

# Early Years Pathways

## – STRONG SERVICES

### for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

February 2015

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services

### THE Issue

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services have been damaged by funding cuts and are threatened by continuing uncertainty over future funding.

Federal funding for the 38 Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) across Australia was discontinued in July 2014. Some states, including Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales have provided temporary funding, with many ACFCs being forced to operate at a significantly reduced rate. Others, such as South Australia, the Northern Territory and Tasmania, are managing the Centres directly through their state

education departments. Victorian ACFCs have not received any state funding for the operation of integrated services, and are therefore having to operate on substantially reduced budgets.

The 270 services funded under the Budget Based Funding (BBF) program remain in limbo on inadequate year-to-year funding, with their future being considered as part of the Government's ongoing review of early childhood.

### WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Establish quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led integrated services for children and families in the early years. This could be achieved by:

- Establishing a long-term block funded program specifically targeted to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families<sup>1</sup>; and
- Implementing this new program to strengthen the existing Aboriginal Children and Family Centres and Budget Based Funded children's services, and building capacity for other new services where coverage gaps exist.

<sup>1</sup> For more information see Brennan, D. (2013). *Joining the Dots: Program and Funding Options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Services*. Commissioned by SNAICC, Melbourne and SNAICC (2014). *SNAICC Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning*. Melbourne.

### HOW DO WE KNOW IT WILL WORK?

The statistics on the lower health, educational and wellbeing outcomes experienced by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are clear. Strong evidence shows that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families aren't accessing the service supports they need in the early years of their children's lives. In addition, we know that families experiencing disadvantage have difficulty navigating the complex web of service systems, and therefore need an easier 'first door' or access point. Services that are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are more effective in creating safe and welcoming environments that engage our families and connect them to the service supports they need. Not only that, but in the early years they provide a vital place for our communities to share and continue their cultural traditions.

**STILL NOT CONVINCED?** Then read on to check-out these amazing examples of how whole communities are changing because of a new Aboriginal-led integrated early years service...

# Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre

## NOWRA, NEW SOUTH WALES

**With 400 children and adults participating each year in allied health and family support programs, Cullunghutti ACFC is a community service in high demand.** In addition to this, the service has 70 children enrolled in the early childhood program – and another 45 on the waitlist. These high numbers can be largely attributed to the fact that Cullunghutti delivers a culturally centred, holistic response to the needs of Aboriginal families. After only 18 months of operation, Cullunghutti ACFC has dramatically changed the way Aboriginal families are supported in Nowra.

Child and family health is supported through an extensive range of freely available on-site allied health services delivered through strong partnerships with other service providers. These include:

- speech and occupational therapy
- psychology
- paediatric services, including child hearing assessments, 'blue book' health checks and coordination of GP assessments for allied health plans
- antenatal maternal health assessments.

The centre will also shortly be certified as a provider for the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Families are encouraged to drop-in to the centre when they need – for advice, support or just a friendly yarn and cuppa. A comprehensive case management approach ensures that families receive wraparound services, including:

- behavioural management support and Early Links Inclusion Support Service
- drop-in housing support
- parenting programs, including a supported playgroup that sees regular attendance from around 15 adults and 20 children
- cultural and arts programs, as well as separate Men's and Women's groups
- a catering and nutrition program
- support for kinship carers.

Cullunghutti also supports the development of a strong Aboriginal workforce, employing 12 Aboriginal workers out of 16 staff, with the other 4 staff members having strong connections and acceptance in the local Aboriginal community. The Aboriginal General Manager, Aboriginal Teaching Director and eight-member community and parent Board ensure strong Aboriginal management and leadership. In addition to this, families report feeling that they have a strong voice at the centre.

The very real differences brought about in the lives of Nowra's children as a direct result of the service are staggering:

- There has been an significant increase in early childhood diagnosis of additional needs and learning delay, with the Aboriginal specific stream of the Early Links program assessing over 30 children annually.
- A minimum of 80-85% of the children and families accessing the early learning and supported playgroup did not previously access any early learning service before attending Cullunghutti.

- Numerous children who previously experienced limited access to health professionals have now received health checks, visited health professionals and are receiving additional support.

Changes are not just visible for the kids, but also for their families and the community as a whole. Adults are supported to undertake TAFE level study in work readiness, community services and micro-enterprise. Due to the success of its nutrition program, Cullunghutti has established its own catering business as a social enterprise, as part of its sustainability strategy, which is staffed by 3 women from the nutrition program. General Manager Cindy Holmes describes how, *"The changes for those women are phenomenal....now they are running a catering business and out in the community selling raffle tickets to raise money for Cullunghutti. The changes are flowing through into their families... it's part of the way that we provide whole of family support."*

The centre is now supporting the women to study small business management.

Cullunghutti ACFC delivers a vital service to the Nowra region – with numerous benefits for children, families and the community as a whole. The Nowra community is working over-time to raise funds for their Centre after its income was halved by the withdrawal of Federal funds in 2014 and it awaits confirmation of state funds beyond June 2015. It is more than apparent that it is time for the Federal government to re-invest in Cullunghutti's success.

*Cullunghutti is a family – our families are part of us*



## Yenu Allowah Aboriginal Child and Family Centre

### MT DRUITT, NEW SOUTH WALES

**In the past year 34 Aboriginal children enrolled at Yenu Allowah ACFC, supported by an all-Aboriginal staff.**

The centre offers a range of allied health programs, including:

- speech and occupational therapy
- immunisations
- dental health and hearing screenings (screenings are conducted for all Aboriginal children in the local community, not just those who attend the centre)
- maternal health and a visiting health nurse
- disability services.

An array of family support programs enable a wraparound service for all the family. Playgroup services are delivered to 30 families through two mobile playgroups. In addition, the service offers behavioural management, parenting support and a catering and nutrition program. Cultural and arts programs, offered to children and families, are a fundamental aspect of the service. With a high proportion of children in Out of Home Care (OOHC) the cultural program

Strong, Proud and Deadly Kids Club is essential to support kids in care to remain connected to their culture. Support is also provided to kinship carers.

Local community involvement has been embedded from the start – in the centre design, approach and programming – making Yenu Allowah a truly Aboriginal owned and guided service. The service is now initiating a custodianship role for Elders, so that their wealth of knowledge can guide decision-making.

To cater for the high proportion of children in OOHC or within families at risk, staff are highly experienced in and sensitive to childhood trauma and child protection issues. An essential point of difference for the service is that staff know how to support children with higher needs, and the service structure supports the more intensive levels of care required. Their approach is simple, Centre Manager Christine states, *"We take them in and then we worry about what needs to happen."*

Word of mouth is spreading across the community about the value of the centre – with new families continually visiting,



and some families even enrolling their children before they are born. Christine estimates that 95 per cent of children in the preschool group have not previously accessed formal child care, and that numerous children are accessing health services they previously wouldn't have benefitted from.

Despite all the gains, the future of the centre beyond 2015 continues to remain uncertain. Closure of the centre would, Christine says, *"mean utter devastation [and] impact generationally on today's children and children in the future."*

## LUKE'S Story

This is the story of just one of the many thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have benefitted from the Aboriginal Child and Family Centres.

**Luke's\* educational journey had a rough start. Beginning kindergarten at the public primary school in 2014, Luke was asked to leave due to his 'disruptive behaviour', and inability to cope with the school environment. His mother, a single parent, was incredibly distressed by this, and not knowing what to do. She was incredibly stressed by this and turned to her local Aboriginal Child and Family Centre because she knew and trusted the staff there.**

The ACFC Manager attended meetings with the school and Luke's mother, and a mutual decision was made to give Luke another year at home with the support of the ACFC. An assessment revealed that language delay was hindering Luke's successful transition to school. This assessment enabled Luke to be referred to the supports he needed – a speech therapy service and a playgroup for children with disabilities, both facilitated by and hosted at the local ACFC. In mid-2014 Luke was then able to progress on to a long day care program at the ACFC, at the same time as continuing with in-house individual and group speech therapy. Support was provided

by the speech therapist to Luke's mother and educators to ensure that the care he received was consistent in reinforcing his therapy. As a result, Luke's language development has improved significantly, confirmed by increased vocabulary and comprehension test results.

At the end of his year at the ACFC, preparation started for Luke to re-attend primary school. Discussions were held with the speech therapist and the school, to ensure the school was prepared to receive Luke. The school applied for additional funding to ensure that Luke could receive one-on-one support. The ACFC hosted a preparation for school workshop, which Luke and his mother attended.

At the start of 2015, Luke recommenced at the local primary school. His mother reported that he was warmly welcomed into the school environment and settled in well, and that she has seen fantastic improvements in Luke's ability to communicate at home. She directly attributes these gains to the support Luke received at the ACFC.

\* not his real name

# Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu Halls Creek Children and Family Centre

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu Halls Creek CFC operates in the remote Kimberley region, providing a reliable space for children to build relationships, learn and to be strong in their culture and identity.**

Participation rates are high, with 113 children and families accessing Little Nuggets, the long day care centre, and 505 children participating in Lilwuns playgroup over the last 6 months.

Operating as the only children and family centre in Halls Creek, the centre delivers a large array of allied health services, including:

- growth and development assessments by the Yura Yungi child health nurse, who is permanently located in the CFC
- Neuro-Development Clinics
- Allied Health (speech, physiotherapy and occupational therapy), which delivers workshops and attend Early Years Network meetings at the centre
- nutrition and dietary advice from visiting specialists, including collaboration with the CFC and Yura Yungi on one-off community events
- a sexual health program delivered weekly
- regular visits from a psychologist; and
- specific workshops delivered according to local demand – with past workshops covering topics such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and the ‘breathe blow cough’ program.

Centre Manager Maria Lovison believes it is crucial to provide families with a range of programs to expose them to new knowledge and empower them to take a leading role in their child's development.

The range of family support services provided at the Centre include:

- Parenting support, including a fortnightly men's circle to discuss health and community issues.
- Daily literacy and numeracy support. The centre is also in discussion with the Australian Parents Council around training local staff to conduct the Indigenous Parenting Factor program.
- Cultural and community activities – including fortnightly programs through the Kimberley Language Resource Centre and local community members.



- A money management program delivered by the Jungarni Jutiya Aboriginal Corporation.
- A weekly radio slot to promote the Centre's programs, upcoming events and partner service providers, as well as a special feature on 'children's stories'.

The community uses the centre as a hub for a range of activities from birthday parties to a shared garden initiative. Maria describes how *"No matter where you come from, what your languages are, it is everyone's centre. This is the most empowering aspect."* Community members are encouraged to share their thoughts and suggestions on the operation of the centre and the programs provided.

A cultural advisory group, comprised of Elders and community members, meets monthly to provide staff with advice and guidance on cultural and community matters. Culture forms part of the *"life and breath"* of the centre, and Carolyn, Manager of Little Nuggets, describes how the flow-on effects of this are visible in increased community pride in their culture and centre.

The establishment of a strong cultural identity is seen as particularly crucial as school-age children move on to attend mainstream primary schools. Supporting this transition, the centre maintains a strong partnership with the two local schools. A weekly story-time program is run for kids in Lilwuns Playgroup at the Halls Creek District High School, and a kindy program at Warlawurru (Red Hill) Primary School.

In describing the strengths of the service, Centre Manager Maria says simply, *"people love coming here"*, and this results in consistent participation and attendance rates. She attributes this to the trust that the community

have in the centre – the community *"have started to take ownership of the centre, and you can really feel that when you walk in."* The employment of local staff is crucial in this. Seven of the nine Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu staff, and eight of the 11 Little Nugget staff are Aboriginal, and Maria describes how *"when the people see locals working here, they feel more comfortable. They have their trust. When they see family working at the centre, they are more likely to come to the centre than [to a] mainstream service."*

However, like most remote communities, qualified local staff are hard to find. The Centre has responded to this through a strong focus on staff capacity building. Seven local women are currently being supported to undertake Certificate and Diploma level training, and a high school student is undertaking a school-based traineeship. The Kimberley Training Institute visit fortnightly to discuss training options with staff and community members. Additionally, the service mentors young parents through study enrolment processes and options.

Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu has been delivering strong outcomes for children and families since its inception. However with no certainty of funding beyond June 2015, it is hard to plan for the future. A mobile playgroup service operating out of the "Mums & Bubs" building gained just enough momentum to begin to show strong outcomes and high family participation, before funding ceased and the program was forced to close.

Programs at the centre are at risk of ceasing if future funding is not secured. Simply put, without Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu, there would be no child and family services available in Halls Creek.

Culture forms part of the *"life and breath"* of the centre...