



Illawarra Shoalhaven Joint Organisation

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29 March 2019

Their Futures Matter
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The four councils of the **Illawarra Shoalhaven Joint Organisation (ISJO)** – Wollongong, Shellharbour, Kiama and Shoalhaven – appreciate the opportunity to provide a response to the '*Their Futures Matter (TFM) – Access System Redesign discussion paper*' and provide the following as a summary of our comments. This response is focused on issues most relevant to local government and the particular issues within the Illawarra Shoalhaven region.

Overall, we agree with the premise that in order to improve the lives of vulnerable children, young people and families, and to keep children and young people out of the Out of Home Care (OOHC) system, greater supports and investments, including early interventions, are needed. There is a wealth of research and evidence to support this proposition, including the cited *The First 2000 Days* research and framework.

Furthermore, to underpin these efforts, we agree with the need to establish a robust, reliable and valid monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure targeted and effective investments are made to achieve better outcomes for our most vulnerable community members. However there are a number of matters we feel need greater consideration to make this Access System Redesign an optimum community outcomes initiative.

Most significantly, in addition to the targeted early intervention and prevention investments, there remains a need for substantial, base level, recurrent funding for general community development and soft entry-level supports. This would ensure that children, young people and families who have not been identified as 'at risk' but who may benefit from true preventative supports, can access the services they need to avoid progressing to higher levels of disadvantage and risk. For example, in the publication '*Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect*' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017), a range of social/environmental protective factors are identified that can help to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect in families – these include:

- Positive social connection and support
- Employment
- Neighbourhood social capital
- Adequate housing
- Socio-economically advantaged neighbourhood
- Access to health and social services.

The above listed factors are outcomes that are typically achieved through generalist community development work across all communities. Removing the funding for these initiatives, could put currently healthy communities at risk.

An important feature of this generalist community development work is that of sector support and interagencies – a process that facilitates organisational collaboration and cross referrals for clients. The paper *'Interagency collaboration: Part A. What is it, what does it look like, when is it needed and what supports it?'* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2011), proposed that interagency collaboration is most effective and beneficial for complex problems that fit across several organisations (such as homelessness and poverty) and for vulnerable and at-risk families. This is often the role that councils play in the community sector and we would urge that funding for these services remain.

Another concern with this proposal is that it is geared towards the family unit and consequently, targeted programs and investments for individual young people will be lost. Young people, defined as being 12 – 24 years of age, and the services that support them, are unique and specialised and if the funding for these services is removed, the young people who are vulnerable could fall through the cracks and slip into a state of high risk, placing additional pressure on other service areas. For example, as stated in the discussion paper (p.6) '33% of OOHC leavers were pregnant or had a child within 12 months of leaving care and are 10 times more likely to have their own children removed'. With the ongoing provision of targeted, youth specific funding and services, true preventative interventions can be delivered and aim to reduce these statistics.

All funding needs to shift to recurrent, long term contracts with a minimum 7 year cycle. One of the greatest factors to undermine the work of service providers supporting vulnerable community members is the short term, non-recurrent funding landscape. Sustainable outcomes for the most vulnerable and at risk requires long-term supports and investments. This approach is strongly supported by the Australian Productivity Commission's *'Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report'* (No. 85, 27 October 2017). The report states that the current three years or less contracts 'can be detrimental to service users because service providers spend too much time seeking short-term funding, which is a costly distraction from delivering and improving services' (p.24). The short-term funding cycle also results in the high turnover of community service staff as they chase positions that are funded. This undermines the building of strong trusting relationships with vulnerable community members, which is the foundation for effective work with this cohort of the community. To conclude, the report recommends that governments move to seven-year default contract terms.

The ISJO is strongly concerned that these reforms will result in further cost-shifting, from state to local government. If the issues raised above are not adequately addressed, community expectations will shift to local government to fill the service gaps. For example, if funding is removed from some Neighbourhood Associations and interagencies, it is likely that community will look to councils to fill the void. This major concern is reinforced by the 2018 study – *'Impact of cost shifting on local government in NSW'* (Local Government NSW) – which outlines the \$6.2 billion dollars total cost shifting burden to councils over the past 10 years.

A note on the regional context of the Illawarra Shoalhaven. In the discussion paper, it is stated that 73% of children leaving OOHC in NSW are in regional or remote locations (p. 6). We hope that the future resource distribution is reflective of this and substantial investments are made in the regional and remote communities. The challenges for the Illawarra Shoalhaven communities are exacerbated by the fact that we are an incredibly elongated and dispersed community with very limited public transport. This means that accessing services that are not local and readily available could result in limited supports being provided.

In their report '*Effective regional, rural and remote family and relationship service delivery*' (2008), the Australian Institute of Family Studies outline a range of enabling factors that can contribute to an effective service delivery model:

- Greater investment into training for staff to promote leaders and retain staff
- Organisations providing greater flexible work conditions, ultimately resulting in greater staff satisfaction and retention
- Service re-engineering to foster recruitment and retention (such as preparatory training, professional development, support systems, relocations assistance, temporary tenure, admin supports)
- Strong community engagement and capacity building to support and nurture community champions, to promote services and to become involved in local boards and management committees
- All of this needs to be underpinned by appropriate long term funding that recognises the particular challenges faced by regional and remote communities.

The above mentioned types of supports and training, often delivered through interagencies and networks, is typically the work done by councils and we would recommend that future funding recognises and respond to these particular needs.

Lastly, some comments on providing effective services with and for Aboriginal communities. In line with the issues outlined in regard to regional and remote communities, it is imperative that services are the result of extensive and inclusive community consultation directly with the communities impacted, and that local solutions are designed with local champions at the helm. The ISJO councils enjoy the benefits of long standing, positive working relationships with a range of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and services and could help to identify and facilitate connections with those stakeholders.

In closing, we agree with the need to invest into early intervention services and programs to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. However we urge the NSW Government to ensure investment into other services and interventions not only remain, but increase, to ensure a true 'prevention' model is delivered for the community and the whole of community can be protected from neglect and abuse.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Fraser', written in a cursive style.

Jim Fraser
Interim Executive Officer
Illawarra Shoalhaven Joint Organisation