

SUBMISSION

TO | Early Intervention Research Directorate (EIRD),
DPC

TOPIC | Getting it Right Early: South Australian
Government's Prevention and Early Intervention
Strategy for Child Abuse and Neglect 2018

DATE | January, 2018

CONTACT

Simon Schrapel AM
Chief Executive
Uniting Communities
10 Pitt Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Ph: 08 8202 5886

Email: SimonS@unitingcommunities.org

Introduction

We are pleased to provide a response to the draft of the *Getting it Right Early: South Australian Government's Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy for Child Abuse and Neglect 2018* (hereafter referred to as the draft strategy).

Uniting Communities is a not-for-profit organisation working with South Australians across metropolitan and regional South Australia through more than 104 community service programs. At Uniting Communities we work to create a compassionate, respectful and just community in which all people participate and flourish. We are made up of a team of more than 1,500 staff and volunteers who support and engage with more than 20,000 South Australians each year.

Established in 1901, Uniting Communities recognises that people of all ages and backgrounds will come across challenges in their lives. We offer professional and non-judgmental support for individuals and families around alcohol and other drugs interventions, issues of housing and crises, mental health and wellbeing, for individuals with disabilities, respite for carers, counselling and rehabilitation, medical issues, and financial and legal services.

We have extensive collective practice wisdom in supporting children and young people and their parents and families across the breadth of our services. We offer this submission in the hope that our knowledge and perspective within the NGO sector and working alongside families will inform the development of a final strategy to prevent and intervene in child abuse and neglect.

We have structured this submission to highlight what is missing in the current draft strategy and what should be included in the final strategy. Our feedback is summarised below and has been expanded upon briefly under sub-headings. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss our submission as we are committed to seeing the establishment of a highly functional prevention and early intervention strategy and system in South Australia. Such a strategy has been long overdue in South Australia and the ramifications of its absence are unfortunately all too obvious.

Uniting Communities' Feedback on the Draft Strategy

While we welcome the draft strategy, we are doubtful of its ability to achieve the needed reform for prevention and early intervention of child abuse and neglect. Our concerns centre predominantly on two core limitations of the current draft strategy, which are:

- The actors involved in preventing and intervening in child abuse and neglect outlined in the draft strategy is limited because it doesn't properly take the contribution of the NGO sector and broader civil society into account; and

- It is unclear how the strategic themes and associated activities will achieve the level of prevention of, and intervention in, child abuse and neglect needed in South Australia.

We additionally have concerns about the vision being too service-dominant and would like to see a transparent commitment to a state-wide response that includes increased investment, capacity-building and target-setting. What South Australia urgently needs is a bold and visionary approach to prevention and early intervention, which the current draft strategy falls well short of.

The Inclusion of the NGO Sector

We contend that the draft strategy does not properly take the NGO sector into account to prevent and intervene in child abuse and neglect. Whilst we acknowledge that the second strategic theme identified in the draft strategy—*Strengthen the System*—alludes to services outside of the child protection system (including ‘adult services’) playing a role in prevention/intervention in child abuse, it is not clear what role these services can play in a coordinated strategy, nor how they will be involved and supported to do so. This insular approach taken in the draft is further amplified through the complete disregard of organisations outside the public sector in taking a lead on any of the activities listed in the document.

It is stated in the draft strategy that ‘adult services’ will play a ‘...stronger role in identifying and responding to vulnerable children and families to better support their adult clients as parents’ and it is also stated that ‘we need to be better at identifying them [children and families at risk] wherever they present’. Services that sit outside of the child protection system can both support parents and families and identify children at risk of abuse and neglect. Uniting Communities applies a ‘family lens’ in many service settings to support the client and their families. Our Aboriginal Community Connect service (ACC) provides an excellent practice example of how a family lens is applied to working with adult clients who are experiencing problematic AOD use and/or homelessness. ACC’s family/kinship focused model is about understanding the importance of family connections to Aboriginal people and utilising family and community strengths as a part of positive recovery. Additionally, ACC’s family/kinship approach includes working with individual family members, which can lead to prevention and early intervention in child abuse and neglect, and ultimately help keep families safely together.

Kurlana Tampawardli (KT) is one of the services of the ACC program. KT houses and supports families who have come to Adelaide from the APY Lands and are experiencing homelessness or overcrowding. KT housed one such family who had travelled to Adelaide from the Lands to seek medical treatment and were living in overcrowded accommodation. The family, like many other families who travel to Adelaide from the Lands, were experiencing trauma from community violence in

addition to extreme stress related to their uncertain living situation, health issues, culture shock and cultural disconnection. When assessed at KT, staff noticed that the trauma, stress and culture shock that the family were experiencing impacted on their ability to meet the children's basic needs, including hygiene, nutrition and education. Once housed at KT and provided with wrap-around support that helped the family access needed medical care, two significant stressors were removed and staff noticed that the family's distress decreased significantly. The parents engaged in the Circle of Security—a parenting program on coping with life stressors, child development and effective parenting. The parents were also linked to past residents for peer support and cultural connection via regular yarning sessions. The safety and wellbeing of the children was assessed and monitored via the use of child and youth specific Nunga care plans as well as liaison with the children's school to monitor their attendance and behaviour there. With the support of KT, the family secured private rental accommodation. Three months after moving into their private rental accommodation they are maintaining their tenancy and there has been no DCP intervention.

KT worked with the entire family, as well as separately with individual family members, to ensure that they could remain safely together and adapt in extraordinarily challenging circumstances. The current consideration of the important role of 'adult services', such as ACC and KT, in the draft strategy is cursory at best and it is vital that a re-worked iteration of the draft strategy explicitly recognise the capabilities of the NGO service-scape to prevent and intervene in abuse and neglect, particularly those services where individuals and families present with risk factors for child abuse and neglect e.g. AOD, DV, homelessness etc.

It is imperative that government works collaboratively with services to co-design what a system-wide response would entail. At a minimum this would include: transparent and greater investment in an early intervention response; support and capacity-building for services to better respond; and liberation of services to effectively work in this space and alongside DCP, which may include the sharing of case management responsibilities. The important role played by 'adult services' was recognised through the work of *Building Capacity Building Bridges* a program established and piloted through the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Building on the knowledge and learnings established through such initiatives would avoid a re-creation of some of the capital and learning already established.

In a revised strategy the importance of reconciliation and early reunification services must also be recognised. Services, such as the Therapeutic Youth Service (TYS) and its accommodation component Ruby's, work with the whole family to resolve conflicts and reunite families where it is safe to do so. Services such as TYS that focus on working with the family on reconciliation/reunification play an important role in early intervention and should be considered as important components in a revised draft strategy. Preventing entry into out of home care is an important goal – another is to ensure more children in care can be safely

reunited with family. South Australia currently has a poor record in terms of its investment and success of reunification and this needs to be bolstered.

Achieving Prevention and Early Intervention

It is unclear how the strategic themes and activities outlined in the draft strategy will achieve prevention of, and intervention in, child abuse and neglect. Indeed it is unclear what exactly is meant by prevention and early intervention, let alone how this will be achieved. The draft strategy lists activities that have been undertaken by the EIRD as well as activities to be undertaken, predominantly by the EIRD, over the coming 12 months. However, there is a paucity of information regarding how prevention and early intervention will be achieved by these activities. For example, an activity that is listed under the strategic theme of *Strengthen the System* is to 'work with stakeholders to develop a performance and accountability framework for the strategy to track the success of prevention and early intervention responses.' It is unclear what prevention and early intervention responses are being referred to. If this is yet to be decided, then what are the criteria for inclusion/exclusion as a prevention/early intervention response? Furthermore, how will 'success' of prevention and early intervention responses be determined?

A revised strategy must provide a much greater focus on how the actions outlined in the draft strategy will contribute to the prevention and early intervention in child abuse and neglect. In its current form the strategy reads more as EIRD's workplan, rather than a state-wide strategy. A revised strategy must outline a well-articulated plan that contains targets for the prevention of, and early intervention in, child abuse and neglect. The setting and monitoring of targets would give us some insight into the quality and effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts and allow us to continually improve to best support vulnerable children and families.

Finally, we question whether the service-dominant vision of the strategy is appropriate. We propose that the focus of a revised strategy may be better targeted at keeping families safely together. Thus a revised vision statement might read *supporting families to stay together, where it is safe to do so.*

Targets and Accountability

South Australia needs a bold strategy for prevention and early intervention which will effectively recalibrate the way we address issues of vulnerability for South Australian children and families. An inability to invest in sound prevention and early intervention over more than a decade has left South Australia in a very parlous state and has contributed in large part to a burgeoning number of children being removed from families and remaining in care.

A prevention and early intervention strategy must have at its heart 2 fundamental commitments:

- A clear investment strategy that redresses the imbalance in where South Australia invests its effort and resources so that a significantly greater proportion of all new funds are directed to prevention and early intervention initiatives. Both in quantum and proportion South Australia desperately needs to ‘invert the pyramid’ in its investments to ensure our greatest efforts are directed to keeping children living safely within their homes, families and communities.
- To reinforce the urgency to act and commitment to undertaking substantive rather than cosmetic change, the strategy must lead with a set of clear targets which can be used to hold us all accountable for shifting the current investment balance and child protection and out of home care metrics. The strategy must set targets related to renewed investment in prevention and early intervention, to the number of vulnerable families accessing required services and ultimately in both reducing the number of children entering and exiting out of home care.

Summary and Recommendations

Overall the draft strategy is not specific enough to achieve prevention and early intervention of child abuse and neglect. Furthermore, the lack of targets and investment would make it impossible to determine any achievement whatsoever. The draft strategy appears to be more of a work plan for the EIRD, rather than a Government or State strategy.

We are very concerned about the lack of inclusion of the NGO sector and broader civil society agencies, which offer excellent opportunities for the identification and prevention of child abuse and neglect. We would also like to stress the importance of reconciliation/early reunification (delivered via practice and evidence-informed services that work from a family lens) as a key strategy for the prevention and intervention in child abuse and neglect, and ultimately a reduction in removals (where this is safe). We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss how we might collaborate to protect vulnerable children and young people through a more visionary and inclusive strategy.