to address this complex issues. This includes our evidence based *Girls at the Centre* program which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls to stay in school by providing focused resources, activities, mentoring and events. Originally developed and implemented in Alice Springs, this program is now being run in Wagga Wagga, NSW and Bairnsdale, Victoria. We also provide support to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from remote communities to attend private schools through the federally funded Indigenous Youth Leadership Project.

This submission will respond to selected questions aligned to our experience and skills as requested, in the Productivity Commission Issues Paper, December 2016. While recognising the interconnectedness of services such as social housing and universal health services to the achievement of positive outcomes, areas of focus are:

- Government commissioned family and community services; and
- Services in remote Indigenous Communities. .

## Tailoring reform options

### Request for Information 1

The Commission is seeking feedback from participants on whether Figure 1 reflects the characteristics that should be taken into account when designing reforms to service provision for the

six priority areas considered in this inquiry. What other characteristics should the Commission consider?

### **Characteristics of service users, service providers and government stewardship**

The Productivity Commission's issues paper sets out a proposed model of characteristics of human services, including the service users, service providers and government stewardship. The proposed characteristics to be taken into account when designing reforms to service provision are reasonably robust.

The Smith Family particularly agrees that effective government stewardship requires initiatives that inform users to consider language and other barriers. Awareness and understanding of available services often depends on the motivation and ability of the users to interact with service providers and the level of support that is offered to users. Assistance offered to navigate service provision is critical in ensuring appropriate uptake of services. . Simple approaches to support users from the access point to further referrals should be considered as a characteristic that enables efficiency and effectiveness within certain human services systems.

We also agree that monitoring and evaluating outcomes and reacting to feedback from users and providers are critical in ensuring quality, equity, and efficiency in the delivery of human services. However, the focus of evaluation for government should be deeper than evaluating outcomes at a programmatic level as is currently the situation. The current lack of coordination of data and service planning across levels of government is, in our view, a major barrier to coordinated service delivery.

In considering the characteristics of service users and the barriers faced, we would include emphasis on the barriers that exist due to differences in language and/or culture and entrenched disadvantage. This issue is particularly pertinent in the context of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, where consideration of cultural safety of services can determine whether or not they get used. An increasing reliance on digital approaches may also be a barrier. For example, significant proportions (35%) of the *Learning for Life* scholarship students we support do not have secure reliable computer access in their homes. Some of the families who do have access may have limited technical capabilities required to effectively identify, locate and access human services.

The Smith Family notes that the focus of the Productivity Commission's enquiry relates to the provision of government funded services. However, we also note the substantial role played by philanthropic, corporate and individual providers of funds. One of the key characteristics of service providers such as The Smith Family is their capacity to leverage funding relationships with the broader Australian community to extend the scope of services with a view to improving outcomes for disadvantaged populations.

### **Request for Information 2**

The Commission is seeking information on the potential to introduce greater user choice to the six priority areas considered in this inquiry. This includes information on:

- How to support users with complex needs, or a reduced capacity to make informed choice
- How to overcome the challenges of introducing greater user choice in regional and remote areas

### **The potential to introduce greater user choice to the six priority areas considered**

The Smith Family agrees that through the introduction of greater user choice in certain services and under specific conditions, the effectiveness of human services are predicted to improve the wellbeing and welfare of Australians. However, we would argue the notion of choice is contestable in some areas that are being explored. It has been noted that increased user choice can be empowering for users, however when accessing public services, including health care, dental care and education, service users with limited resources are often have little real choice as to the services on offer. . Offering increased user choice is also not always feasible, particularly in regional and remote areas. In these unique situations, greater focus should be placed on increasing effectiveness through quality services and if possible, offering a relatively tailored service according to the needs of the community in which the service is provided. There are a range of complexities that exist in regional and remote

communities which can be overcome by gaining a deep understanding of the needs of those communities. This is a time-intensive and sometimes cost-intensive process, but there are long-term benefits to be gained, including better outcomes, increased trust between service users and service providers and the appropriate tailoring of services to suit the unique requirements of the communities.

## **Commissioning Family and Community Services.**

Many of the comments above and in our previous submission to the Productivity Commission on this issue are pertinent to your request for input with regard to the model of provision for family and community services. The key points The Smith Family would like to re-emphasise with regard to the potential for commissioning approaches to influence service provision and outcome are:

- As you have noted, issues faced by disadvantaged people and communities are complex and people needing service support can be involved with multiple parts of the service system to achieve an outcome. Family and community services can often not be separated from the broader service system, each part of which works to a set of separate, siloed outcomes. At present, our service system is characterised by erratic and often incoherent approaches to policy, service design and data collection and analysis across levels of government. In the absence of a coherent set of agreed outcomes towards which service providers can map their efforts, the focus will continue to be on measurement of inputs and activity, to the detriment of service users. The loss of the COAG reform council means that there is currently no published baseline data from which to track national progress.
- There is no solid evidence base yet in Australia or overseas that demonstrates that increased contestability in service provision leads to better outcomes for service users, particularly those with complex needs. Those initiatives that have been implemented to date such as Employment Services and VET reforms have not delivered intended outcomes for people with more complex needs and in the latter case have actually been detrimental. We suggest some deep analysis of these initiatives to better understand what has been learned by their lack of outcome prior to implementing any further initiatives. Implementation of the NDIS also provides a good learning opportunity regarding features of consumer driven service provision, providing a real opportunity to learn from some of the emerging challenges in this initiative.
- There are also international initiatives that provide a good basis for understanding preconditions for successful implementation of greater choice in human services delivery. Glasby and Littlechild's 2016 publication provides a comprehensive overview of UK and international experiences in this regard. The publication highlights "the inherent policy tensions of personalisation that could be used to further accelerate 'consumerist' reforms of public services as well as promoting choice and control, citizenship and independence"<sup>1</sup>

## **Human Services in remote Indigenous communities**

### **Request for Information 32**

The Commission is seeking information on service delivery challenges in remote Indigenous communities, including:

- Examples of the costs faced by service providers in remote areas and how they differ to those for similar services in regional and urban areas (cost data would be particularly welcome)
- Strategies to address the challenges of recruiting, training and retaining staff

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<sup>1</sup> **Direct Payments and Personal Budgets: Putting Personalisation into Practice, 3rd edn.** J Glasby and R Littlechild, Bristol Policy Press 2016

## **Service delivery challenges in remote Indigenous communities**

Providing quality services in remote communities is challenging for a range of reasons but primarily lack of service infrastructure and small populations, making it economically challenging to provide even essential services. . The economics of this situation has resulted in services frequently being provided through 'fly in/fly out' models, resulting in services only being available during in community times. .

Considering one of The Smith Family's programs – the Li-Ardubirri Playgroup – funded by the Department of Social Services and being run in Borrooloola, NT: a three day trip including flights (\$1,000) and accommodation (\$800) amounts to approximately \$1,800 per individual. The small populations and high levels of disadvantage in remote communities can mean that there is limited capacity in terms of education and skills, within the local community. To address these challenges, particularly in Borrooloola, The Smith Family incorporates a mentorship and training program that complements the implementation of the Li-Ardubirri Playgroup. Through this program, we currently employ three local women and a non-Indigenous Coordinator. Since 2010, we have mentored and trained about 12 women in Cert 1, 2 or 3 in Early Childhood Education and Care. At least four have secured employment at the local crèche, the school or at another similar service, Indi Kindi. We currently have three women enrolled in the course at various levels. This approach ensures that the positive impacts are compounded through increasing the education and skills levels of the adult members of the local community.

### **Request for Information 35**

The Commission is seeking information on ways to improve the effectiveness of human service provision in remote Indigenous communities, including:

- Ways governments can improve how they engage with communities
- The scope for greater community-level involvement in service planning and in ensuring there are ongoing improvements in provision (for example, through co-design approaches where communities collaborate with government and providers to design services)
- What support communities (particularly small communities) would need in order to have a greater role in service planning (such as capacity building).

## **Increasing the effectiveness of human service provision in remote Indigenous communities**

The Smith Family's experience of working in remote communities demonstrates that services that do not consider the unique cultural context of the specific community will not be utilised by community members. Community involvement in determining and designing appropriate services is paramount to service utilisation. The Smith Family is a signatory of the APO NT<sup>2</sup> Principles which are designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach for non-Aboriginal NGOs engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal communities in the NT.

### **Request for Information 36**

The Commission is seeking information on ways to improve commissioning arrangements for human services in remote Indigenous communities, including:

- The potential for more integrated services to improve the service effectiveness, including particular services that would benefit from integration, and the level of integration that would be suitable (for example, information sharing or merging of service providers)
- The barriers to effective service coordination and how they might be overcome.

## **Commissioning arrangements for human services in remote Indigenous communities**

The Smith Family partners with local organisations to build their capacity, to develop strong relationships and deliver programs that suit the needs of the community. This approach is only

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<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT) is an alliance comprising the Northern and Central land councils, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (<http://www.amsant.org.au/apont/>)

successful if a solid foundation is built with service users. We note examples of whole of community approaches that are demonstrating good early results such as the Justice Reinvest<sup>3</sup> initiative in Bourke, NSW. This initiative has taken the time and invested resources to develop a deep understanding of the needs of the local community and tailored an approach to address those needs.

Government ostensibly supports and encourages collaboration and partnership between organisations, but this is often a costly approach that requires critical funding to be made available. Funding these types of collaborative partnerships will support effective and efficient delivery of services, particularly in remote areas.

Standardising information and data systems for particular human services sectors can help promote the integration of service provision. For example in the case of *My Health*, secure personal and medical information is stored and shared between the user's medical professionals. Barriers to this approach in remote areas include access and usability of this type of technology. Effective information sharing systems will generate great benefits for service providers but may not be necessary or culturally appropriate for service users in remote communities.

The families that we support on our *Learning for Life* program are highly mobile, with 20% of our students having been at four or more schools and 1 in 20 having been at six or more schools. School records are not shared between schools when students relocate and this often results in a lack of understanding of the students' current and past circumstances. The education sector can benefit from a nationally standardised information and data system.

## Conclusion

The Smith Family recognises the vital role that the human services sector has to play in the wellbeing of the Australian population. We also fully support innovative approaches which address the challenges faced in the dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, we note that the challenges faced in many disadvantaged communities, and in particular in remote Indigenous communities require a more nuanced and inclusive approach to tackle the entrenched disadvantage. We believe that these challenges exist partly due to limited and/or inconsistent collaboration between service user and service provider. In remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, working in a culturally safe and competent way is a fundamental precondition for building trust necessary to service uptake.

We encourage the Productivity Commission to consider that complex and long standing challenges cannot be addressed with siloed service solutions. We note that there are examples of whole of community approaches which enable competition and collaboration across service systems. User-centred practice, including design thinking and co-design processes have the potential to provide a degree of choice to service users whose options are often constrained by their capacity to navigate service systems or mandates of government policy.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.justreinvest.org.au/justice-reinvestment-in-bourke/>