

# The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper



<b>To:</b>	Early Years Strategy, Department of Social Services
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<b>Subject:</b>	Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper Consultation
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Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) is a well-recognised and prominent not for profit children's social care organisation and registered charity, providing direct care and support to over 11,000 children and their families through our integrated Children's Family Centres (CFCs) each year. Barnardos CFC services are geographically located in, and targeted to reach, specific areas of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. Barnardos also provides foster care for over 1,200 children, the majority of whom are referred to us by statutory child protection departments with poverty a directly contributing factor to childhood neglect. Barnardos delivers services in many areas with significant Aboriginal populations, including the Central Western and South Coast regions of NSW, and Inner and Outer Western Sydney. Barnardos has worked with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage and create safe, nurturing and stable homes, for almost hundred years.

## Our knowledge of early learning and education

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to contribute our views on the Early Years Strategy ('The Strategy') Discussion Paper and the role of the Commonwealth in supporting children in the early years. With 100 years of experience in caring for young children, we believe in the power of learning, an evidence based curriculum delivered in a safe and secure environment, with family that is supported to care and protect their children for the entirety of their childhood, will unlock their full potential.

We provide early learning, school readiness and education support programs for children and their families in metropolitan Sydney, Western Sydney, and rural and regional areas (e.g., the South Coast, Queanbeyan and Western New South Wales). We recently launched the Barnardos Early Learning Centre Ultimo as a state-of-the-art, purpose-built centre based at Ultimo Public School which enhances our children's services footprint from the existing Auburn Long Day Care. All these programs are delivered via our Barnardos CFCs as part of joined-up and integrated service responses to reduce service fragmentation and gaps currently experienced by impoverished families with young children. The National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (ELYF) guide all our educational programs.

Barnardos aims to improve early identification of child and infant developmental needs in disadvantaged families, strengthen health and education responses to meet those needs and increase access for hard-to-reach populations, including:

- First Nations children and families
- Children living in families in deep poverty
- Children in families in contact with the child protection system
- Children in regional and remote areas
- Children with language backgrounds other than English
- Children with disabilities
- Children with incarcerated parents.

## (a) Proposed structure of Early Years Strategy

### 1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

Barnardos welcome the emphasis on identifying the correct indicators to measure success against each of the outcomes and priority reform areas of the Strategy.

However, to comprehensively assess the Strategy's success, we suggest extending the proposed structure to include an assessment of its social impact (in addition to outcomes) explicit as a key design element.

In our view, measuring the social impact of implementing the proposed detailed action plans (for example, on children's and carers' future vulnerability risks and service use) would significantly strengthen the proposed structure. This social impact piece would directly build on the work already proposed to develop an Outcomes and Evaluation Framework and significantly contribute to the evidence base on the return on investment for supporting children in early years. It should seek to identify which government funded supports and interventions made the greatest difference in outcomes of children and had the greatest impact on the community.

In the description of outcomes, we would suggest highlighting the importance of selecting appropriate implementation outcomes and indicators (as distinct from but interrelated with service and client outcomes and indicators) which will be critical to evaluating the proposed reform.

To build on outcomes measurement work that is already underway in the sector, provide comparable data, and identify comprehensive and culturally appropriate outcomes and indicators, the Outcomes and Evaluation Framework should be co-designed with service partners including Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), peak bodies and other service providers and research institutions. Further, the outcomes data should not rely solely on administrative and service use data, but should actively promote strategies for incorporating qualitative data and the expertise that comes from children's lived experience.

## (b) Vision

### 2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Barnardos vision is 'to empower every child in Australia to reach their full potential'.<sup>1</sup> To ensure that all children reach their brightest future, vulnerable children should be supported to recover and thrive despite the adversity they have experienced.

To support early childhood development and wellbeing and ensure vulnerable children have the best start to school and learning, services need to be accessible, easy to navigate and above all trusted by families who are often alienated from the service system.<sup>2</sup> Barnardos has seven integrated Children's Family Centres servicing the Sydney region, Canberra, southern NSW, the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions and the central west and western

<sup>1</sup> Barnardos Australia, *Towards 2025 Strategic Directions*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, K. (2023). *Barnardos Children's Family Centres: Integrated local service delivery for vulnerable children and their families*. Barnardos Australia: Sydney.

NSW. The CFCs deliver integrated services that are child-centred and family-focused, and service users optimally need only tell their story once. They are visible and welcoming service hubs who are socially isolated and suffering economic hardship and intergenerational trauma. Our early education teachers and educators provide families with seamless referrals to co-located parenting and family support services and other professionals, to augment and enhance family functioning and wellbeing, and strengthen parent's capacity to care and protect.

In our experience place-based services that provide a one-stop shop serviced by key workers targeted to reach the most developmentally vulnerable children, such as our evidence based CFC services, are the best way to achieve this vision. In addition, fostering genuinely collaborative and Aboriginal-led approaches with ACCHOs and ACCOs is critically important to ensuring accessibility, engagement and cultural safety for First Nations children and families.

## (c) Outcomes

### 3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

In partnership with the Parenting Research Centre, Barnardos has developed a comprehensive, and robust evidence-based Outcomes Framework to monitor and assess our program and service outcomes.<sup>3</sup> The Framework is aligned with key external outcomes and evaluation frameworks, including the NSW Human Services Framework.

Barnardos has prioritised the measurement of one flagship indicator of effectiveness across all of its programs and services: that *'Children and young people are (and report that they feel) safe and cared for'* (2020, p. 5). It assesses outcomes and indicators for children across seven areas:

- Children are safe
- Children are healthy and thriving
- Children are learning and developing
- Children have a positive identity and sense of belonging
- Children are connected to family, community and culture
- Children have hope and enthusiasm for their future.
- Children are building resilience skills

In our view the above mix of outcomes areas are the most important to include in the Strategy.

We note also our response to Question (1) and the importance of also defining appropriate implementation outcomes and indicators.

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<sup>3</sup> Urquhart, R., May F. et al. (2020). *Overarching Outcomes Framework: Plan for the ongoing monitoring and assessment of outcomes*. Parenting Research Centre and Barnardos Australia. (available on request).

## (d) Policy priorities

### 4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

We believe consideration of the governance and partnership arrangements should be a key priority for the Strategy to remove structural impediments to intent of the early years reform.

It is well-recognised that the delivery of the Commonwealth's early childhood policies and programs and their funding across different departments and agencies has created silos that hamper cross-agency collaboration.

Previous whole-of-government evidence based approaches aimed at improving outcomes for vulnerable children have lacked governance arrangements with sufficient independence, authority and cross-agency clout to achieve the intent of the reform.<sup>4</sup> Notably, in 2016, the NSW Government launched 'Their Futures Matter' (TFM) reform. The TFM reform failed to create a new stand-alone authority to drive reform, achieve adequate cross-portfolio buy-in, achieve consistent senior leadership and drive re-prioritisation of people and resources, despite this being recommended by the Tune Review.<sup>5</sup>

We therefore believe further consideration needs to be given to effective governance arrangements to drive collaboration and achieve the Strategy's policy objectives. In our view bold and imaginative solutions, such as creating a new standalone Commonwealth authority for children's services and policy formation, in the form of a Department of Children or Children's Investment Commission, may be required so that the Strategy is implemented as envisaged.

### 5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

In our view, a key priority should be strategies to address the impact of economic deprivation and cumulative disadvantage on children and families who are at risk of being reported to, and already in contact with, child protection and statutory out of home care systems. The Commonwealth has a direct role in reducing the financial vulnerability of families and the impact of rising living costs through its provision of appropriate income support, tax relief measures, child care benefits and access to educational and vocational opportunities for parents

These strategies include increasing income support payments, coupled with significantly prioritised funding for the establishment of co-located integrated services nationwide, specifically targeting lower socio-economic areas of entrenched geographic disadvantage and parents living in poverty. This could be achieved by Commonwealth funding for the scaling up of evidence-based Children's Family Centres nationwide, to enable joined-up and integrated service responses to practically reduce service fragmentation and gaps currently experienced by impoverished families. Strong investment in renewed social housing to boost accommodation security thereby alleviating poverty is a further essential strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Audit Office of New South Wales (2020). *NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament Their Futures Matter*.

<sup>5</sup> 2015 Independent Review of Out of Home Care in New South Wales (the 'Tune Review').

## 6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

We note our response to Question (4) above and highlight the importance of effective governance and partnership arrangements to drive system change.

## (e) Principles

### 7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Barnardos has been caring for vulnerable children for 100 years. The Barnardos Practice Framework was developed through a co-design approach between the Parenting Research Centre and Barnardos practitioners and leaders, to identify key outcomes we seek for children.

At the core of the Framework are 7 Key Practice Principles which guide the work of Barnardos at all levels, driving continuous service improvement. The Framework outlines Barnardos practice approach to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. It is founded on a collective understanding that children thrive when the adults who care for them are supported and doing well. They are:

- Be child-focused
- Keep families central
- Build strong relationships and connections
- Approach culture with humility, respect and curiosity
- Build capacity
- Help clients heal from the effects of trauma
- Be evidence driven

These principles provide the practice foundations for the work of our CFCs. For example, Principle 4 of the Barnardos Practice Framework affirms that Barnardos practitioners approach culture with humility, respect, and curiosity. Our work with Aboriginal children and their families and communities in NSW and the ACT is built on our acute awareness of the tragic impact that colonisation and the history of child removal have had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our CFCs have developed a diverse range of programs for Aboriginal children and their families. These programs have progressively worked towards culturally safe service delivery to keep families together and connected to their culture.<sup>6</sup>

We believe these 7 principles are pertinent to the Strategy demonstrating its child-centred approach.

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<sup>6</sup> Moore 2023, *op. cit.*

## **(f) Evidence-based approach**

### **8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?**

We recognise the important evidence-based work undertaken to develop the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and the work already undertaken to identify future opportunities for partnership towards achieving the identified goals. We also welcome the establishment of the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership that will drive community-led policies and programs for First Nations children.

The priority for development of the Strategy should be utilizing this important knowledge of the views of Aboriginal controlled peak bodies and organisations by aligning with it and acting upon it. To build on this evidence, and strengthen self-determination, resources should be allocated to SNAICC, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and ACCOs to lead this work. This should include resourcing strategies to enhance the voice of First Nations children and families to ensure the implementation of the Strategy will address their support needs.

We thank Minister Rishworth and Minister Aly for the opportunity to participate in the recent Australian Government Community Roundtable on the Strategy at the University of Newcastle, and for their strong commitment as Ministers to hearing directly from early years stakeholders.

Our Chief Executive Officer, Deirdre Cheers is available to provide detailed verbal feedback as part of the ongoing consultation process. If the opportunity is available for local engagement and consultation with children and families, we could also provide input from our clients who are experiencing multiple types of vulnerability.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide this written submission, and please contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes & Research on [rurquhart@barnardos.org.au](mailto:rurquhart@barnardos.org.au), tel (02) 9218 2392 or mobile 0431 404 199 should you require further information on our feedback.