



everyone's family

The Smith Family

Input to Productivity Commission Consultation Paper

What is known about systems that enable the 'public health approach to protecting children?'

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Context

The Smith Family welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the Productivity Commission's investigation into what is known about systems that enable the 'public health approach' to protecting children. We note the focus in particular on systems that protect children abuse and neglect that occurs within families.

Aside from outlining The Smith Family's experience in providing support for families with complex needs, we have limited our comments to areas where the discussion paper articulates a request for information.

Relevance to The Smith Family

As Australia's largest national education-oriented charity, The Smith Family supports disadvantaged Australian children to participate fully in their education, giving them the best chance of breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our programs intersect with the wider service system in myriad ways.

The Smith Family supports children and young people to participate more fully in their education by providing long term innovative, evidence-based programs and emotional, practical and financial support throughout their schooling and tertiary education. Our approach is focussed on next generation change, leverages the universal service system (schools), is early intervention, preventive and emphasises long-term support.

We currently support 45,000 students on the '*Learning for Life*' Program. Tracking the individual progress over time of students on the program is key to assessing its effectiveness. Each student on *Learning for Life* has a unique student identifier which enables their progress to be monitored. Data on a range of short-term outcomes is collected, such as increases in students' reading ability, motivation, confidence and knowledge of careers and post-school pathways. The **focus on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes** is important given research shows the contribution both make to long-term educational success.

Short-term outcomes are the foundations for achieving three key longer-term outcomes, which The Smith Family has been tracking since 2012. These are:

1. School attendance (**Attendance Rate**)
2. School completion (**Advancement Rate**)
3. Post-school engagement in employment, education and training (**Engagement Rate**).

There are strong links between attendance, achievement, school completion and a range of longer term life outcomes, post-school. These are important outcomes for the long-term economic and social wellbeing of young people and for national productivity and social cohesion.

In addition, The Smith Family is the facilitating partner for nine Department of Social Services funded Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP)¹ sites across Australia. In this capacity, we take a 'whole of community' approach to supporting disadvantaged families and children. Through this approach, we establish a governance arrangement through which service providers, service users, community leaders, business, and government officials can collectively understand and assess the needs of their respective communities and determine the best ways to organize and strengthen their assets, capacities, and interests. Using a strategic Whole Community approach leverages the knowledge and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders in assessing how best to provide and plan for services.

A Whole of Community approach has the following benefits:

- Shared understanding of community needs and capabilities
- Greater empowerment and integration of resources from across the community
- Stronger social infrastructure
- Establishment of relationships that facilitate more effective prevention, and early intervention approaches

Our commentary below draws on our experience of working with disadvantaged families and children in struggling communities over many years, many of whom move in and out of contact with the Child Protection System.

Information and evidence on any other key system characteristics a system should have to enable the public health approach to protecting children

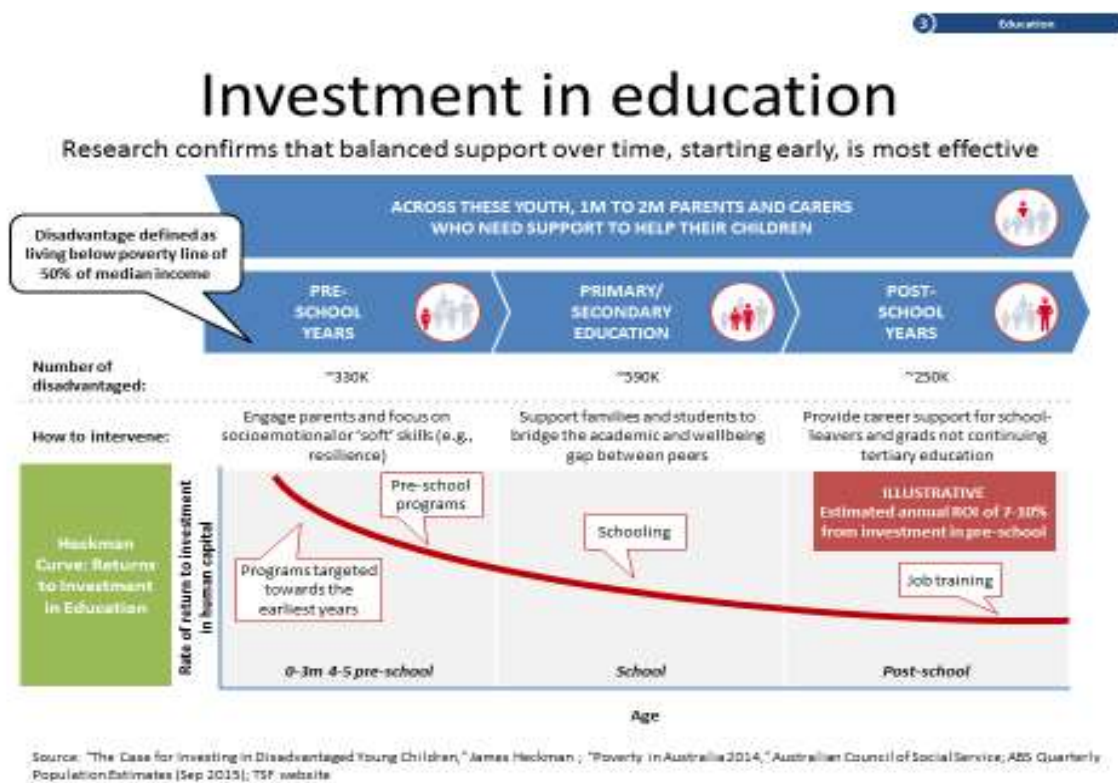
The system characteristics outlined in the discussion paper make good theoretical sense, and we strongly support the focus on leveraging universal services systems to identify families who may need additional support. In practice, any approach should take account of the resources, or lack thereof, currently available to address need in a location, and also seek to address service gaps and identify solutions to prevent or address issues.

In our view a common assumption in designing systems approaches is that complex issues can be 'fixed' within a case management window. Our experience and the evidence demonstrates clearly that issues relating to poverty and disadvantage are dynamic and evolving. Families may move in and out of parts of the system across time and geography. An unexpected crisis or additional cost can be the tipping point for a deeper crisis. There is no buffer in the vast majority of these households, where life can be an ongoing struggle just to achieve the basics.

Families with young children may traverse between universal or prevention services (eg: antenatal) early intervention (parenting programs, supported playgroups) to tertiary support (eg: emergency welfare, housing crisis). Systems need to be established so that issues can be identified at any level in the system and appropriate support and referral enabled to required, point in time support. Universal points of access support participation of *at-risk* families by being non-stigmatising and inclusive. Targeted programs that scaffold on universal access can lead to sustained participation of more vulnerable families.

¹ These are: Raymond Terrace CfC FP, Bankstown CfC FP, Fairfield CfC FP in NSW; Townsville West CfC FP and Rockhampton in QLD; Brimbank CfC FP in VIC; Katherine Region CfC FP in NT; Kwinana and Mirrabooka CfC FP in WA.

Thus, optimal results are achieved when support is provided in the early years, and sustained across the child's school life-time.



Importance of Cultural security

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children in particular, and for diverse cultures more broadly, a component of the 'skilled and professional workforce' needs to be that practice is culturally sensitive and relevant in order to build trust and secure support.

In summary, our experience demonstrates and ongoing evidence demonstrates that the following practice approaches are important for achieving positive long term outcomes:

- trauma-informed care and practice
- culturally appropriate or safe practice
- co-design with service users.
- authentic community or parental engagement
- systems change

Our Cfc FP community partners have made simple practice changes to improve outcomes for more vulnerable clients. Some of these are:

- Holistic, family centred approach
- Understanding of referrals pathways: linkages between child-centric and adult focussed service providers

- Capacity building for clients – relevant information sessions in a non-intimating setting (for example playgroups), end of program celebrations
- Simplify language (avoid jargon) with clients, take time to consider how concepts can be unpacked for clients and/ or translated.
- Fostering trust and partnership with Aboriginal elders and leaders in the community.
- Culturally appropriate support for clients – use of bicultural workers (rather than just using interpreters)
- Engage the education system as a key universal platform and a which is an important part of a child's life
- Capacity building and support for the sector – professional development, secondary consultations by Allied Health and Mental Health services to education staff, bicultural mentoring

The main barriers and enablers to implementing the public health approach in a system to protect children in Australia (with a focus on working across the entire system)

While acknowledging some promising moves to address cross-jurisdictional issues, one of the key barriers to a fully functioning service system is **lack of co-ordination between levels of Government and across Government Departments**. To effect long lasting change in service systems, we need to think differently about how these issues play out in experience of the service system for the people being served.

The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare in its 2017 report on Welfare in Australia looked at groups most likely to experience deep and persistent disadvantage. They are people who are:

- Living in Public Housing
- Dependent on income support
- Not in employment
- Lone Parents
- Education levels at year 11 or below
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

Services to address these issues variously the responsibility of the State and some of the Commonwealth. But the people who use or are impacted by those services don't and should not have to differentiate. Thus, despite our ability to identify risk factors, and despite to some extent understanding what 'needs are' we are unable to tailor support to meet the varying needs of each differing family situations

In general, government procurement and delivery of services such as housing, education or health programs occurs in a vertical with a key rationale around sufficient control in the expenditure of taxpayers funds. While supporting a focus on fiscal rectitude, the deeply entrenched nature of these issues in Australian Society makes it is eminently clear that current approaches are not realising value for money in the long term.

People don't experience disadvantage or use service systems in the vertical. We need to find ways to bring together organisations that are delivering complementary services and reduce barriers to participation in services for vulnerable groups. In short, we need to move to

systems where people can access the right support at the right time to address their short and longer term needs.

A second key issue relates to a **lack of long term co-ordinated data sets**. In releasing the Productivity Commission report into inequality, Peter Harris noted the value in longitudinal data sets in 'showing us remarkable truths'. He lamented that we have so few of them and The Smith Family endorses this view. We understand clearly the potential predictive power that could be harnessed through aligning data across the nation.

Unfortunately, in our view, Australia has lost some momentum in this regard, with no national tracking of progress against key human services population outcomes since the cessation of the COAG Reform Council whose work was beginning to uncover a longer term data development agenda.

Australia is unlikely to make substantial inroads in intergenerational welfare dependence unless we adopt national goals for reduction of poverty and inequality. Nationally, our commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have already created overarching, long-term targets to guide social policy between now and 2030. These targets are welcomed, and should guide our national social policy priorities, supported by necessary strategies, collaborative frameworks and adequate resources. The fact that these goals are non-binding should not diminish their significance to public policy development, or limit our ambition about what we can achieve over the next decade as a nation

Examples of approaches to address system design and implementation challenges and their applicability to or success in the Australian context including across different cultural groups and locations

As noted above, The Smith Family is a Facilitating Partner in nine Department of Social Services funded sites. Funding for this program is due to expire in June 2020. We believe, that with appropriate co-operation between the Commonwealth and State Governments, and with ongoing improvements in data capture and sharing, as well as focussed end-user participation, this program, which is focussed on early intervention and prevention could be adapted to trial a refreshed approach to focus on the whole service system in a defined place. Key features of a refreshed approach should include a focus on:

Relationships: community professional interactions and shared values will always affect the ability of stakeholders to trust and collaborate. The Smith Family is a national organisation but to be effective we ensure that team members who are place based, understand and respect their community and remain objective. Despite the challenges of staffing, we have place based team members based in Katherine NT and this has helped in the community accepting us as 'local'.

Structures: once good relationships are established, structures help in leveraging on the common agenda. In our CfC FP sites, having a robust governance which includes local Committee that informs, guides and sustain collaborative practices, has been critical to success. Beyond formal governance, participation in informal networks and community engagement is essential to disseminate information, share community intelligence and ensure efforts are focussed.

Co-design: while consultation has always been a key feature of the CfC FP, a refreshed approach should actively engage service users in co-designing services that would be most

responsive to their need. The Smith Family recently engaged with some of our *Learning for Life* families in co-designing an online portal that would ease the way they communicate and receive support from us.

Data and Measurement: having shared measurement or at least aligned measurements can result in increased transparency, efficiencies, reduced effort, more effect and ultimately sustains collaborative practice.

Governments have a key role in building sector literacy in collaborative processes and models. Collaborative practice takes time and sustained attention. It also ebbs and flows and we have observed communities demonstrating collaborative practices regressing back into competitive, siloed responses, especially when there is a drastic funding change or contraction of the service system.

Public Health Approaches used in other social service areas and the lessons they provide for designing a system to protect children.

Initiatives identified in the Productivity Commission's discussion paper, in particular the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' model currently being implemented in Scotland are showing promising early results.

The Smith Family is also supportive of the broad approach being developed through the NSW Government's *Their Futures Matter* initiative. This is described as cross-government reform delivering whole-of-system changes to better support vulnerable children and families. The guiding vision is to significantly improve life outcomes for current and future generations of children and families. Further information is here www.theirfuturesmatter.nsw.gov.au.

Our understanding is that there is an intent to utilise a range of human services data sets to develop predictive capability of service need and to underpin this with a client centred approach to identifying need at a point in time. Hearteningly, the initiative is seeking to also layer de-identified Commonwealth income support and other data to strengthen the integrity of the data.
