



Ninti One Submission regarding Draft Report on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory

Ninti One welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on the above report released by the Productivity Commission. As the organisation responsible for the Quality Services Support Panel that is intrinsic to the design of the Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC) program, we appreciate the recognition of the program made by the draft report. We wish to provide some reflections on our experience SCfC as they relate to the wider question of the effectiveness of government-funded services and programming for children in the Northern Territory.

The most salient feature of SCfC is that the design of the program recognises the importance of local community ownership of services. SCfC aims to provide the services that children and families need, in order to achieve each participating community's vision of a strong and safe community. Facilitating Partner organisations (FPs) work with each community to facilitate the SCfC program under the advice of a Local Community Board (LCB). FPs collaborate with the LCB to plan and deliver culturally appropriate services to meet prioritised community needs, as documented in a local Community Plan.

The independent evaluation of SCfC conducted by Winangali, IPSOS and kookaburra consulting in 2017 noted that 'the SCfC funding modality ... has a number of strengths:

- It enables a quick and flexible response to changing circumstances and the unpredictability in remote communities, which in turn allows the channelling of resources to services and activities that can adapt in reasonable time to complex needs.
- It minimises the administrative burden on organisations delivering the services, enabling them to spend less resources on administration and more resources on service delivery. It reduces transaction costs and lessens the administrative burden for government by contracting one community-controlled organisation rather than many organisations.
- It enables collaboration with other funders, to pool money in partnerships to get better locally funded initiatives that are more likely to work. This might be scaling up or top-up funding for existing programs or attracting new funding to the SCfC where an extra resource boost would improve outcomes.
- Better focused resources go to areas where funds are most needed because of the local identification of need and community input into service delivery. This minimises wastage, the need to refund poor-performing programs and duplication of resources.'

Two key features of SCfC are notable in the context of the analysis of expenditure made by the draft report. First, the table on page 7 presents a breakdown of grants by service type. We have observed that choices on expenditure of SCfC funds made by local boards often span several of these areas in response to perceived local needs. In a single year, boards have often chosen to support activities in

education, employment, community development, early childhood development, health, nutrition and other service areas. These decisions have been framed by a local community plan that sets priorities. The point we make is that there is evidence in SCfC work in each community of a healthy breaching of the boundaries between services that are often so impenetrable at a macro or departmental level, enabling a more responsive approach to meeting local needs.

Second, using figures from page 5 of the draft report, we estimate that the budget for SCfC is 2.2% of the total expenditure on children in the Northern Territory. We believe the cost-effectiveness and impact per unit of expenditure on SCfC is likely to be high for the reasons set out by the evaluation and summarised above. In particular, SCfC activities attract local volunteer time and in-kind contributions made by people and organisations in each community.

In managing the Quality Service Support Panel (QSSP), Ninti One has taken the lead role in supporting program implementation. Over the life of the program, QSSP has worked with Menzies School of Health Research and the Northern Institute at different stages, as well as engaging external specialists to meet particular needs. The QSSP was tasked by PM&C with working closely with communities to establish the LCBs and support the service delivery capacity of the FPs with technical expertise, training and capacity building assistance.

Although supportive of increased emphasis on relational contracting (Draft Recommendation 7.3.), we do not necessarily believe that the answer lies in an expanded role for regional networks (Draft Recommendation 7.4.). Supported by the Commonwealth, the Quality Services Support Panel has been effective in working in the space between communities, government and service providers. QSSP is an entity set up specifically to support SCfC and independent of government. This role has enabled relationships to be developed that are not burdened by the funder-recipient dynamic (or indeed, the weight of historical relationships between the state and Aboriginal people) that can sometimes hamper arrangements in which the government is directly involved at the community level.

In conclusion, we believe that any recommendations designed to improve the effectiveness of expenditure on children in the Northern Territory ought to identify and build on positive experiences and achievements that many communities have worked hard to attain. There is always a danger that a review of the kind the Productivity Commission has conducted could generate a new wave of reform that may push aside some existing work. We believe SCfC provides insights which could be a foundation for further effective programming.

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