



Children's Ground Ltd.  
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Childcare Inquiry  
Productivity Commission  
GPO Box 1428  
Canberra City ACT 2600

To whom it is concerned

### **Submission to Productivity Commission Childcare Inquiry**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission Childcare Inquiry. This submission focuses particularly on the need for, and opportunity to create, a new approach to childcare and early childhood learning for children facing deep and persistent disadvantage, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal children living in rural and remote communities.

For further details on Children's Ground's approach and evidence based early learning model please refer to our prospectus (attached). For information on our major project, in Kakadu West Arnhem, please refer to the Community Report April 2014 (attached).

#### **Why is early childhood development important?**

Early childhood development contributes to health, education and employment outcomes and is critical to enabling individuals to achieve their full potential.<sup>i</sup> This early investment can improve life outcomes to such an extent as to significantly reduce government expenditure particularly in areas of health and social services. In a report by Access Economics, matching the circumstances of Aboriginal Australians, for example, to those of the Australian average would improve life outcomes to the extent that government expenditure would reduce by \$3.7 million and government revenue would increase by \$4.6 billion.<sup>ii</sup>

Childcare and early childhood learning have a significant role to play in these early stages of development, particularly for children experiencing significant disadvantage. 'Children learn through the environments in which they spend their time. This means that if we want to promote children's development and learning, then we need to ensure that the environments in which they spend their time are optimal.'<sup>iii</sup>

#### **A new approach is needed particularly for those who experience disadvantage**

In 2012, the overall preschool participation rate for enrolled children aged 4-5 was 90 percent.<sup>iv</sup> However, analysis from the Australian Institute of Family Studies indicates that while only 2.4 percent of children from high income families do not participate in early childhood education, 13.5 percent of children from low income families do not participate.<sup>v</sup>

As noted by the Centre for Community Child Health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in a review of the evidence base for early childhood, the 'services and service systems that support

children and their families have not changed significantly over the past 50 years and are struggling to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged groups.<sup>vi</sup> A new approach is needed to address issues of access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds including ensuring services are locally available and accessible (i.e. culturally safe, feeling welcome) and that providers work with parents to build an understanding of the benefits of early childhood education and provide support to address any barriers that might prevent their children attending (e.g. transport, language skills).

### **About Children's Ground**

Children's Ground works with families and communities experiencing significant disadvantage to create an environment in which they can realise their aspirations for the next generation of children.

Children's Ground arose from the ambition of Aboriginal people committed to changing their future – where people want their kids 'strong both ways' – strong in the oldest living culture in the world, and fully engaged in the Western world.

Led by the communities we work with, we celebrate the extraordinary depth and sophistication of First Nations knowledge, capture local ability, and bring the scale and quality of resources needed for kids to have the very best in learning, well-being and development.

### **Children's ground has created a new approach by reforming governance, funding, workforce, approach and evidence.**

As our Chair, William Tillmouth, a Senior Elder of the Arrernte nation, has stated:

“To create a different future for children for families and communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage requires us to be led by empowered local expertise, vision and intelligence, informed by best practice, nationally and internationally’.

That observation is especially pertinent to rural and remote Aboriginal communities, where early years learning has, for 50,000 years, occurred in the context of family and community life. The traditional informal, integrated approach to child care is in profound contrast to the mainstream 'program-silo' approach where formal services are provided in centres by professionals. Formal childcare services act to undermine traditional child rearing practices and, in so doing, undercut culture and disempower parents and communities.

Children's Ground's approach to early years learning, which we are now implementing in Kakadu, West Arnhem, is to both support and empower parents and other family members while, concurrently, ensuring children have access to best practice learning.

Children's Ground approach is based on five key reforms in service delivery:

- *Governance*: Blending formal corporate governance with strong local community ownership and engagement ensures community ownership and direction at the service delivery level while providing impartial organisational governance at the strategy level.
- *Outcome based collective investment*: investment based on outcomes enables the organisation to have sufficient flexibility to respond to changing community needs while still delivering on the desired outcomes. Collective investment invites support from the communities which are able to contribute, governments, corporations and philanthropists; ensuring everyone has ownership of the approach and the outcomes.

- *Workforce:* A workforce of cultural and community experts working alongside sector experts ensures the approach is informed the breadth of local and best practice expertise. It also ensures community engagement and participation.
- *Service delivery approach:* An integrated platform of services that both directly and indirectly ensures support for child development. Children’s Ground’s approach includes an integrated suite of services focused on learning, wellbeing, community development and economic development. The approach works responds to the social, cultural and economic environment, is placed based, strength based and intergenerational.
- *Evidence:* A commitment to gathering, acting on and sharing evidence of the educational, social, health, economic and cultural impact of our work, measured against key community, government and international benchmarks.

In operation since October 2013, we are already seeing the benefits of our approach. There are a number of outcomes that we are already seeing within the community as a result of Children’s Ground’s establishment. An example is the employment of 43 local people in Children’s Ground and engagement with the community around how the service should operate has ensured that the organisation has had contact with 64 percent of children aged 0 – 8 years over the last six months and already 16 percent of children are regularly attending. The employment of mothers within the organisation has facilitated the engagement of their children and vice versa.

Please refer to the Children’s Ground Prospectus for further details on our approach (attached).

Our recommendation for the Inquiry is that the Productivity Commission support an approach to childcare and early childhood learning that is informed by the Children’s Ground model and based on the five reform areas outlined above, particularly for communities facing deep and persistent disadvantage.

Sincerely

Jane Vadeloo

CEO

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<sup>i</sup> Productivity Commission, *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, July 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Access Economics, *An overview of the economic impact of Indigenous disadvantage*, August 2008

<sup>iii</sup> MOORE, T. et al *Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children’s Ground Project*. Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health. October 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Measures of Australia’s Progress, 2013*, Cat. No. 1370.0

<sup>v</sup> BAXTER, J. and HAND, K. *Access to early childhood education in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Research Report No. 24 April 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> MOORE, T. op cit.