



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The national peak body for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander children and families
www.snaicc.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

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Statement by SNAICC Deputy Chairperson, Geraldine Atkinson

Productivity Commission report: where is the blueprint for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

SNAICC believes the Productivity Commission's draft report into child care and early childhood learning has some promising ideas, but fails to deliver a blueprint to improve access and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in vital early childhood services.

SNAICC commends the report's focus on and recognition of the value of integrated services and the strong recommendations to continue funding for preschools.

The value of integrated services — providing a range of early education and care, health and parent support programs — and the need for a “whole of community” approach is abundantly clear, supported by evidence that early years supports lead to significantly better health and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable children.

The latest SNAICC study into transition-to-school issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children — titled *The Journey to Big School* — confirms the vital importance of adequately funded, high-quality, culturally appropriate and targeted early childhood services to improve school participation rates and performance.

Evidence clearly indicates that culturally-centred and integrated services are the key to supporting families and getting children ready for school — having them healthy, confident and excited to learn.

However, the Productivity Commission's draft report raises a number of issues and concerns.

The report advocates for the current mainstream system of funding — the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate payments — to be streamlined into one, means-tested child-based payment called the Early Care and Learning Subsidy.

The report then proposes a new Disadvantaged Communities Program to replace the current Budget Based Funded (BBF) Program, which funds 270 Indigenous community-controlled services. It recommends that the new program be capped at \$100 million — which is up from the \$61 million committed to BBF.

Principal among SNAICC's concerns with the report's recommendations are:

- By focusing on disadvantage as the main criteria for service eligibility, the proposed approach ignores the need to fund culturally-appropriate, Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander specific care. Instead it assumes that through being 'culturally competent' all services can provide vital cultural nurturing and connections — something SNAICC strongly disagrees with. This approach ignores the powerful evidence on the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having access to community-controlled and directed early years services.

- While we are heartened to see a \$39 million increase on the BBF funding, we caution against capping a program for which the inclusion criteria, scope and number of potentially eligible services is not yet known. We question the rationale for leaving mainstream funding uncapped, but capping funding where it is needed most — in disadvantaged communities.
- The report also proposes that the Disadvantaged Communities Program not apply to services “where there is a viable labour market”. SNAICC has great concerns with this proposal: it assumes, wrongly, that the existence of a viable labour market equates to no community disadvantage or need for culturally appropriate services. The existence of a viable labour market doesn't guarantee participation in that market — as many Indigenous job seekers will attest.
- The proposed model does not take into account an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service that supports families with differing characteristics (and levels of disadvantage) — for example a service that has some working and some non-working families. It is not clear whether a centre such as this would be funded under the new Disadvantaged Communities Program, or the Early Care and Learning Subsidy, nor whether either of these approaches would be suitable.
- The Disadvantaged Communities Program is based on the level of disadvantage within a community. How this would work in supporting an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service that caters to a disadvantaged Indigenous community within a non-disadvantaged mainstream community is also unclear.
- Although the report recognises the value of integrated services, it offers only restricted support to the new 38 Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) across Australia to deliver these service in a culturally appropriate context. Only those ACFCs that deliver child care would be eligible under the draft report — which would exclude a large number of ACFCs. So while the report may provide hope for some ACFCs, these new services are still languishing without adequate funding while they negotiate with their state-territory governments to stay open.

In summary, the Productivity Commission doesn't come to grips with the barriers that have prevented greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in early childhood education and care services. One barrier is the lack of services in many areas; another is that the mainstream model simply doesn't work for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Our families are more likely to use Indigenous-controlled services because they provide affordable, flexible and responsive services, they immerse children in cultural activities every day, and they understand the issues and needs of our families.

Our existing services need to be given adequate and long-term funding — and be vastly increased in number — if we are to support Indigenous families, improve school attendance rates and performance, and close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

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