

Response to the Productivity Commission draft report into Expenditure on Children in the NT.

How much are governments spending on children and family services?

DRAFT FINDING 2.1

Significant funds are spent on children and family services in the Northern Territory — in 2018-19, expenditure on services directly relevant to the prevention of harm to children was about \$538 million. The expenditure landscape for children and family services is complex and involves:

- nine funding agencies — five Commonwealth Government departments and four NT Government departments
- more than 500 service providers
- more than 20 funding streams, including over 700 grants.

Despite the size of this funding, expenditure data is not kept in a format that allows it to be used to inform policy.

This finding rings true! This is unfortunate and may account partly for persistence and possibly growing numbers of vulnerable children and families in the NT. (Although I am aware that this is not the only jurisdiction experiencing this problem).

Furthermore it is not exposed how much of the expenditure is spent on administration and how much is spent on service delivery. This is of concern because very frequently a lot of funds intended for service delivery are consumed in governance and administration. It would be useful to track this expenditure landscape as well.

It is important to note that public health, environmental or community factors e.g. social determinants of health, also impact on outcomes for children and child development I assume these costs are not also counted.

DRAFT FINDING 2.2

It is not possible to accurately track where money is being spent in the Northern Territory. This is because:

- the location where money is being spent is not reported in a manner that is consistent between different government departments, with more than 15 different types of geographical units used to report location data
- in some cases, record-keeping about location is not sufficiently granular to allow expenditure items to be linked to specific towns or communities.

This is a barrier to understanding where money is being spent and to governments making informed and coordinated funding decisions for individual towns or communities.

The recently published Story of Our Children and Young people Northern Territory 2019 collates population level data for 7 NT Regions. No information is provided about how the 7 regions were decided. Communities themselves would have some good ideas about what geographic and cultural regions they belong to. For example, the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) under Central Land Council links the Warlpiri communities who all have cultural, social and geographic links.

Better and more transparent data on expenditure and services

DRAFT FINDING 2.3

Grants for children and family services in the Northern Territory tend to be small and given for short terms. In 2018-19:

- the median grant payment was about \$225 000, with about a quarter of payments less than \$100 000
- almost all grants (97 per cent) had terms of less than 5 years.

Communities for Children seems to defy this finding but understand it is not the norm. DSS CfC has historically provided 5 year agreements although CfC Committees in Palmerston and Tiwi Islands have kept activity agreements to 1-2 years at a time till efficacy is established. Then a further 1 – 2 years is then agreed or not as the case may be.

In other cases this is true. Funding opportunities do not consider decent wages that match with the facilitation of meaningful activities. Money is limited and because contracts are short term, local capacity strengthening is not possible. Small funding opportunities and short term contracts amount to a 'band aid' fix. This puts more pressure on an already pressured sector working alongside communities.

DRAFT FINDING 3.2

Both the Commonwealth and NT Governments fund a broad range of children and family services, and there are many service areas where both governments are operating in the same field.

Areas of significant overlap in government funding include: services for addressing domestic, family and sexual violence; crime, justice and legal services; community development services; and sport, recreation, culture and wellbeing services.

It is interesting that education is not also listed as an area for overlap since I believe that both private and public education systems are funded by both governments and consider that this may warrant further exposition by the Commission. It appears that remote and other state education services are under resourced.

A decent education underpins this response in terms of informing and educating people around better choices and options in their lives. Education is a preventative measure. I understand that there is evidence that the outcomes from NT public and private schools delivering bilingual education programs in the NT achieved better results than have been achieved since the fateful introduction of a policy of teaching the first four hours of school in English in 2008.

Having 2 streams of funding above, potentially opens up 'competitiveness' in the sector and encourages organisations to work in silos and not together. This was evident in the Back on Track Youth Diversion funding opportunity – NT Government. The successful candidates are funded to operate their own programs in isolation and it is business as usual. For a young person in the system, this does not make any sense and instead of one pathway, there are several with dead ends. There is no connection or follow on.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 3.1 HARMONISE RECORD-KEEPING PRACTICES

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should work together to develop a common method for:

- reporting location data at a level of granularity that reflects service catchment areas
- describing and categorising children and family services.

This method should be adopted by all relevant government departments for the purpose of keeping records and reporting about government expenditures, as they relate to services for children and families. The improved expenditure and services data should be used by the NT Government as a basis for putting together a single and cohesive service list that covers all of the Northern Territory (draft recommendation 3.2).

The recently published *Story of Our Children and Young people Northern Territory 2019* collates population level data for 7 NT Regions. No explanation is given for the adoption of those 7 regions. The map on page 11 of the document reflects the growing size of the regions as they are located south. Populations of each region are also not equitable.

Greater Darwin	148,884
Top End	17,190
East Arnhem	14,522
Big Rivers	21,479
Barkly	6,935
Central	
Australia	38,481

It makes sense to enable people to identify a region that they belong to if community development is to take place with good cooperation between regional services. Aboriginal families and children of highly mobile within regions. E.g. Warlpiri triangle, West Arnhem Land, NE Arnhem Land, etc.

INFORMATION REQUEST 3.1

The Commission is seeking feedback on what geographical unit should be used for reporting where funded services are provided. Is the concept of a 'service catchment area' a useful touchstone for choosing or designing a geographical unit? How might it be operationalised in practice?

Good question.

As already stated it makes some sense for community members to identify a region that they belong to. A learned Burrarra man in Maningrida in 1991 helpfully pointed out to me that 'dreaming' lines/stories were what connected Aboriginal peoples in different locations which are somewhat related to geography however not in ways seen by non-Aboriginal peoples. I somehow doubt that a serious consultation of people themselves will take place.

Planners could consider using major towns: Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs plus regions with cultural and linguistic connection e.g. Tiwi Islands (2543), West Arnhem Land (6188 pax), East Arnhem land (14,522), Warlpiri triangle, Arandic remote communities of Central Australia, Pintubi-Luritja-Pitjantjatjara region in Central Australia.

Communities for Children believes that believes that NT Shires are too big for effective planning especially those in Central Australia which cross social and cultural boundaries.

The Tiwi Islands area which I have some familiarity with has a population of about 2,500 comprising 3 key communities of Wurrumiyanga (population approx. 1600), Pirlangimpi (population approx. 400) and Milikapiti (population approx. 400) as well as smaller outstation communities of various sizes. For effective planning each bigger community would need to be involved in saying what they consider their needs to be although there would I believe be enough commonality for a Tiwi Islands Regional Plan.

I think it is important that families with the lived experience of disadvantage are involved in their regional planning in order to properly inform data and planning. Therefore there needs to be some commonality for those regions to work together and not be a further imposition of a top down approach that has been responsible for disempowering First Nations peoples' leadership in their communities over the last decade and a half which has directly affected growing numbers of children at risk.

The East Arnhem area (where Red Cross also has a connection) is an enormous area that includes many diverse communities – some with connections and others not. Because of the enormity of the area, many services are thin and people have to wait for long periods of time. Once again, empowering local people in these communities to plan and facilitate services in their own communities makes more sense. E.g. Vets and other specialists visit Galiwin'ku sometimes on a quarterly basis. People from these communities could walk alongside and be trained to continue the education and referrals during the down time when the specialist is not in the community.

Funding for these services should include engagement and empowerment of local people to conduct the business of the service in their own communities.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 3.2 **A PUBLIC CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICE LIST**

The NT Government should compile and maintain a single and cohesive service list that covers, at a minimum, children and family services funded by the Commonwealth and NT Governments in the Northern Territory. The service list should be made available to the public, in a manner that allows members of the public and service providers to easily identify the services that are available in their communities.

At a minimum, the service list should contain information about:

- the type(s) of service(s) provided
- who is eligible to receive the service
- the service provider (name and contact details)
- when the service is available (days and hours of operation), including whether the service is provided on a permanent or visiting basis
- where the service can be accessed
- other requirements for attending (costs of attending, whether an appointment or booking is required).

Over time the service list could be expanded to include services funded through other means such as royalties and philanthropic sources.

This is a good recommendation and seems achievable at a community and regional level as long as the regions are not too large. NTCOSS currently publishes and updates a Community Services Directory meant to address needs of community services. As an online tool it is 'searchable'.

Community research in Palmerston near Darwin NT indicates that this information is **useful in the hands of local people** and this is also verified in the author's personal experience. When a family is struggling they are most likely to turn to other trusted family members and neighbours for help and advice. The Grow Well Live Well Collective Impact Initiative plans to develop ways that community service information can be easily accessible to community members so that this information is more accessible to families and children who need help and support not just to community services.

The other point for early intervention, if children and families are struggling, is through schools and early childhood services. It is these face to face services who see children struggling first, long before they come to the attention of authorities. So service directories need to be accessible to on the ground service workers and teachers.

Therefore a comprehensive and accessible list of services does make sense.

Shared responsibilities are challenging but inevitable

DRAFT FINDING 4.1

In each area of children and family services, the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth and NT Governments are unclear and often overlap. This makes it imperative for them to work cooperatively in a coordinated way to meet shared outcomes.

Clearer roles and responsibilities would be desirable in the long term, but should not be pursued at the expense of other reforms or a more coordinated funding process.

Shared responsibilities are indeed inevitable as they already exist.

Identification of roles and responsibilities sounds good but it should be expected that roles and responsibilities would overlap as governments at all levels share responsibility for the welfare of their overlapping populations. Working co-operatively is often disabled by unclear governance, roles and responsibilities, accountability and leadership as well as egos, power struggles and political brinkmanship. Therefore clear identification of leadership and accountability as well as a common plan that is **not just geared toward bureaucratic achievement but on the ground outcomes**. Better outcomes will be achieved by communities if the humans involved have some commitment to the tasks for community benefit rather than their own power and job security.

It should also be noted that social determinants also impact early childhood development outcomes as shown in the Kids in Communities Study¹, the Royal Commission into Youth Detention and the NT Safe, Thriving and Connected plan² among many others. For many young people in remote

¹ <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/CCCH-KICS-Final-Report-April-2018.pdf>. Accessed 7 January 2020

² <http://newsroom.nt.gov.au/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=ZGrq3mRWaKoEGm0LMNX8zTIIMKKxGcjD6dfmLnzdgiY>, Accessed 7 January 2020

community settings there is much to be done to improve enabling social indicators for which there is much shared responsibility across three levels of government.

Federal government policy geared toward social security benefits (the only income for many disadvantaged families) is causing severe disadvantage and needs to be redressed if this key social determinant of family health and wellbeing is to improve.

Enabling means also enhancing the authority of local community leaders which has been seriously undermined repeatedly in history and repeatedly since 2007 Intervention action by the federal government and other policy shifts by all three levels of government.

DRAFT FINDING 4.2

In designing and funding services for children and families in the Northern Territory, there is limited coordination between levels of government (the Commonwealth and NT Governments) and within each level of government (for example, the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Department of Social Services within the Commonwealth Government).

In terms of service delivery, service providers are often left to informally coordinate on the ground, to try to avoid duplication and better meet the needs of the community. Although numerous initiatives exist to coordinate services in specific places, these tend to be partial and fragmented, and at times overlapping.

In CfC on the Tiwi Islands I made it a condition of the funding agreements that Community Partners do their best to work together and provide some evidence of that at relational monitoring meetings. Governments at all levels could also do this. Although if funding was pooled and provided to service a community or regional plan the evidence of collaboration would need to be visible to regional coordinators and community members.

Siloed decisions are leading to poorly targeted spending

DRAFT FINDING 5.1

The Commonwealth and NT Governments are making funding decisions about children and family services in ways that are not consistent with either the place-based or public health approaches to preventing harm to children.

Although there are pockets of good practice and improved processes emerging in some areas, it remains the case that:

- the needs of children and families in each community are not assessed in a systematic or rigorous way, and there is no holistic consideration of which services would best meet local needs and priorities
- community input into service selection and design is often belated or superficial
- there is sparse evidence for 'what works' in the NT context (and especially in remote Aboriginal communities).

The end result of these processes is that the system of children and family services in the Northern Territory is fragmented, with government expenditure poorly targeted and failing to best address the needs of children and families.

This seems to be a true finding. While I understand that the Tiwi Islands Government Engagement Coordinator (formerly PMC now NIAA) for Tiwi Islands has done some rough planning for Wurrumiyanga or Tiwi Islands last year I don't feel confident it was at all comprehensive and was probably done in a siloed way. Though I am the program lead Communities for Children on the Tiwi Islands I had no direct involvement in that planning. I don't think the NTG Regional Coordinator was involved and am fairly certain that no community input into service selection was done in any comprehensive way.

Agreed that there is sparse evidence for what works in the NT and remote NT context. Sometimes however even if an activity, program or strategy is known to work it can be summarily dropped with no consultation with community members who are the people with the most to lose in the community service matrix. Changes are often made at the will of a government often the rationale for which is not explained.

The CfC model may hold valuable experience for governments in the area of children and families. This is especially in the way this is facilitated by Red Cross where we:

- Apply a place-based approach
- Include at least 50% community members on our two committees with the rest being service providers including local government agencies with local knowledge and experience.
- At the beginning of a 5 year funding cycle extensive community consultation is done with families and a strategic plan is developed in collaboration with the committee that incorporates any other known data sets as well as consultation information
- Advertise to the sector through advertising and direct email seeking expressions of interest from service providers in delivering activities that support the CfC program logic, the local strategic plan and any other requirements such as child safe organisation practices
- Voting and non-voting members of the committee share views on the applications to deliver activities

- Decisions made based on those views and a voting system (carefully monitoring conflict of interest and confidentiality)
- Agreements developed by Red Cross as the facilitating partner that include milestones to be met by the service provider
- Regular relational monitoring of agreements through monthly or quarterly meetings using a standard discussion template
- Regular reporting back to the Committee how the delivery of the activity is progressing
- Encouragement to committee members to visit activities and discuss with any participants they may know the efficacy of the activity

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 6.1 **COMMUNITY PLANS AND COORDINATED FUNDING DECISIONS**

To deliver on their shared responsibility for funding children and family services in the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth and NT Governments need a new way of working together. This should include both governments genuinely engaging with NT communities, coming to a shared understanding of the issues affecting children and families, and jointly committing to solutions, with collective ownership and accountability for outcomes.

To put this new way of working into practice, the Commonwealth and NT Governments should establish a formal process to coordinate funding.

1. Both governments should collate community-level data on services, outcomes (risk and protective factors) and current expenditure on children and family services in each community.
2. The regional representatives of both governments should share the data with communities, and in collaboration with communities develop a short community plan that:
 - provides a snapshot of the strengths, needs and priority issues of children and families in the community
 - gives the community a voice about which children and family services they would like to retain, change or replace.

The regional representatives should provide the community plans to the Children and Families Tripartite Forum, together with a summary of overall expenditure, headline data and any other relevant information for each region.

3. Drawing on the community plans and regional summaries, the Children and Families Tripartite Forum should provide advice to both governments about funding arrangements for children and family services across the Northern Territory, including advice about funds pooling for particular locations or services.
4. The relevant Ministers of both governments should consider the advice of the Children and Families Tripartite Forum and then agree on which children and family services each is going to fund and in which locations, and publish details of the agreed funding.

This process should be repeated as necessary, including when there are significant changes in government or community priorities, or when new funding becomes available.

Importantly the voices of community members and especially children and young people should be included in community planning in appropriate ways.

INFORMATION REQUEST 6.1

Which locations or service types should be considered as priority candidates for funds pooling? How could funds pooling be best put into practice in these areas?

I consider that Palmerston and Tiwi Islands may be primary areas for trialling funds pooling. I say this because in Palmerston there is already a collective impact group at work consulting with and activating the community around their priority areas so the ideal of collaborative working relationships at the level of that region is already in practice. Although in my view government participation could be further refined. My view is that the 'heavy lifting' on community outreach is done by NFP partners rather than government partners with the exception of the child protection and youth justice space.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 6.2 AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR THE TRIPARTITE FORUM

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should expand the terms of reference of the Children and Families Tripartite Forum to include providing advice on funding arrangements for children and family services across the Northern Territory, including advice about funds pooling for particular locations or services (as per draft recommendation 6.1). The Tripartite Forum should be adequately resourced so that it can fulfil its expanded role, and should manage any potential conflicts of interest.

It seems logical that governments' cooperation needs to be at all levels and agreed as an approach at the ministerial level as well as the Tripartite Forum level. I would prefer that peaks involved in the Tripartite Forum had a clear and transparent consultation strategy rather than speaking for all regions and all ACCOs/NFP without reference to up to date views.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 6.3 BETTER DATA ON OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

To provide a more complete picture of the wellbeing of children and families in the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth and NT Governments should improve their data so that it is:

- outcomes-focused — seeking to measure outcomes for children and families using available child-centred indicators across all the domains of child wellbeing
- collected, tracked and publicly reported at the community level wherever possible.

Agree with this recommendation but think that the outcomes-focused indicators need to be devised with input from families with the lived experience of system failure or disadvantage and that measures to redress disadvantage/system failure are also devised, measured, tracked and publicly reported.

INFORMATION REQUEST 6.2

What are the sensitivities involved in releasing data at the community level on risk, protective and wellbeing factors of children and families (such as statistics on child protection, police, justice, health and education)? How could these sensitivities best be managed?

The risk with data sharing with community is that it is often presented as a problem and deficit based rather than strength based. E.g. if 23% of children are vulnerable when 77% of children are on track but usually the emphasis is on vulnerability not what is going well.

Community members, especially those with low education levels, should not be presented with tables of data but with representations of data that are meaningful and can be related to. Good attempts have been made to do this using interpretive indicators as in the Palmerston State of the Children Report, or using infographics in the Child Friendly Alice Community Profile, the NT Government Story of our Children and Young People. In some regions it may also be useful to work with interpreters of Aboriginal languages or languages other than English to help ensure the data is understood. Naturally only de-identified population level data would be shared publicly.

Our experience in Palmerston is that the data sets need to be shared in understandable ways and the question of whether the conclusion drawn from this data rings true to community is asked. E.g. it looked as if there were many bus transport options in Palmerston based on the data re: number of services but community members were able to point out that a lack of cross-suburb services and violence at the interchange discouraged use and rendered public transport as inadequate at that stage.

In saying this, however, some community members express the desire to share their personal data especially if it could be done in de-identified ways. Particular those community members that are expected to contribute to the data constantly e.g. social security beneficiaries. Often data collection is duplicated by various government departments and agencies with the same information collected from the same people over and over again.

Also there needs to be some sensitivity regarding ownership of community data. (This is sometimes known as data sovereignty). We have experienced high levels of suspicion amongst refugee and Aboriginal families about the collection of data. Perhaps management of the data streams could be determined by the community and controlled by the community from where the information comes.

Children's ground, a NFP operating in the NT has developed a strong monitoring and evaluation system that is participatory and inclusive and controlled by local people who have a say about its further distribution.

Trust in the process is vitally important in collecting good information/data from community members about their community needs.

Longer term, more collaborative contracting with service providers

DRAFT FINDING 7.1

Current grant funding approaches used for children and family services in the Northern Territory do not facilitate a focus on long-term outcomes and create funding uncertainty for service providers.

Grant funding for children and family services is characterised by:

- short-term funding periods
- insufficient timeframes and information about funding opportunities and renewal or cessation of grants
- insufficient funding for capital expenses required for service delivery, for capacity building, and for monitoring and evaluation.

The result is gaps in staffing and capital for service providers, and substantial time devoted to grant applications. This adversely affects the quality of services, particularly where funding gaps mean providers have to cobble together funding from various sources and manage multiple grants.

I wholeheartedly support this finding. This approach is not just an historical artefact either. As recently as late December 2019 an example reached the desk of the Australian Red Cross whereby the results of the process of reviewing the need for the Tiwi Island child care centres by the Commonwealth Dept. of Education was released on 17 December 2019. This was followed by a request 'Restricted Selection Process for Child Care Services Management on Tiwi Islands' was opened the following day with a closing date for by 25 January. The current service provider will cease operating the Centres on 31 December 2019. There will undoubtedly be a gap in service providers and the people impacted by this will be workers on the Tiwi Islands who need child care.

The lack of capacity building funding has a profound effect on small local Aboriginal organisations who struggle through lacking the appropriate financial, HR, IT support that other organisations have. Their staff are underpaid or volunteer and have little or no rights such as superannuation, leave etc. This also affects the program functionality producing poor reporting and undermining local skillsets and knowledge. These organisations often have no voice in the government process used.

DRAFT FINDING 7.2

Competitive funding processes can provide benefits, in terms of lower costs and improved service quality, but they are not suited to all circumstances. Where there is an inadequate number of potential providers (markets are 'thin') or the economic costs and benefits of a service are difficult to quantify, competitive processes may:

- disadvantage small, community-based and Aboriginal organisations that are trusted by, and may be better able to meet the needs of, communities
- create disincentives for collaboration between providers who are competing for a limited funding pool and the same service user group
- lead to a disproportionate focus on price over quality, and take insufficient account of the longer-term benefits of community-based service providers (such as cultural competence and trust of communities).

Agreed. Strong local First Nations community organisations are an important plank in many aspects of remote community life. They have cultural congruency that no non-Aboriginal organisations cannot have. Sometimes non-Aboriginal organisations are good partners as they have strong back office systems and governance that can be drawn from. Partnerships can work if needed by following protocols developed for this purpose by agencies like APONT and SNAICC.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.1 **INCREASING CERTAINTY IN FUNDING**

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should set service contracts such that they provide adequate time and resources for service providers to establish their operations, and improve service quality and outcomes.

- Default contract lengths for children and family services should be set at a minimum of seven years.
- Funding should cover the full costs of providing children and family services in the Northern Territory (taking into account the higher costs of delivering services in remote areas, capital investments needed to support service delivery, and the cost of monitoring and reporting on service delivery outcomes).

Where exceptions to default terms are applied, for instance for program trials, agencies should publish a justification of why an exception was made. Pilot programs will be expected to have shorter initial terms, but contracts for such programs should include a contingency for long-term funding if the pilot is found to be successful.

Contracts should also contain adequate safeguards to allow governments to remove providers in cases where they fail to deliver an adequate service despite ongoing support from governments to rectify issues (draft recommendation 7.3).

Agree. An emphasis on certainty in funding can enable the establishment of a strong workforce with employment certainty. Funding agreements can be based on clear achievable milestones or performance measures. Relational monitoring should ideally ensure supports are put in place in a timely manner. I'd be interested to know what supports governments would provide to service providers.

Having been a relational contract manager I recognise a need for some discretionary funding to help employ specialists in order to help support things like, program logic/theory of change development, evaluation plans and independent evaluation by appropriately qualified/skilled people or organisations and capacity building.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.2 **INCREASING CERTAINTY IN THE CONTRACTING PROCESS**

To reduce uncertainty in funding of children and family services, the Commonwealth and NT Governments should:

- publish a rolling schedule of upcoming funding opportunities over (at least) the next twelve months
- allow sufficient time (a default of three months) for providers to prepare considered responses, including the development of integrated bids across related services
- notify providers of the outcome of funding processes in a timely manner, well in advance of the end of the existing contract.

This is a very good idea.

But if the pooled funding under a community plan idea comes to fruition there should be some alignment of upcoming funding opportunities. There has been a long history of last minute notifications of intentions e.g. Stronger Communities for Children in 2017, and now we are still waiting to hear about the future plans for the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner program for which funding expires on 30 June 2020. Current implementation cycles require a minimum of 6 months' notice which we have not had.

In some cases 3 months is not an adequate time frame. For example the Communities for Children program requires a 6 – 12 month lead time as community consultations must inform a local strategic plan, prior to seeking of Expression of Interest from potential community partners. Then adequate time (3 months) needs to be set aside for group review and decision making before settling on contracts and contract terms.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.3 **A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO CONTRACTING**

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should adopt a relational approach to contracting, in which governments, service providers and communities work collaboratively towards shared outcomes. A relational contracting approach would involve:

- governments and service providers engaging in collaborative, regular reviews of service outcomes (after consulting users of the service) to assess progress against user needs, with continuous improvement and adaptation of services when required
- regular reviews that are proportionate to the dependency between governments and providers — for example, more regular reviews where there is lack of competition — and where the risk and complexities associated with the service are high
- management of the relationship with service providers at the local or regional level, using existing regional network staff and infrastructure already in place. Governments should ensure that regional network staff have the skills, capacity and authority to make independent decisions on minor changes to service delivery, and in consultation with head offices when more substantial changes are required.

CfC Facilitating Partner program is a good model for a relational approach to contracting as it is delivered by Red Cross. The relational approach enables Red Cross as the facilitating partner to have regular meetings with the Community Partner when general discussion occurs to find out about the

delivery of the activity in the preceding period as well as a regular check against the performance measures agreed in the contract/agreements. (see regular meeting template attachment 1).

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.4 AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR REGIONAL NETWORKS

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should ensure that their regional networks have the skills, capacity and authority to:

- undertake community planning and provide advice to the Children and Families Tripartite Forum (as per draft recommendation 6.1)
- adopt a relational approach to contracting at the local or regional level (as per draft recommendation 7.3).

Yes. The two governments need to ensure that their regional workers have skills, capacity and authority as well as a good understanding of the public health approach to reform. An important plank of regional planning will be community input.

CfC and collective impact groups have a lot of good experience to offer and those efforts have generally been spearheaded by NFP organisations. E.g. GWLW, Child Friendly Alice who are represented by NTCOSS and APONT on the Tripartite Forum.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.5 TRANSITION TO ABORIGINAL CONTROLLED SERVICE DELIVERY

When commissioning children and family services primarily targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Commonwealth and NT Governments should ensure that service providers have the capacity to deliver physically accessible and culturally appropriate services.

- Funding decisions should take into account the characteristics and capabilities of providers (such as their cultural competence and connection to communities) and their ability to deliver improved outcomes. To support this, grant rules and guidelines should be adapted where necessary.
- Where an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) is expected to deliver better outcomes for children and families over the longer term, but lacks the capacity to effectively deliver services, the Commonwealth and NT Governments should engage non-ACCO service providers to partner with them, with funding agreements outlining a clear succession plan over defined timeframes and appropriate resourcing and incentives for building the capacity of the ACCO to deliver services.

CfC Tiwi Islands in particular hopes to transition to local Aboriginal community controlled organisations to deliver services. Unfortunately there is not a lot of local expertise nor is there housing for outside workers. We hope to incubate and support the development of a local child and family ACCO. In the meantime CfC provides for external CPs to increase their cultural congruency by employing Tiwi facilitators and workers. Means that there are more costs involved in order to:

- Budget for training and Tiwi wages
- A long period of mentoring and refining content for the Tiwi context
- Less services for the same amount of money spent

Budgets in remote areas in particular need to account for recruitment of appropriately qualified staff (2 way qualification) capacity building and infrastructure development by local organisations.

Cultural ways are usually relational ways and may appear less efficient but we believe have better outcomes.

It must also be noted that many outcomes for children are also socially determined (KICs and Royal Commission in Youth detention) and as such will be hard to move without a public health approach to primary prevention, early and targeted support, crisis intervention and transition and restoration.

Evaluation to build the evidence base and drive continuous improvement

DRAFT FINDING 8.1

Performance monitoring and reporting on children and family services occurs at many levels, but the quality and use of performance information is inconsistent. In general, performance monitoring of children and family services is:

- compliance-focused, mainly reporting on service outputs and tertiary level activities, such as delivery of statutory child protection services
- undertaken at a national, regional or agency level.

The current approach does not enable monitoring of outcomes for children and families at the community level. Better data on outcomes for children and families at the community level (draft recommendation 6.3) is needed as a first step in identifying the impact of the service *system* on outcomes.

Yes.

Community members need to help devise system level indicators. In my experience most community members know at some intuitive level, some better than service providers, what they will see that shows better outcomes for children but will need support from an evaluation facilitator articulate this and translate in to measurable indicators. Communities will be happy to be involved.

DRAFT FINDING 8.2

Evaluation of children and family programs in the Northern Territory is challenging.

- Formal quantitative program evaluations of high scientific reliability (such as randomised controlled trials) will often not be informative for children and family services in the Northern Territory. This is because of the multifaceted factors that influence outcomes, the multiple programs simultaneously directed at affecting outcomes, and the rapid changes that can occur in the programs being delivered.
- Results of formal program evaluations (that seek to measure the impact of programs on outcomes) need to be interpreted carefully. Given that the mix of other programs varies by community in a non-random way, only rough conclusions about a program's impact can be drawn — precise magnitudes of impact cannot be estimated.
- Informal evaluation, embedded into the design and delivery of programs from the start, helps to facilitate learning by doing and continuous improvement. An informal evaluation approach (that employs monitoring and assessment of basic program metrics, including through the use of user surveys) is likely to be suited to many types of children and family services in the Northern Territory.

We agree that evaluation and monitoring is challenging but a useful practice. It is not clear to us what is meant by informal evaluation. It sounds a little like Action Research. Which can have informal feedback loops as well as formal feedback loops and importantly a process of ongoing learning and change based on learning.

However employing 'monitoring and assessment of basic program metrics, including through the use of user surveys', sounds like formal rather than informal evaluation.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 8.1 **BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE THROUGH EVALUATION**

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should embed requirements (and appropriate resourcing) for monitoring and evaluation into contracts for children and family services where:

- the service lacks an existing, relevant and context-specific evidence base
- the service is expected to be adapted over time (for example, because the exact inputs and outputs of the program may not be known in advance).

At a minimum, funding should support the use of an evaluative approach that facilitates learning by doing and continuous improvement in services (draft finding 8.2). This should include funding to run periodic surveys that seek to understand user experience and community views on the functioning of the service and how it could be improved. This is an important complement to the collection and reporting of data on outcomes for children and families at the community level (draft recommendation 6.3).

Governments should prioritise and fund more formal, rigorous evaluations for programs or services that:

- involve a high level of expenditure and risk, or that cover a large number of children and families
- have been introduced in communities where there have not been significant changes in policies or other programs (to enable reasonable attribution of the impact of the program on outcomes).

It makes sense that some kind of articulated program logic/theory of change and evaluation be embedded in contracts for children and family services.

Local innovation needs to be welcome and supported as long as proponents are able to articulate a theory of change and ways they expect to measure their success or otherwise. Our CfC experience is that it can help all parties to be clear about what needs to be done, what resources are required, what the sequence of actions will be and ways to evaluate outcomes/achievement.

Such planning does need to be supported with training, specialist expertise advice, and time. When we did this with NT CfC in 2016-17 it was well received by our community partners who became very engaged in considering what could be done in any of their programs that weren't currently evidence based. We found it particularly useful in the remote context to employ an outside evaluation facilitator to work with local people to devise an evaluation plan and to regularly visit to carry out some evaluation processes with local support. This kept the evaluation on track and enabled some capacity building by the facilitator.

However it should be noted that some relevant early childhood education and development outcomes are community development outcomes. This is clear in the Kids in Communities Study (KICs) 2018³ which identifies 13 -21 community factors which can help remediate family and individual disadvantage. These are social determinants such as income, level of schooling, housing and housing affordability, perceived primary school reputation, local decision making, physical access to services, leadership, service coordination, sense of community which are articulated in table 3, page 13 of the report.

Implementation and oversight of reform progress

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 9.1 **AN AGREEMENT ON COORDINATED FUNDING**

The Commonwealth and NT Governments should negotiate an agreement for a coordinated funding framework for services relating to children and families in the Northern Territory.

This framework should include:

- the mechanism by which governments will agree on how they will coordinate funding (including any pooling of funds) in line with the needs and priorities of children and families, as outlined in community plans (as per draft recommendation 6.1)
- the institutional arrangements for enacting this coordination, including the role of the Children and Families Tripartite Forum and the NT Children's Commissioner (as per draft recommendations 6.1 and 9.2)
- a commitment to transition to longer-term contracting and a relational approach to engaging with service providers (as per draft recommendations 7.1 and 7.3)
- criteria to guide the selection of service providers and partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal providers (as per draft recommendation 7.5)

The coordinated funding framework should be developed in consultation with the Children and Families Tripartite Forum and with community representatives in the Northern Territory.

³ <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/CCCH-KICS-Final-Report-April-2018.pdf> Accessed 7 January 2020

Yes.

One concern that important child and family program funds will be consumed by bureaucrats talking about what to do and how to implement the recommendations rather than by action in community.

E.g. COAG trials at Wadeye

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 9.2 **INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT OF REFORMS**

The NT Government should task the NT Children's Commissioner (and its future replacement in the Commission for Children and Young People) with ongoing monitoring and public reporting on the progress of reforms to children and family services in the Northern Territory. This should include reporting annually on the progress of:

- implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory
- implementation of the recommendations of this Productivity Commission study.

Where Commonwealth services or funding are involved, the Commonwealth Government should proactively assist the NT Children's Commissioner.

Oversight by the NT Children's Commissioner sounds like a good idea.

It would also be good to involve the NT Tri-partite Forum so that there is input from NFPs via NTCOSS and APONT who are key peak bodies in the NT (provided they also seek inputs from their constituents especially those in remote areas).

Personal submission by Kathy Bannister, Communities for Children Team Leader, Australian Red Cross.