

Department for Child Protection and Family Support
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To the Individual and Family Support Policy Team,

FEEDBACK ON THE EARLIER INTERVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department for Child Protection and Family Support's (the Department) Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy, dated February 2016.

The care and protection of children in vulnerable environments continues to be one of Western Australia's greatest social concerns. We believe that every child deserves a good start to life, supported by positive parenting and strong family support. A child's experience in the first few years of life has a direct impact on the wellbeing of young people through adolescence and into adulthood.

With growing concerns over the economy, jobs, and continued reform of the welfare and tax system in Australia – families will likely find themselves in increasingly difficult situations putting further pressure on parents and carers who may already be undergoing hardship. It is logical to expect that as a result of these growing pressures, concerns of child abuse, and in particular child neglect may increase, inadvertently leading to even more children being taken into care. As a result, there is a need for more specialised, targeted, and joined-up services supporting families across the continuum of need to prevent crisis and child protection concerns.

This prediction of future need, coupled with the growing number of children, and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children, entering the Out of Home Care System over the past ten years, it is clear that the child protection system, other relevant government departments, and the community services sector need to be innovative in our responses to reverse this trend.

Viewed as a whole, we are supportive of the aims and strategies outlined in the discussion paper. We are particularly encouraged by the Department's continued focus on early intervention and the need for more targeted and culturally secure services aimed at preventing Aboriginal children from entering care and/or supporting successful reunification with their families. Furthermore, we are in support of the Department's commitment to expand the Family Support Networks, to join up the Department's internal reforms to the many other ongoing and relevant reforms in WA, to develop a shared outcomes framework across the multiple agencies working with families who have complex needs and to review and develop existing early intervention and family support services.

YACWA would like to make particular comment on three areas:

Review and Develop Existing Early Intervention Services

While we agree that a review of all early intervention services is necessary, we urge the Department to consider the impact of transitioning investment from an existing service, such as Strong Families, Best Beginnings and Responsible Parenting Services, into new programs/services and compare this with how these existing services could be built on and/or enhanced to make them more effective.

Strengthen across government involvement in governance and delivery of services and strategies

Regional Managers Forums currently vary greatly from region to region in their structure, membership and effectiveness. To allow these forums to provide governance and respond appropriately to the rising need of vulnerable families and young people, a review of their membership and overall purpose will be required. Currently many regions have CPFS District Directors, Police Superintendents and other Departmental Regional Managers in attendance, which provides a unique opportunity for strategic alignment across agencies, however it also limits the capacity of these forums to hold specific discussions on service responses to families needs due to their high level nature. It would be possible to improve upon the Regional Managers Forums to allow them to provide effective governance to regional services and strategies, if it is possible to garner across agency support, communication and coordination from Education, Child Protection, Justice, Health, and mental health services, and so on. In addition, these forums could possibly adopt a multi-tiered model utilising the Regional Managers Forums, Family Support Networks, and other service coordination groups such as Integrated Offender Management Meetings and Strong Families, but this would need to be formalised and evaluated.

In addition, another significant limitation of the Regional Managers forums is limited opportunity for not-for-profit and community sector involvement.

Youth Service Models

We are in support of the Department's proposal to establish a new multi-agency Youth Services Model, however, this needs to be done in close concert, and under clear agreement, with the other relevant Departments investing in the youth sector. If this isn't done, there is significant concern that a transition of investment from one end of the continuum of need to another by any single department, without proper planning, could create unintended gaps in service provision. We are also in support of the concept of a lead service provider to manage the cross-agency coordination of youth service delivery, if this is done at the local level. YACWA is currently contracted by the Department of Finance to provide sector support throughout the Aboriginal Youth Investment Reforms process, and as outlined in the discussion paper, the Department's current reform may be an appropriate place to hold these multi-agency discussions over the coming months.

It is evident through the Department of Corrective Services' recent Program Delivery Plan for Youth Justice Services, the current CPFS Expenditure Review and this Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy Discussion Paper, that statutory agencies are moving towards 'core business'

which will mean a transition to investing in more targeted and intensive support for identified 'at-risk' youth such as those young people leaving care, young people who engaged with the juvenile justice system and adolescent parents. In principle, we agree that there needs to be significant growth in investment at this end of the spectrum of need and welcome a continued focus on this cohort, we also believe there needs to be acknowledgement of the importance of less intensive services that are still targeted to at-risk young people, which provide critical entry and engagement points for young people through recreational and more universal activities. If clearly targeting young people at-risk, these services should still be eligible to receive funding through statutory agencies.

Lastly, we agree that secondary family support services and CPFS Parent Support services should be working with youth services in the community. To improve the future outcomes for Aboriginal young people, it is critical to also provide support to their families and close kinship networks. Youth services that operate in isolation from the underlying family problems are not likely to be as effective as those that work to address the needs of the whole family and the same is true for Parenting Support and secondary family support services.

In conclusion, YACWA is in support of the Department's review of it's current early intervention and family support strategies with the aim to refine, improve and build on them. That being said, we also believe firmly that a cultural shift is needed across government and the community services sector. To meet the needs of our communities most deprived and vulnerable children, young people, and families we need to acknowledge our shared responsibility and break down the barriers to taking a joined-up and collective response.

YACWA welcomes the opportunity to have continued involvement in these critical reviews, with particular regard to any reforms and reviews that have a direct impact on young people or the sector that support them. We are also happy to meet to expand on any of the comments or ideas shared in this letter.

Regards,



John Thomson
A/CEO

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