

10th February 2017

Productivity Commission
humanservices@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners,

Reforms to Human Services

Who we are

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated (NCSMC) is an organisation dedicated to single mother families. The Council has become a platform whereby both the community and the Government can communicate. NCSMC ensures that the 'lived experience' is heard.

NCSMC provides information, referrals and assistance to single mothers through our electronic platforms. In the past year we have responded to over 1,300 individual requests whilst our information post can reach up to 53,000 per week. We also host a *solomothers* email list and this collaboration ensures that we can reach up to 100,000 single mother families. Privacy is granted to single mother families impacted by poverty, hardship and or domestic violence.

Our Response

The National Council of Single Mothers and the Children Inc welcomes reforms that would improve the effectiveness of human services and help ensure all Australians can access timely, affordable and high quality services.

To ensure that the outcomes are based in 'reality' rather than 'rhetoric' and that they can transcend into real live situations we make the following points:

1. The Productivity Commission in undertaking a review should capture the views, the needs and the experiences of Australians, and or their representative bodies, who either interact and or access Human Services. The information gained can complement knowledge from services providers and other stakeholders. An absence of undertaking this task will result in an incomplete picture.

National Council for Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

Eliminate and respond to violence, hardship and inequality for single mothers and their children

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2. Human Services need to be more explicit regarding the assistance, exemptions, the raft of support and the rights of those receiving the services can expect. NCSMC suggests that it's explicit in service delivery charters, and that it's known to all who are seeking and or receiving a service.

Example: Domestic Violence Exemptions

Domestic Violence Exemptions are the key protective mechanism offered by the Department of Human Services for Australians impacted by Domestic Violence. Exemptions are not well known including their purpose, stated timeframes and the application process. Below are the findings from a national online survey known as '*Domestic Violence and Government Payments*' (2014)

- 14% of the respondents stated that they knew of the *Maintenance Action Test Exemption* while 70% stated no knowledge.
- A little over 3% of the respondents stated that they knew of the *Job Seeking Domestic Violence Exemption* whilst 93.33% stated no knowledge.
- 10% of respondents stated that were aware of *Partial Collect Exemption (child support - private collect)* whilst 76.67% stated no knowledge.

Respondents could also indicate if they had 'partial knowledge'

3. Avenues that bring together stakeholders that access Human Services are reducing despite its value. NCSMC points to the *Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group*. The Engagement Group has a long history of bringing key stakeholders together; it provided a conduit for the NGO's, Representative Bodies, Academics, and the Government to communicate. It enabled stakeholders to be better informed with the overall aim to improve service delivery. Furthermore, The Chair and Deputy Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs attended meetings and used the network to promote and seek engagement for a Parliamentary Inquiry (2014).The Engagement Group has undergone a review and a subsequent disbanding, thus leaving a vacuum.

In NCSMC's experience, Child Support is an emotive, complicated and erroneous legislation. Endeavors that assist the hundreds of thousands of Australians who interact with the scheme are a worthy pursuit and the Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group is one example of a lost opportunity to improve Human Service delivery.

4. Human Services should be encouraged to provide information that aims to inform Australians. NCSMC points to Government initiatives such as online estimators for child support and Government payments as solid examples.



5. The closure of face-to-face services will further marginalize Australians with more complex needs, who are isolated, and or can't afford or do not have the technical literacy to navigate online information. There is a gap in our service delivery focus which cannot be mitigated through online initiatives and information.
6. Human Services should seek to remove duplication i.e. women speak about the challenges of providing the same information to various organizations which is particularly harrowing when speaking about hardship and or domestic violence.
7. Human Services need to promote the assistance that is provided especially if funded from the Government. NCSMC has repeatedly sought a list of 'emergency relief providers'. Despite our attempts to seek this from a variety of departments and various Ministers it is still not forthcoming. It would be more efficient for families impacted by hardship not to have to contact a range of services especially whilst experiencing a crisis.

Our final statement relates to the notion of 'competition' and the procurement of services. We unequivocally endorse a more sophisticated process that would provide weight to specialist, longevity and or local services, as we seek the highest quality Human Service rather than a stand-out grant application.

If you wish to seek additional information or clarification please do not hesitate to contact us.

Warm regards

Terese Edwards
Chief Executive Officer

