



everyone's family

Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Expenditure on children in the Northern Territory

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Graham Jaescheke
General Manager NT and SA
Level 2, 6 Pavonia Place
PO Box 553
Nightcliff, NT, 0814

www.thesmithfamily.com.au

Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. The Smith Family supports the educational journey of children and young people in an effort to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Our mission is founded on the belief that every child and young person deserves a chance.

Our mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising. The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional communities.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported around 175,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs, including over 140,000 children and young people. We are supporting 48,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people nationally on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* (LfL) educational scholarship. Nationally, one in five students on the *Learning for Life* program is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. In the Northern Territory, our programs annually support almost 6,000 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Two in three students on LfL in the NT are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory (the Inquiry). Investment in the lives of children and young people is a critical area of Government policy. Evidence-based, targeted interventions early in their lives can have a profound and positive impact on young people's future.

Data from the Australian Early Development Census highlights the need for early intervention. Significant proportions of children from disadvantaged communities start school developmentally vulnerable. For instance in their first year of school:¹

- 35.8% of children in the Northern Territory do not meet one or more key developmental milestones –the highest proportion for any state or territory.
- 41.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children nationally do not meet one or more key developmental milestones.
- 26.6% of children in remote communities across the country, and 45.5% of children in very remote communities, do not meet one or more key developmental milestones.

These children are at risk of falling further behind without sustained, targeted assistance. The Grattan Institute demonstrated the significant gap in educational performance for disadvantaged students compared to their more advantaged peers. Even when capabilities are similar in Year 3, disadvantaged students fall between 12 months and 21 months behind more advantaged students by Year 9.² Year 12 completion rates are also significantly lower (60%) for students from low SES backgrounds than for

¹ Australian Government (2018) [Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018: A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia](#), Department of Education and Training

² Grattan Institute, [Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress](#), p 2.

students from high SES backgrounds (90%).³ This can have a major impact on these children and the community. It has been conservatively estimated that the lifetime costs to governments and the community for each young person not completing Year 12 or equivalent by age 19 is close to \$1 million.⁴

The Smith Family sees the above statistics as part of the context of this Inquiry given it aims to 'support better outcomes for children, families and the community'.

Overview The Smith Family's programs in the NT

The Smith Family runs a suite of programs in the Northern Territory that seek to intervene early in the lives of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to assist them on their educational journey through the early years, primary and high school, and then into further study, training or work. These are as follows:

- our Parent Engagement Program with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families;
- our flagship initiative, the *Learning for Life* scholarship program; and
- Facilitating Partner for the Commonwealth Government's Communities for Children (CfC) program in the Katherine region.

Our services are delivered in Darwin and Palmerston, and the Katherine region. In this submission, we outline the extent of our services in these communities, their effectiveness in meeting community need, and their capacity to be scaled up if further investment is made in them. We do this to support the Inquiry's focus on 'promoting better outcomes'.

Recommendations

Additionally, in order to ensure that services provided to children and young people are as effective over the long-term as possible, funding arrangements with Government could be improved, and more could be done to strengthen collaboration between government, service providers and the communities themselves. As such we make the following recommendations to the Inquiry for its consideration:

- **Commissioning processes should prioritise self-determination and culturally appropriate services.** This includes, as a priority, funding Aboriginal organisations to provide services for Aboriginal people where those organisations with the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise exist. When there are no apparent Aboriginal organisations available to provide the services, the process should prioritise funding organisations and coalitions with the combined skills, knowledge and expertise to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal people.
- **Deliver greater impact in communities through improving certainty of funding:** Extending the tenure of contracts to a minimum of 5 years with certainty being provided to the funded organisation (and to specialist staff recruited to deliver the program) alongside all the checks and balances necessary to ensure the program/s is/are being delivered to the required standard. A notice period of a minimum of 3 months to terminate/extend contract as standard.
- **Improve contract management services between government and service providers:** Contract management services should focus on creating genuine partnerships between government and service providers.

³ ACARA, *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2010: Additional statistics*, 2012.

⁴ Lamb, S. & Huo, S., *Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education*, Mitchell Institute, 2017.

- **Shift to funding arrangements that are genuinely outcomes-focused:** Negotiating contracts that reflect the intent of the funding and are well-informed and able to be modified when appropriate, to accommodate changes in circumstances, changed or reorganised priorities or government agenda, allowing adequate time for implementation and /or transition.
- **Consider financial loading for regional and remote communities in service contracts with provider:** In order for remote communities to benefit from initiatives such as *Communities for Children*, funding needs to take into account the added expenses of service delivery in remote communities.
- **Government funding arrangements should encourage long-term relationship building with local communities:** This approach will increase the likelihood of outcomes being achieved for participants.
- **Embed an evidence-based approach to service delivery:** Having a strong evidence base for program funding that can demonstrate impact in community and ensuring there is adequate provision in the funding to provide for meaningful evaluation as part of the process.
- **Adopt system-change approaches to place based service delivery:** This is in addition to program-specific solutions to tackling poverty, disadvantage and hardship. Approaches for example such as Collective Impact, provide a collaboration framework that engages across sectors and groups who share a common interest to address a complex social issue, in a given community. Agreement on what outcomes are to be achieved through collective effort is critical.
- **Improving the service transition process to minimise disruption to communities:** There is a role for Government in facilitating timely transition arrangements that are respectful of all parties, but particularly the families and communities who will be impacted by the transition.
- **Reconsider the size of a region in remote and regional communities:** For instance, consider re-sizing the Katherine Region based on area rather than population. In Katherine it is common for services such as Aboriginal medical services and allied health services to divide the region into two parts. This division would reduce the number of communities to 10 in each region, and can promote greater collaboration with public health services.

These recommendations are examined in more detail below.

Detail on The Smith Family's programs in the NT

In order to support the Inquiry's understanding of both some of the opportunities and challenges involved in current funding arrangements in the NT, detailed information on The Smith Family's programs in the NT is provided below.

A. Parent Engagement Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Overview

Extensive research highlights the critical role of parental engagement in children's learning, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental engagement is a bigger predictor of educational outcomes than family socioeconomic background. Students with engaged parents, no matter their income or background, are more likely to graduate from school and go on to higher education.⁵

The Smith Family is contracted to provide a Parent Engagement Program in seven nominated schools in Darwin/Palmerston under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy managed by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). This program has been funded since 2011 and builds on the relationships The Smith Family has in its focussed everyday work to provide assistance to parents and carers to better support their young people as they progress through the education system.

⁵ Fox S and Olsen A., (2014) Defining parental engagement, ACT Department of Education and Training.

In each of the contracted schools, we consult with parents and carers to identify and better understand their needs. Once this occurs, we develop targeted, place-based support for them on issues such as:

- early years intervention through the *Let's Read* and *Let's Count* literacy and numeracy programs;
- cyber-safety for students and parents via the *ThinkUKnow* program;
- financial literacy for parents via the Money Minded community model; and
- mentoring, curriculum enhancement, student cultural celebration and employment opportunities for parent leaders via the *Elders in Schools* program.

Program effectiveness

The Smith Family has had its funding renewed by PM&C and previously by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on four separate occasions from 2011 to 2019. Extensive and detailed reporting to government throughout this period has been well received. The program that has evolved over this lengthy period is supportive and inclusive, and reaffirms to parents their role as the first educators of their children. This particularly resonates with Aboriginal families enrolled in these schools. More recently, PM&C introduced a required feedback measure designed to ensure that the program meets the needs of families and is delivered in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way.

Opportunities to provide additional critical support

Given the international research and The Smith Family's strong practice experience of the importance of supporting parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds to better understand and engage with their children's educational journey, our ambition is to be able to deliver the Parent Engagement Program to all our partner schools in the NT, where there is a significant concentration of disadvantaged families, in particular Aboriginal families. We are currently not able to do this due to funding limitations. As such, there is a missed opportunity for making a bigger impact through a program that has proven highly effective. Additionally this program has the potential to be supported across all schools in the NT, given the high levels of disadvantage⁶ and high percentages of Aboriginal students enrolled in local schools.

B. Learning for Life in the Northern Territory

Overview

Our flagship national program is the *Learning for Life* (Lfl) educational scholarship program. The program has three components:

- a modest biannual payment to help families cover education-related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions;
- a *Learning for Life* coordinator (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education; and
- access to a range of shorter programs that begin in the early years and continue through to tertiary level.

Students can begin on the program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary study. This long-term support provides continuity over the various educational stages and needs that the young person and their family will experience. We maintain a unique longitudinal dataset of young people participating on *Learning for Life*. It includes demographic, administrative and outcomes data. We are tracking the school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study

⁶ MySchools data 2018

of all young people on the program. We are analysing this data in a systematic way in order to contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

The Smith Family has formal partnerships with twelve partner schools in Darwin, Palmerston and the Tiwi Islands in the Northern Territory. Through these partnerships, programs and support are provided to thousands of Territory students and their families. Partner school arrangements are with schools that have high levels of disadvantage; have high numbers of Aboriginal students; have high numbers of migrant and refugee students; and are committed to providing additional opportunities to their students and their families in their local community to keep young people engaged in education through to the completion of Year 12 and beyond. Some of the tailored programs offered in the NT as part of the LfL suite include:

- Let's Read and Lets Count (Early Years);
- Learning Clubs, Passport, Student2Student, TechPros, Future Seekers (Primary Years); and
- Work Inspiration, Post School Options, SmArts (Secondary Years).

A detailed list of all the programs we provide in the NT is at **Attachment A**.

Program effectiveness

The support The Smith Family provides to students/families/partner schools has three high level (long term) outcomes:

1. **ENGAGEMENT** - Young people are in education, training and/or work post school
2. **ADVANCEMENT** – Young people complete Year 12 or equivalent
3. **ATTENDANCE** – Young people stay engaged with learning

Opportunities to provide additional critical support

The Smith Family is building its support for students in the Darwin and Palmerston area with additional Learning for Life Scholarships being provided, with a growth from 380 students in January 2018 to 740 students by the end of 2019. As part of the LfL suite we provide a range of complementary learning programs such as Learning Clubs. In the NT these programs have additional costs associated with them (eg for paid facilitators due to more limited access to volunteers and transport). We could expand these cost-effective educational programs to more students with additional support.

C. Communities for Children in the Northern Territory

Overview

Communities for Children (CfC) is a place-based initiative, using a whole of community approach to support and enhance early childhood development and well-being for children, from birth to 12 years, and their families. The Smith Family has been the Facilitating Partner (FP) for this initiative in the Katherine Region since 2005. Geographically, it is the largest CfC FP site and includes some of the most remote communities in Australia. The Katherine Region CfC FP site covers the Statistical Areas 2 (SA2's) of Victoria River, Katherine, Elsey and Gulf, covering a total geographical area of 326,326.7km².

As Facilitating Partner, we are funded to provide eight activities to the Katherine Region addressing the four priority areas in our strategic plan:

- **Priority Area 1:** Our children are happy and have everything they need to learn and grow
- **Priority Area 2:** Our children are ready for and supported through all of life's transitions
- **Priority Area 3:** Our families have the knowledge, skills, and connectedness to support their children's aspirations
- **Priority Area 4:** Our communities are safe, nurturing, and inclusive places

The eight funded activities are:

- Baby FAST (NT Christian Schools) – Mataranka
- DRUMBEAT (Relationships Australia NT) – Katherine and Jilkminggan
- Holding Children Together (Relationships Australia NT) – Katherine Town, Binjari, Kalano, Rockhole Communities
- Lillypads Early Connections Playgroup (Catholic Care NT) – Katherine Town
- Play2Learn (Save the Children) – Katherine Town
- Smiling Mind Katherine Project (Smiling Mind) – Katherine, Mataranka, Jilkminggan
- Teaching Artist Project (The Song Room) – Yarralin & Bulman
- Titjimat Biginini Kaltja (Mimi Ngurrdalngi Aboriginal Corporation)

Program effectiveness

A total of 78% of funded activity in the Katherine Region is recognised as evidence-based programs by the funding body, the Department of Social Services. All funded activities report their outcomes through DSS's Data Exchange.

The Smith Family, as Facilitating Partner, completes project review meetings each March and October to consider the progress of the project, if and how the activity can be further improved, and the extent to which the activity contributes to the Katherine Region priority areas. Further, Community Partners submit progress reports in July and January of each year to illustrate their progress in meeting project milestones, budget, and outcomes. Outcome data is collected through pre and post surveys for activity participants and practitioner observation data.

In the 2017/18 Financial Year, a total of 2,022 individuals participated in Katherine CfC FP funded projects. This included,

- 439 children 0-4years (108 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)
- 962 children 5-12years (295 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)
- 409 parents/carers (84 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)
- 212 community members and/or professionals (14 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

The Communities for Children Facilitating Partner Committee (CCC) is a voluntary group of key stakeholders within the Katherine Region CfC site who work in collaboration with the Facilitating Partner (The Smith Family) to: Develop, guide and support implementation of CfC and its achievements of CfC objectives, and inform and support the Facilitating Partner in decision making regarding the governance of the CfC initiative.

For the 2015-2019 funding period, The Smith Family, guided by the CCC, undertook research and extensive consultations in the region to establish a picture of the Katherine Region service system and the aspirations of community members for their children and families. Drawing upon this work, a scoping document was developed that aimed to provide highlights and emerging themes to inform the Katherine Region CfC strategic plan.

The strategic plan establishes the CfC vision for the Katherine Region and priority areas for funded activities. Drawing upon the knowledge and experience of the CCC, sub-advisory groups are established to assist in the assessment of proposed activities in accordance with the vision and priorities identified in the strategic plan. Recommendations from the sub-advisory group are then presented to the CCC for endorsement.

As part of our ongoing consultations in the Katherine Region, The Smith Family is placing a greater focus on the views of children. The first Hearing Children's Voices project took place in 2018 and explores a different way of working with children in the Katherine Region. It aims to build the ability of children to have their say in a safe and respectful environment and hold a genuine voice within their community. The Smith Family undertook this project to make sure our work is connected to, and guided by, what children think is important. We view this project as a foundation for ongoing relationships with schools and communities, to ensure we are able to best support children and families in the Katherine Region.

Opportunities to provide additional critical support

The Katherine Region service system is centred in Katherine, which serves as a hub for the surrounding region. The majority of community organisations and government agencies are based in Katherine and, when available, deliver services to surrounding communities on a drive in, drive out/ fly in, fly out basis. This affects the capacity of services providers to develop trusting and meaningful relationships with communities, and significantly adds to the overall cost of service delivery.

The complexities of service delivery in the region is extremely high due to a number of factors: the absence of public transport; the vastness of the region; the high turnover of staff and the season variability of access to many communities in the region.

The factors described above impact the services funded by Katherine CfC, with the majority of funded services being based in Katherine and, when required, travelling to communities in the region. The work of The Smith Family, as the Facilitating Partner, is also affected by these factors as they can inhibit our ability to meaningfully engage with all 21 communities in the region, and provide appropriate support and capacity building to community based organisations to deliver services in the community.

Improving the way services are funded by Government

From our experience in delivering services to NT communities as we have identified above, we believe there are options the Inquiry can consider for improving service funding. These are set out below.

- **Commissioning processes should prioritise self-determination and culturally appropriate services.** This includes, as a priority, funding Aboriginal organisations to provide services for Aboriginal people where those organisations with the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise exist. When there are no apparent Aboriginal organisations available to provide the services, the process should prioritise funding organisations and coalitions with the combined skills, knowledge and expertise to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal people. If organisations chosen through commissioning processes do not have the above capabilities, the risk is that Aboriginal people and other marginalised and disadvantaged groups end up receiving inadequate or insufficient services from organisations offering generic services that are not tailored to community need.
- **Deliver greater impact in communities through improving certainty of funding.** Extending the tenure of contracts to a minimum of 5 years with certainty being provided to the funded organisation (and to specialist staff recruited to deliver the program) alongside all the checks and balances necessary to ensure the program/s is/are being delivered to the highest possible standard.

In regard to contract renewals/extensions/cancellation, it is recommended that there be a standard timeframe of a minimum of three months. At present, good staff leave organisations because of the uncertainty around contract negotiations as some discussions are held too late and staff

(understandably) feel they need to look elsewhere for job security.

- **Improve contract management services between government and service providers**

Contract Management Services should focus on creating genuine partnerships between government and service providers. This requires authentic engagement between funder and provider that is respectful, knowledgeable, informed and trusting. Such partnerships should also encourage an outcomes-based approach that offers the provider flexibility in service approach.

For instance, service providers in the Katherine region benefit greatly from clear communication from funding bodies. Being made aware of future funding arrangements in good time assists service providers in their strategic planning, contributes to the retention of quality staff, and ensures the community continues to benefit from the services delivered.

- **Shift to contracts that are genuinely outcomes-focused:**

Negotiating contracts that reflect the intent of the funding and are accurate, well-informed and able to be modified when appropriate to accommodate changes in circumstances, changed or reorganised priorities or a government agenda that allows adequate time for implementation and /or transition.

The Smith Family welcomes a strong focus on outcomes reporting as it is critical to ensuring that programs and services are making a positive difference in the lives of the children, young people and families they are aiming to support. Community Partners have however, consistently reported on the additional time resources required to complete rigorous outcomes reporting. With the greater focus on outcomes reporting associated with contract funding, budgets should acknowledge the increased time and resources required for data collection and reporting. This has a practical, day-to-day aspect as well given some of the challenges associated with data collection systems like DEX.

- **Consider financial loading for regional and remote communities in service contracts with provider**

In order for remote communities to benefit from the initiatives such as Communities for Children, funding needs to take account of the added expenses of service delivery in these communities. For example, for services based in Katherine these costs include additional staff travel time and heightened travel costs, resources such as a vehicle (fuel, maintenance), food and accommodation. For community-based services additional costs can include infrastructure, staffing (possibly additional time and resources for training/upskilling), and governance.

- **Strengthening partnerships between government, communities and service providers**

The effectiveness of services in communities can be substantively improved with strengthened relationships between government, service providers and the communities themselves. As such, we set out below ways to achieve this, for the Inquiry's consideration.

- **Government funding arrangements should encourage long-term relationship building with local communities**

Funding provision that recognises the importance of developing strong relationships over lengthy periods of time will increase the likelihood of outcomes being achieved by participants. The Smith Family recently undertook a Mapping Project that clearly identified the critical nature of the strength of the relationship. This was a key observation in reviewing all our work across all schools and all programs. The implication for our service delivery is that relationship building is a key success factor to

a successful program in the Northern Territory. The implications are that time needs to be factored in at the start of the program cycle to build relationships before program delivery can commence. Longer term contracts are needed to allow this to happen.

- **Embed an evidence-based approach to service delivery**

Having a strong evidence base for program funding that can demonstrate impact in community and ensuring there is adequate provision in the funding to provide for meaningful evaluation as part of the process.

- **Adopt system-change approaches to place based service delivery**

This is in addition to program-specific solutions to tackling poverty, disadvantage and hardship. Approaches for example such as Collective Impact, provide a collaboration framework that engages across sectors and groups who share a common interest to address a complex social issue, in a given community. Examples of Collective Impact in the Northern Territory include the Sanderson Alliance, Grow Well Live Well and Opportunity Child. This is a new way of doing business, gaining momentum across the country and across the world and takes a different approach to the oft used programmatic response to address issues or problems. Agreement on what outcomes are to be achieved through collective effort is critical.

- **Improving the service transition process to minimise disruption to communities**

There is a role for Government in facilitating timely transition arrangements that are respectful of all parties, but particularly the families and communities who will be impacted by the transition.

The Smith Family's experience with the cessation of funding for a remote/regional program (Intensive Support Playgroup in Borroloola) in the Northern Territory, where it had been funded to deliver over a seven year period, was not in keeping with this principle. A decision (by PM&C, the funding body) to transition this program to our existing community partner occurred without consultation and in very rushed way. We had previously communicated a plan to transition the program to the local Aboriginal organisation and the process used could have put at risk the support for what was described by the funding body locally as a very successful and well run program.

Best practice for transition processes should entail clear communication, shared accountability, agreed planning and mutual respect and recognition that both recognises the past and informs the future.

- **Reconsider the size of a region in remote and regional communities**

For instance, consider re sizing the Katherine Region based on area rather than population. In Katherine it is common for services such as Aboriginal medical services and allied health services to divide the Katherine region into two parts. This division would reduce the number of communities to 10 in each region, and can promote greater collaboration with public health services.

The reduction in region size would make a place-based approach more achievable, as there is ground for the Facilitating Partner to cover in order to engage with the communities, families and children in the region. Greater engagement with communities would lead to more accurate depiction of priority areas in specific communities and more tailored responses to priority areas identified.

A change in the size of a region does not address the challenges associated with Katherine-based organisations delivering services in remote communities. However, it would provide an opportunity for

more communities to receive services and more time and resources for the Facilitating Partner to dedicate to supporting community based services providers.

Conclusion

Improving the lives and the future of children in the NT will require a genuine commitment to early intervention, especially for those children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attempting to break out of cycles of inter-generational poverty. In turn, early intervention services will only prove effective if they involve authentic engagement with local communities and meet their specific needs. Courtesy of the Inquiry, government has an opportunity to improve its funding processes and simultaneously strengthen its partnerships with service providers, in turn delivering a larger impact for its investment in the NT. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission further with the Inquiry at their convenience.