

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Expenditure on Children in the NT – Submission from Kathy Bannister, Australian Red Cross Communities for Children (CfC) Team Leader

What types of children and family services are available in your community?

Two documents attached as attachments 1 & 2 constitute a summary of the CfC activities provided in Palmerston and Tiwi Islands in 2019-2020.

In addition to these services there are some others on the Islands and in Palmerston but unfortunately do not have time to fully research and detail them in this submission. In short though there are many more services available in Palmerston and many more choices of service providers than there are on the Tiwi Islands.

Who uses these services and how easy are they to access?

On the whole the Palmerston CfC services are as accessible as we can make them on our budget. They are provided free which we know service users appreciate but accessibility in terms of transport is more a problem. Well off families with cars have the easiest access of course. Some disadvantaged families though face enormous barriers to access such as transport, social isolation and feelings of shame.

TRANSPORT A CHALLENGE FOR DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES

Struggling families face challenges accessing transport if the early childhood events are not within walking distance of their homes. This is why we mostly provide playgroups in the vicinity of the schools in the most disadvantaged suburbs. Some CfC activities which target a specific group such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families receive smaller numbers of attendees as the CALD families are dispersed across Palmerston suburbs. Public transport in the cases of all families not living in the suburb of Driver, where the group is held, requires at least two bus journeys to reach the venue. If a family has more than one pre-school child it is a struggle to get organised, get to the bus stop with children and stroller and other needs, get on the bus, reach the interchange, wait for the next bus and struggle to board it as well. In addition to this the Palmerston bus interchange is also known for being a place where conflict will occur, and some families will not allow their older children to be in transit there for fear of incidents occurring when children are not protected by adults.

Disadvantaged families cannot afford taxis. Work needs to be done to develop across suburb public bus routes rather than all routes leading to the bus interchange in the Palmerston CBD. The only other alternative is cab fares or a volunteer bus service.

I should add that this CALD playgroup is not exclusive to CALD. Other families also use it for convenience and as it is a goal to help CALD families connect with other community members this is a mutually good outcome.

Are services being delivered in a culturally capable way that meets the needs of children and families?

Many child and family services are not delivered in a culturally capable way. This is because in short well-meaning white people can be known to make peoples from other cultures quite uncomfortable. In Red Cross the CfC view of the best way to make people feel culturally comfortable, congruent and accepted is to have facilitators /co-facilitators from the culture of the families. This author observes that First Nations people face extra challenges where there is not recognition of their struggles due to colonisation and dominant cultural influence. Some of the struggles are often the product of intergenerational trauma unknown to service providers and

some struggles are the product of racism and economic marginalisation. They feel most comfortable when their values are understood and accepted and flourish where they are allowed to flourish.

It is rare that a qualification in education, social work, or community services result in a full knowledge of the cultures and struggles of first nations peoples let alone an ability to communicate in ways that enhance relationships. Increasingly the growth in individualism in western industrial cultures makes understanding of collectivist cultural values less accessible. It can take some years of social contact with First Nations peoples or other non-Anglo cultures to get a better grasp of crossing cultural divides.

FEARS A RESULT OF HISTORY

In the case of First Nations peoples there is a significant fear of white professionals especially from government children's services and police due to the historical and now contemporarily high rates of child removal for reasons of 'child protection'. Trust is much more easily established with workers from the same culture or from another First Nations culture.

I've been told by reliable sources that in Palmerston when First Nations targeted groups were combined with CALD groups that most First Nations people just simply stop coming.

On the Tiwi Islands the intensive family support service is only offered by Territory Families staff. Since Territory Families are also the department with the responsibility for child protection families are unlikely to see out help and support unless fiercely mandated to participate. On the other hand, child support workers from non-government agencies who deliver CfC activities will be sought out for advice on matters to do with children once they are known and trusted in the community. Sadly, none of these people are residents of Wurrumiyanga where they work weekly as there is not funding for a full-time service and no housing available for a full-time worker at this time. Herein lies a problem for most remote communities receiving the level of intervention services needed.

Parents Next often undermines a family's ability to care adequately for their children. Some of the actions of the Parents Next provider in Palmerston, Bamara, appear also to alienate families when the intention is to encourage and reward their participation in early childhood programs. Some of the barriers there are the operations of Centrelink in imposing harsh penalties rather than giving parents nurture and support to manage their family responsibilities and further their own development in preparation for work when their children are older. While it does seem possible to use a program such as this to leverage support to families who would otherwise not be participating, making it a punitive system rather than reward system feeds fear, structural racism and resentment.

INEQUITABLE PROVISION OF SERVICES CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES ON THE TIWI ISLANDS

It is clear on the Tiwi Islands that more services are needed. CfC Committee members often talk of the need for a full-time child counsellor, the prevention of domestic violence and more widespread understanding of the effects of violence and trauma on small children's development. On Bathurst Island where there are a majority of CfC Committee members and where Red Cross has an office it is clear adults and children are acting out traumas a result of colonisation, violence and sexual abuse. There is a history of high levels of suicide on the Tiwi Islands as well as high levels of chronic disease and premature death from preventable illness.

SERVICES PROVISION NOT HEALING PAST AND PRESENT TRAUMA

Where these traumas go unhealed symptomatic and self-medicating behaviour follows. Many young parents are addicts to some substance or behaviour. Addictions to drugs, alcohol and gambling are causing further harm to people self-medicating themselves but not healing. Domestic violence is at high levels among families on the islands and children in schools often display poor self-regulation and lash out with violence at other children. This results in exclusion from school which further decreases their chances of social and economic success later in life. If families are unable to support their children, there needs to be some effective interventions to break the cycle of disadvantage and prevent it being passed on again to the next generation.

Are there services that are needed but are not being provided? Or are there problems with the mix of services that are available?

SOME SERVICES MISSING IN PALMERSTON

A recent consultation with families suggests that in Palmerston there is a lack of 'parenting programs' that are accessible in Palmerston. One family spoke of being expected to attend a parenting class in the Darwin northern suburb of Malak if they were interested in having the youngest of their 3 children, who had been taken into foster care, eventually returned to the family home. Unfortunately caring for the other 2 children, getting them to school clean and well fed then catching three buses to reach the class then another three buses back home in time to get the two older children from school was an almost impossible task.

Other informants report a high level of suspicion about the concept of 'parenting programs' especially among First Nations peoples. Most 'parenting programs' don't focus on the existing cultural knowledge and strength but are based on a concept of First Nations cultures being the problem instead of the influence of the dominant culture on undermining traditional strength and values. Tiwi people stand out to me as having willingness to consider new approaches where they are respectful and supportive of traditional values and are proven to be of benefit to their children. The evidence based Baby FAST program delivered at Bathurst Island as a CfC activity enables local facilitators to deliver the experiences in Tiwi language and use Tiwi music, dance and stories as well as English concepts such as lap reading and conversational reading and these methods are wanted and accepted by the Tiwi families.

POOR MONITORING OF FAMILIES AS FIRST TEACHERS PROGRAM ON BATHURST ISLAND

On the surface it seems that the NT Dept of Education early childhood program, Families as First Teachers (FaFT), by its name appears to offer a respect for families as able to provide sufficient brain growth and development for children 0-3 years old. On Bathurst Island the FaFT program is not delivered directly by the Dept of Education as the Bathurst island Schools are run by the Catholic Education Office for historical reasons. DOE then contracts Tiwi Islands Regional Council (TIRC), the local government authority, to deliver the FaFT program. TIRC also hold a separate contract to run a creche at the same premises.

It is clear and well known to locals however that the Bathurst Island FaFT program is poorly attended and therefore almost non-existent. For reasons not clear to the author and others it continues to be poorly attended a fact apparently not known to the DOE. I also know from personal communication that this is not the case with FaFT in other communities such as Gunbalanya, Maningrida and Yirrkala. CfC is disappointed that TIRC does not reach out to other services such as Red Cross, Territory Families, Catholic Care, Tiwi Islands & Education Training

Board (TITEB), or Women's Centre to redress this lack of participation and enable an attractive environment with transport available to attract families.

Bathurst Island families are missing out on a great opportunity to support their children and their parents. Unfortunately, the CfC activity for 0-3 year olds and their families, BabyFAST, is only able to be conducted for the maximum of 14 weeks a year while FaFT is funded to run for 40 weeks a year. Approximately 15-30 families participate in BabyFAST over the 8 initial weeks, although graduation numbers are only 8-12, which means they've attended 90% of the initial 8 weekly sessions.

A look at the AECD results for the Tiwi Islands 2012 - 2018 suggest that perhaps a quarter of a whole generation of young people are being disadvantaged by this situation and are vulnerable on at least one of the AECD domains. It raises questions about the DOE oversight of this contract for quality and value.

'PARENTS NEXT' SOMETIMES DOING MORE HARM TO VULNERABLE FAMILIES THAN GOOD

As referred to above there is a problem with the implementation of Parents Next program in Palmerston. The service contractor seems to be challenged to adequately support and advocate for vulnerable families and tailor agreements to real family need and development. As a result, instead of helping they can hurt the most vulnerable families in Palmerston. This may be due to the constraints in operation of the Parents Next program by Centrelink since the 2018 Senate Inquiry has also highlighted the harm being caused to families and the need for changes in its operation of abolition¹. Therefore, no need for me to repeat the harms being reported in the community as these are covered well in the Senate Committee Report.

A recent consultation with vulnerable Palmerston families also suggests that options for further education that enable parents to participate during school hour would be welcome. Gatherings of parents while their children are in school they say would enable them to:

- Socialise and share joys as well as worries with other parents
- Discuss issues to with raising children with experienced family and child support workers
- Get access to literacy /numeracy and other learning such as first aid on a part time basis that fits in with family and cultural responsibilities

There is a lot of shame and embarrassment about not being able to read and so a specially sensitive, strength -based, targeted literacy/numeracy programs could be particularly useful, and make a difference to parents as well as child outcomes.

Are you consulted on what services are provided in your community and what outcomes should be prioritised? How could governments and service providers do this better?

WHAT PALMERSTON LOCAL VOICES SAY ABOUT CfC PRACTICES

The local community members in Palmerston and on the Tiwi Islands say they like be included in CfC local Committees and being enabled to contribute to decisions about funding of CfC activities

1

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ParentsNext/Report

in their community. Families with the lived experience of disadvantage are noticeably proud of being able to use their otherwise less valued knowledge for their communities. However, it is not their experience across the board in society that their knowledge is valued outside their own social groups.

This practice of a good balance of community members on a local committee provides lived experience combined with advice from service providers and data we consider results in good outcomes. All the CfC activities are well used and evaluation data suggests they are meeting the goals of the committee members. Data sources are limited but we use data from sources such as AECD, ABS and NT Primary Health Network to inform the expenditure of approximately \$400,000 in each of the two areas Palmerston and Tiwi Islands.

NO TRANSPARENCY OF GOVERNMENT STRATEGY RATIONALE

Red Cross as a Facilitating Partner in the CfC program is required to be extremely transparent in its application of funds and rationale for funding particular CfC activities. We are required to consult locally and develop a local strategic plan for 5 years of funding. At the same time our funding agency, DSS, also fund a suite of other activities in Palmerston such as the Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS), Home Interaction Program for Parents & Youngsters (HIPPY). When I've asked senior DSS officers to share with us the rationale for the targeting of Palmerston and the thinking behind the suite of services I've been told they don't know. This sounds genuine and if accurate says that the agency is not required to be transparent itself although it requires it of contractors. Such issues are not enough our core business to investigate or pursue this further but it would be good and useful to know.

We also know that other Commonwealth government departments also fund other services to Palmerston through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy such as Healing our Children and Larrakia Palmerston Family and Culture Centre. No doubt there are more funded services through Dept of Health and Aging, or NT Primary Health Network since the Danila Dilba Health service operates a clinic in Palmerston with specialist maternal and child health outreach strands to their clinical services. NT Government also provide maternal and child health clinics and outreach in the Palmerston community. The NT Health nurses often attend CfC playgroup activities to do health checks and give parents free advice and a social worker often supports families to join in groups with their babies/toddlers for their social support as well as their children's development.

It would seem though that no one, perhaps not even those government departments providing the funding have full knowledge of what is available for families in Palmerston.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND COMMUNITY VOICE

Grow Well Live Well (GWLW) Collective Impact group research suggests that the Palmerston community has some significantly good elements for families (See the Palmerston State of the Children Technical Report² pages 22-23). However, there are also some widespread concerns for families raising their children in Palmerston (pp 26-27).

Additional GWLW community conversations also showed us that there is a high level of connection and caring between Palmerston families and that a significant ability exists for families to reach out and support each other or their young people when times are tough or the need arises. Families are known to help each other with things like, sheltering women and young people in their homes, helping out with child care, food, garden care & other physical resources,

²<https://www.palmerston.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2018/Palmerston%20State%20of%20the%20Children%20Technical%20Report.pdf>

transport & sharing knowledge of intervention services. A repeated aspiration at community conversations was that there be full knowledge and transparency of service availability so people can refer each other and 'no wrong door' for a family to go through to seek support.

It was also said that usually if a child is in need of help it shows to their teachers and classmates first. They go on to say that it is unfortunate that schools also lack the resources to quickly respond to an individual child acting out trauma due to family need. The process of referring to government and often non-government services is often too slow to be very effective. There is a need for family support services to be attached to schools and there is also an expressed desire to build the capacity of local people to help and support other local people when the need arises.

Informed local Palmerston people say they need tailored support to families enabling them to engage socially, learn how to overcome their own trauma and provide the best environments for the young people's development – physical, social, cultural and spiritual should be prioritised. All services should be strength based and empower parents and families to support their children at all ages.

COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY PLANNING

As a result of the GWLW experience so far I see a lot of scope for more transparency in sharing what data is available on a community and draw the community members into sharing the knowledge of that data. This will further enable and empower families to contribute to strategising about what resources and programs are valuable as well as what additional resources should be made available.

One such resource spoken by some community/committee members is knowledge of causes and symptoms of intergenerational trauma as well as knowledge of overcoming the symptoms of trauma through peer and family support as well as the practices of schools, health services and law and justice bodies. Sometimes the roll out of services, without transparency and community input just adds to trauma being experienced by community members. E.g. Parents Next

Are services being provided in ways that maintain and build on the community's cultural and other strengths to prevent harm to children?

It is possible to build on a communities cultural and other strengths but we are not seeing this as a high priority yet. Red Cross Communities for Children is a partner in the Grow Well Live Well (GWLW) Collective Impact group in Palmerston NT has been involved in some community consultation in order to determine what the community consider their highest priority issues for making community life better for all families in Palmerston. The result was the identification of

1. Family violence
2. Youth mental health and wellbeing
3. Property crime

To this end the current NT government from time to time announce a new funding stream or initiative that is slightly in line with community aspiration around these areas however it is clear they are expecting to roll out the initiative without recourse to community consultation. This occurred in January 2019 when a senior official in the Department of Chief Minister made such an announcement at the Palmerston Safe Community Committee. It was accompanied by an

attention demanding flyer³. Despite there being community service workers from three GWLW agencies being a part of that committee this was the first we had heard of the plans.

Unfortunately, this suggests to us that the Government are interested in a perception of political fix rather than shaping the initiative into something that will work best if informed by local knowledge and lived experience of youth and families.

We found it somewhat unfortunate that even though NT government through the department, Territory Families, fund the 'backbone support' of the GWLW project they did not even meet with the Backbone Executive Offer of the Leadership Group before making their announcement of a small suite of initiatives 6 months ago and have also not engaged the Collective Impact group or community leaders since in shaping how to develop their projects. This is despite their being some middle level bureaucrats sitting at the leadership table of GWLW.

It would seem that both government officers and non-government agencies are still learning about the skills of community led or informed practice.

Another example of this in my view at this time is that of the NT Government's promising Child and Family Community Fund. The official flyer describing the fund this way: *'This fund provides recurrent funding of \$260,000 per annum to support improved outcomes for children aged 0-5 and their families. Child and Family Centres will support communities to access the fund for activities in line with community aspirations and priorities for children through the Local Decision Making process'*. It further describes community led as being the dominant principle for the dispersal of money. *'Decisions about the use of the Child and Family Community Fund will be made by the community in line with community aspirations and priorities for children'*. While this is a 'recurring fund' it is not yet clear how long it will be made available but we expect it to again be available in 2019-2020.

What became clear to me as an agency involved in children and family services in Palmerston and also involved in the steering group for the Child and Family Fund consultations is that government agents are unable to administer this effectively at this time. This seems to be because the pathways for administration were not at all clear despite the availability and urgency to acquit the funds in the last financial year. The funds were made available by one department (Dept of Chief Minister - DCM) to be for the use of dispersal by the Dept of Education who run the Child and Family Centres across the NT. This unclear pathway was compounded by new or temporary staff in both Palmerston DCM and the Palmerston Child and Family Centre at that time.

GWLW Backbone Executive Officer and Communities for Children worked together with the a/g Child and Family Centre Manager and the DCM consultant to help identify how to determine community needs. It was decided to focus consultation on the most vulnerable suburbs based on ABS and AECD data and one local First Nations community (Palmerston Indigenous Village).

Once a participatory consultation plan was developed as much information as possible was gathered from families in the short time left for the 2018-2019 financial year. The data was then examined and recommendations made to DCM. However it is understood by the writer that despite the consultative data some decisions were made based on aspirations of school principals that does not appear to be supported in the family generated data. At 26 July 2019 we are still waiting to hear officially how the funds will be dispersed.

³https://dcm.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/617628/PBCOC_Factsheet_FA.pdf

What's more we now understand from personal communication from a DCM official that the dispersal of funds to projects to support families is to be administered by a local school who has not done this kind of work before. Since CfC is in the practice of dispersing funds to other agencies to deliver activities to support children and families we are well aware of the work load involved in delivering such contracts, schedules of deliverables and measuring against contract milestones. This is at least a half time job for managing the expenditure of \$260,000 and seems impossible that a local school will have the resource or expertise to do this effectively.

I applaud the initiative around community decision making wholeheartedly but am shocked at the naivety of Palmerston government workers drawn into the delivery of the goal of the fund and what appears to be a series of administrative bungles. Some of this administrative stewardship knowledge is already available in CfC and probably also in some government agencies but I am concerned it is not being tapped into to make good use of the initiative.

THERE MAY BE BETTER CASES IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

I am aware that in remote settings inclusive community planning in many cases had already taken place around Child and Family Centres. A presentation on the Engoori concept⁴/method and its application in the NT community of Ngukurr was presented at the Australian Early Childhood Development (AECD) Conference in March 2018 by David Guy and Elizabeth Button et al from the NT Dept of Education. Based on my understanding of their work, Ngukurr Community would already have had a plan based on extensive community participatory planning when the Child and Family Community Fund was released. Presumably they also had an administrative pathway that was used and so none of their work was rushed.

Although I understand that the Child and Family Fund will be available again in 2019-20 local NT government officials have not been able to tell us how and when the fund can be drawn from yet.

These cases point to a need for some special training for government officials about community consultations, inclusive participatory decision making and planning, transparency in decision making inclusive administrative pathways and contract management.

How can services be improved to better prevent harm to children and strengthen the resilience of communities (including their cultural foundations)?

I believe that the types of services needed to better prevent harm to children and strengthen the resilience of communities is already well known in general through research such as the Kids in Community Study (KiCS).⁵ The KiCS study found that there were known *Foundational Community Factors* (FCFs) that had a positive influence on early childhood development (ECD). It showed that *'in disadvantaged communities, lack of resources and opportunities can result in worse child development outcomes that can persist from one generation to the next. However, there are also many factors—such as engaged parents and families, active community organisations, and neighbourhoods that are safe to walk in and have good places to play—that can promote healthy child development even in lower income communities.'*

This is line with the Common Approach developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) as well as the Palmerston community data gathered by GWLW and by the data

⁴ <https://www.murrimatters.com/engoori>

⁵ https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Kids_in_Communities_Study/

gathered for the Child and Family Community Fund. The local data shows that this knowledge is intuitively known by collective parent consensus. However, the work in delivering a coordinated multi-sectoral Foundational Community Factors needs to be an effective collaboration between NGOs, all levels of government, private enterprise and community leaders and members.

The Collective Impact model appears to have all the right ingredients for groups such as these to foster improvements in Foundational Community Factors by encouraging and supporting the voices of those with lived experience of intergenerational trauma and disadvantage who almost naturally aspire that their children have better opportunities.

SERVICE PROVISION IN REMOTE REGIONS

I have previously made some comment about the difficulty of providing personnel such as a child counselor in remote Bathurst Island due to a community and staff housing shortage as well as funding. If CfC were to enable the employment of a full time child counsellor it would use all of the CfC funding allocation for the Islands and mean other activities could not be provided.

While we allocate about the same amount of money for both our CfC sites we get significantly more services in Palmerston for \$400,000 than we do in the Tiwi Islands for the same price. A look at the tables in attachments 1 and 2 will show what these activities are and how frequently they are offered.

My rough calculation suggests that in Palmerston we get the equivalent of 316 CfC activity sessions (that go for up to 1- 3 hours) over the course of a year while in Tiwi for the close to the same cost we get 72 activities of a similar duration. This roughly means we can provide 3 times more access and activities in Palmerston for the approximately the same cost. The difference is due primarily to the additional on-costs of flying in coordinators or qualified staff and to pay wages to local Tiwi co-facilitators to work alongside them and also be involved in delivering the activity to help to make it culturally appropriate. This seems to be money well spent but it is clear from data that the Tiwi Islands needs more interventions.

Activities in both locations are closely monitored and evaluations from participants are collected, analysed and reported on in order to assess whether they are reaching the target audiences and are getting the intended results. If the 2018 AECD data is any indication a lot more needs to be provided to get the suite of Foundational Community Factors in place for Tiwi children.

I'd suggest a sincere collective impact approach that empowers Tiwi leaders and community members with lived experience of disadvantage could make a substantial improvement in chances for Tiwi children.