

Save the Children Australia (SCA): Response to Productivity Commission Issues Paper on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory

Key Responses and Recommendations

1. Embed Communities in Funding Decisions and Program Design

1.1. Ensure community leadership in priority-setting, design, implementation and evaluation

SCA has worked alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for 65 years and recognises the importance of Aboriginal leadership and ownership in shaping culturally safe interventions that reflect local needs and priorities. This is vital, particularly in fraught spaces such as child protection and family support. We firmly believe that Aboriginal communities (including local, regional and national organisations, Traditional Owners and elders) should be at the heart of decision making affecting their communities and are proud signatories of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT Partnership Principles. The recent commitment by Territory Families to the Aboriginal Cultural Security Framework is welcome, and we encourage greater engagement of community leaders in developing funding priorities, co-designing service delivery models and ensuring cultural safety and community acceptance of key interventions. Meaningful outcomes are only possible with the ownership and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

1.2. Support children, young people and families to have a voice in interventions that affect them

SCA promotes and advocates for the importance of children having the opportunity to express their views, influence decision-making and achieve change. SCA firmly believes that children and young people are experts in their own lives, and their experiences and knowledge are critical to service design and delivery. Our program model is underpinned by the recognition that children and young people not only have the right and capability to shape the decisions that affect their lives, but that their voice is essential for effective service delivery and the attainment of long-term development outcomes. This reflects their rights to participation, survival, development, non-discrimination and self-determination as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Convention on the Rights of the Child. We strongly encourage funders to include the voice and input of children in the development of services that affect them, and to recognise that children, young people and families are not merely passive recipients of services, but active members of communities with experiences and views which can shape better and more impactful interventions.

2. Implement a Public Health Model of Harm Reduction

2.1. Increase proportion of investment in prevention and early intervention programs

We know that a child's environment and experiences in their early years set key pathways for life, and early experiences can result in children entering school with clear differences in the cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed for success and positive participation in society. Save the Children's programs work because they support families early – identifying risks, providing holistic, high quality support and assisting families before a situation escalates. Key to this is ensuring that families have equitable access to trusted support at the level and intensity that they require. We do this through the provision of targeted children and families services from the universal service platform including schools and playgroups, complemented by active outreach to the community to address access and participation barriers. The continued concentration of investment in tertiary services does not support best use of public funding, nor does it stop the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and trauma. We note from the budget papers that Territory Families funding for tertiary services such as Out of Home Care has increased annually since 2015-16, while funding for family support and social inclusion has declined. Quality early childhood education and family support programs should be considered an investment, not a cost. Early support for vulnerable or disadvantaged children is vital, and the impacts can be great. We encourage funding and commissioning models that ensure all communities can access appropriate and quality integrated services which provide primary and secondary support in a graduated, flexible and accessible manner.

2.2. Access to, and ongoing funding for, regular data collection, surveillance and monitoring of key indicators of deprivation, child safety and community need

Understanding and identifying areas of high deprivation, need and service gaps is central to ensuring that the right services are targeted at areas of critical need, for the families who need it most. Access to quality and fit-for-purpose data supports organisations in developing evidence-based theories of change (including counter-factuals on potential avoided government costs and value for money) and to better identify service gaps, community needs and changes in children's wellbeing over time. As communities develop, their needs may change. Access to accurate and timely

community-level data is essential in supporting government and providers to target services appropriately. This includes developing and co-designing fit-for-purpose programs with communities and effective monitoring of impact over time.

3. Outcomes-Focused, Purpose-Driven Funding

3.1. Streamlined and coordinated tender submission processes

Save the Children supports a more collaborative approach to government funding, with streamlining of policies, priorities and commissioning models between Commonwealth and state governments. This would better support organisations to provide considered, robust proposals and interventions, leading to quality services, value for money and strong community engagement. We suggest the following practices to support better allocation of resources when procuring services, and support staff to develop strong proposals while maintaining quality existing services:

- Advance provision of funding schedules and alignment of funding cycles (currently Territory Families and Commonwealth government cycles differ);
- Sufficient lead time to submit applications and ensuring tendering processes and documentation is commensurate with award value; and
- Allowing 'intent to partner' on applications and related time and funding to support partnership building in the initial stages of the program and to support better and more respectful engagement with community and capacity to co-design responses.

3.2. Multi-year funding arrangements

Lasting change takes time, and ensuring continuity and retention of quality staff, trusted relationships and impact are not short-term projects. Funding should be over 3-5 years, to support services to address often entrenched and long-term service gaps and persistent community need. This would also allow organisations to work with communities to develop initiatives that are led by local goals and build the capacity of local people to foster a sense of ownership over services. This is particularly important in remote Aboriginal Communities to support local workforce development and sustainable, culturally safe and appropriate service delivery. 12-month contract extensions have led to instability in some of our NT programs and increased stress and pressure on staff. Re-tendering processes should also begin earlier to alleviate pressure on staff and manage workforce uncertainty.

3.3. Flexible funding that is responsive to changing needs and environments

While we recognise that service providers must ensure compliance with contractual obligations and agreed activities, funding should be flexible to allow services to adapt to changes in the operating environment and/or needs and aspirations of communities. Funders should be responsive to requests to change locations, or activities, which are supported by communities and reflect actual needs on the ground. We would also encourage funders to work with partners and communities to establish funding arrangements that reflect and support community-led processes for developing service responses and adaptation to community need. This could include, for example, community involvement in identifying priority outcomes, developing performance frameworks and indicators, and program design and delivery. These should embed flexibility in service delivery to ensure that partners are responding adequately to community-identified needs and outcomes.

3.4. Realistic funding in sparsely populated regional areas where service delivery costs are high

Equitable access to services needs to be at the heart of policy and practice, ensuring that children and families in remote areas have the same access to quality support, interventions and services as those in urban areas. Funding agreements should reflect the reality of working with the remote and vulnerable communities, and ensure that organisations have the requisite vehicles, time, staff and support to provide services, with consideration of the need, distance between sites and related high service delivery costs. For example, the Katherine service area is some 330,000 sq km, and our programs there require different operational investments than those in metro areas of Darwin. In Wadeye on 31 July, the cost of diesel per litre was \$2.18 per litre compared to Adelaide of \$1.47 per litre, rent of a one room bedsit with no kitchen is \$800 per week and a return flight to Darwin is \$660 compared to a return Adelaide to Melbourne flight of around \$200.

4. Funding for Sustainable Outcomes

4.1. Ensure that the time, resources and effort required to build partnerships, trust and capacity with communities is reflected in funding models and payment schedules.

SCA knows that building trust and genuine partnerships with local organisations and communities is critical to successful service delivery. We recognise that building relationships with communities, and developing their capacity, is central to providing long-lasting, impactful and accepted services. We encourage funding models that reflect and support this, particularly through the provision of both time and funding for ongoing co-design (recognising it is a process, not an

activity), community engagement and developing meaningful, two-way partnerships. We support funding models that acknowledge the importance of these activities prior to implementation and ensure that there is adequate funding throughout a project lifecycle to maintain and develop relationships and cross-sector capability transfer. This should be supported by funders through both adequate funding and regular monitoring of community satisfaction with the processes of engagement, participation and partnership. Ensuring that such processes are acceptable and accountable to the community is central to quality interventions, and organisations should be held accountable to both donors and communities in their processes of engagement.

4.2. Funding and timeframes for transition to community control need to be community-led and realistic

We support realistic funding and timeframes of transition to community control. Funders have stipulated short timeframes for transition without adequate consultation with service providers or communities, nor identification of a transition partner. This risks disruption to service continuity for vulnerable children and families and may rupture relationships with the community leading to difficulties in providing ongoing or transitional support. To ensure the sustainable handover of programs to communities, transition must be phased, supported and resourced. In Katherine in the Northern Territory, we are working alongside Binjari Community Aboriginal Corporation to map a shared pathway to community control over 3 years, based on feedback from community which indicated that they were uncomfortable with the initial 6-month period requested by the donor, which they felt was inadequate, leading to organisations being unsupported and 'set up for failure'. Good quality, ethical and sustainable transitions require adequate financial investment to ensure that both mainstream and community organisations are supported to undertake effective and appropriate transition work over a realistic timeframe.

4.3. Invest in communities through funding and supporting workforce development and local capacity building.

Funding models should include adequate funding and timeframes for the professional development and capacity building of a strong, locally-recruited workforce. We know the vital impact investment in this area has on the sustainability and effectiveness of programs and supporting transition to community control. SCA has seen donor-stipulated shifts in professional requirements of local staff, from employing Aboriginal staff in 'para-professional' roles (central to community engagement, acceptance and ownership), to mandatory minimum qualifications. We proudly support local staff development across our programs, through traineeships, mentoring, study and cultural leave and practical support in accessing ID and other basic necessities for employment. However this takes time and resources to be effective. We strongly advocate that funding for this should be included to ensure sustainable and impactful programs and provide meaningful employment, career development and options for the local community, with adequate time both at the start and throughout project lifecycles to undertake workforce development.

4.4. Funding for evaluation included as standard, to better understand what works

SCA includes monitoring of programs in all our work, including the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. However, quality evaluations require funding, expertise, training for local staff, time and access to quality data beyond that generated by services (particularly when measuring outcomes and community-level impacts). Evaluations are not routinely funded through government donor agreements in NT – SCA has not received government funding for the evaluation of any programs in the Territory to date. This cost cannot always be carried by organisations without the support of funders. Evaluations of programs and services are vital to adequately understand the impact of services, effective tools and techniques, attribution of change and how to scale, expand and/or continue funding. It is also essential in providing oversight of how funds are spent by governments, and value for money for taxpayers. Finally, evaluations should reflect accountability to the community, incorporating best practice in Aboriginal evaluation and research (for example through AIATSIS and NHMRC guidelines), integrating local knowledge and understanding of 'what works' and ensuring that communities are genuinely engaged throughout the process.

4.5. Develop clear pathways to upscale programs which show a positive impact, allowing quality programs to grow alongside the evidence they generate

Funding pilot or innovative programs is vital to improving practice and identifying successful models of support in communities. However, this should be matched by clear pathways for expansion and ongoing funding where evidence/evaluation indicates that the program is having positive impacts. Where pilots or small-scale trials are driven by government, funders should include conditional opportunities for expansion and/or continuation should impacts be demonstrated. This provides community and staff continuity and trust and ensures that resources required to bring small projects to scale can be accessed. We encourage funding cycles that include pathways to upscale and expand successful programs, with local adaptation where necessary. We support the adoption of place-based approaches as a positive innovation in reflecting community-embedded approaches to improving outcomes. In identifying programs to scale up,

funders should consider the impact of the service on community empowerment, engagement, support and participation, alongside more traditional outcomes and outputs, as key indicators of positive impact and scalability.