

## **Response to the Early Childhood Development Plan, *Starting Early for a Better Future***

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Territory Government's draft Ten-Year Early Childhood Development Plan: Starting Early for a Better Future.

NTCOSS is a peak body for the Social and Community Sector in the Northern Territory and an advocate for social justice on behalf of people and communities in the NT, who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage. The membership of NTCOSS includes community based, not for profit service providers in the social welfare area such as consumer groups, Indigenous and mainstream organisations and interested individuals.

NTCOSS' vision is for 'A fair, inclusive and sustainable Northern Territory where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from all aspects of social, cultural and economic life.'

NTCOSS' mission is 'To promote an awareness and understanding of social issues throughout the NT community and to strive towards the development of an equitable and just society.'

This response has been informed by feedback from a range of organisations across the sector, including Aboriginal-controlled organisations, and from across the NT. NTCOSS has also drawn on previous submissions to the Northern Territory Government, including pre-budget submissions.

The first eight years are critical in a child's development, and it is essential that policies and programs in this area foster and protect children's rights to grow, learn and thrive. We know that in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly disadvantaged in development and educational outcomes by the end of the early years. Every child deserves an equal start in life, but achieving this requires a range of different approaches. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, mainstream models of early childhood education and care may inadvertently alienate them. The Early Childhood Development Plan provides an opportunity to address these issues of disadvantage, and provide the roadmap for nuanced and appropriately tailored responses.

The Plan largely provides a positive framework for providing universal access to early childhood services, and references the importance of access to evidence-based models. NTCOSS supports the need for access to these models, however there is also the need to support and strengthen culturally strong, holistic, flexible, and integrated community based services shaped to suit the needs of individual communities. *Starting Early for a Better Future* could further build on a positive framework by reflecting the strengths of traditional child rearing practices, and referring to cultural frameworks and cultural safety. With the current focus on evidence-based models in the Plan, it is unclear how it will also allow for the fostering and supporting of emerging programs/models. There is little room for innovation under this approach.

In addition to this, the Plan could be further strengthened by including references to building community capacity, supporting safe communities, the role of parents in their children's development, children as active participants in their families and communities, and the importance of investing in these areas. For example, building community capacity provides the opportunity for discussion about workforce development, particularly Aboriginal workforce development, and how that can be achieved for the best outcomes for children and their families.

We are aware that the Northern Territory Government is currently working on several areas of reform and setting new Frameworks, including in the areas of Child Protection and Youth Justice, Education, and Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. There are strong links between early childhood and positive outcomes in these other areas, and by integrating and linking these areas it may achieve greater outcomes, and greater efficiency in program delivery. It would be beneficial for the Plan to articulate how it intersects with other Northern Territory Government Plans and Frameworks, and whether there is an overarching, guiding framework.

The Northern Territory demographic, cultural and geographic characteristics are unique in Australia, with factors such as a high proportion of remote and very remote communities (over 90% of the NT is classed as remote – very remote); the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia; a growing Culturally and Linguistically Diverse community; the highest homelessness rate in Australia, and a high proportion of the NT population speak English as a second language (more than 30%). This context presents unique opportunities and challenges, and NTCOSS recommends that it is acknowledged in the Plan, and that the Plan articulates clear ways to address and support these.

Following on from this point, issues such as the impact of alcohol abuse (including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), sexual violence, intergenerational trauma and cognitive impairment are not acknowledged in the Plan. Issues such as domestic and family violence and smoking are acknowledged, but these are not adequately explored and contextualised. Articulating these issues will provide opportunities for intervention points, and greater opportunities for focus on prevention.

Other points of interest in response to the plan include:

- A clearly defined target group, or explanation of the parameters would give greater context and meaning to the scope of the Plan.
- Given the complex issues that do currently exist in the Northern Territory, it is important that the Plan references healing and support services (for example, in 'Making a difference') and their role in responding to trauma.
- The stated outcomes could be strengthened if they were more specific, long-term and had measurable indicators – making them easier to measure and report back on.