



SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS COMMITTEE

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30 January 2019

**BETTER
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1 Background

Anglicare Victoria is a well-established agency with an annual budget in excess of \$140 million, over 1,500 staff and 2,000 volunteers across 50 office locations. As a state-wide service provider managing hundreds of service agreements on behalf of local, State and Commonwealth Governments, as well as strong relationships with the business sector, we rely on our infrastructure, capability and systems to efficiently and effectively deliver a wide range of services to support disadvantaged children and families.

Over the last six months there has been a growing concern from some of the families Anglicare Victoria works with in relation to the ParentsNext implementation. We are familiar with the policy intent and have watched the initial trial of the program and reported outcomes. However, we are not convinced that the subsequent rollout has achieved the intended outcomes for the parents or their children, of supporting engagement with services or increasing job readiness capability.

Rather, it has become for some, the end of their own endeavours to prepare for return to the workplace, the inability to plan economically, as income is variable dependant on compliance requirements, and in some instances, furthering levels of disadvantage experienced as parents struggle to meet arbitrary requirements leading to suspension of payments. In some cases, such actions have left families bereft of expected funds, and therefore unable to purchase basic necessities such as food. This is not the intention of a Social Security system which is to assist those most vulnerable, particularly children.

2 a) The aims of ParentsNext model

The intent to assist parents and by proxy, children, to gain better access to services or building work skills as a method to engagement in the workforce is positive. Research informs us that children with a parent with higher education and in the workforce provide better opportunities for children's lifelong trajectories. Change to generational or situational disadvantage is not short term, and is called a wicked issue for

good reason. Therefore, response needs to be proportional to the past and current life circumstance of the parent, as well as, proportional through the Mutual Obligation requirements and compliance.

Additionally, the necessary resources for compliance are needed, from the parent i.e. phone data capacity, IT access & skills to use the technology, accessible and affordable transport and for community i.e. appropriate services for referral. Referrals also need to consider the needs, age appropriateness and interests of the child.

3 b) The design and implementation of ParentsNext

- (i) The appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participation – for the most part this is reasonable, however the range of parents who might need exemptions may need to be reconsidered, or at least have longer exemption periods where the situation of the parent is not short term. i.e. parent of 2 children under 6 with a 3rd child on the way – the criteria needs to apply to the youngest child; or the parent has an ongoing mental health issue.
- (ii) The protocol for providers conduct of Capability Interviews with participants – we have no direct experience with this – no comment
- (iii) The design of participation plans, including the range of economic and social participation requirements – we have no direct experience with this – however from our work with the most disadvantaged we are aware that additional support is often needed in introducing new concepts, plans i.e. readability, and relevance. Parents are reporting that they are feeling ‘punished’ rather than having an opportunity to provide for their children’s and their own future. The deficit approach is not assisting to engage parents around the best interests of the child/ren.
- (iv) The selection of ParentsNext providers – we are aware that the referral to services has been very narrow, and for some, not appropriate. i.e. Child attending Kindergarten needing to be removed from Kindergarten to attend a Playgroup to comply with ParentsNext requirements.

It would appear that the provider was either - not able to include attendance at Kinder as involvement in services, or being aware that such attendance is a better indicator of long term positive outcomes for children and families than Playgroup, and more age appropriate for the child. This begs the question are the ParentsNext providers well versed in what contributes to increased positive outcomes for children, and just as important, clear view of what services, opportunities might be available. It would appear that creating a link for the parent to 'something' was more important than connecting for 'appropriate', and knowing what that might be. Are agencies that are focused on job readiness able to respond to current need/ including the complexity of issues, and more importantly able to lead parents through that to becoming job ready?

- (v) & (vi) Communication between ParentsNext and other stakeholders (as listed) has been hit or miss, and based more on numbers seen than outcomes achieved. There has been a number of circumstances where compulsory elements are applied, not only for the parent/s and children, which have resulted in high demands from ParentsNext providers to report on parents, ensure spaces made etc., in services. This is not contributing to the collaboration across services responding to high levels of complex need of parents and children, with demands being made to preference the providers referrals.
- (vii) Measures to avoid causing harm, have in some instances been ignored, or not understood by the ParentsNext providers, their primary focus appears to have been job readiness, rather than parenting and preparing for future work through gaining skills. This focus needs to be reviewed and either training or support to the providers from senior or key staff who have increased understanding or knowledge in these areas. The TCF needs to be implemented with a common sense approach, a number of the decisions made are clearly contributing to hardships and in some cases active harm, diverting parents from Activities they themselves have generated and disrupted planned actions for imposed actions by a provider with limited knowledge or capacity to acknowledge what parents are already undertaking.

- (viii) (ix) & (x) the targeted population is ok, in that these are the most disadvantaged, and require the most support, however expectation that generational habits and beliefs can be overturned in such time frames is somewhat short sighted. We need to close the gap, we need to provide these supports. The outcomes achieved in the 10 pilot sites cannot necessarily be rolled out without additional knowledge and resources with both the providers and the service sectors more broadly. The stretched service sector is beginning to be overwhelmed with demand, and parents and children are worse off in many cases.

4 Oversight of ParentsNext

- (i) Determination of non-compliance and fairness and efficiency of complaint handling processes – we have little direct knowledge of this, however the feedback from parents of their experience leads us to believe that parents have not understood the TCF, or the reasons behind the new protocols. More time and capacity to check for understanding is required to positively engage parents in the long term outcomes for their children, and the potential for this program in assisting them prepare for their future. The focus appears to be we (ParentsNext) allocate meeting times and activities and parents must comply – there does not seem to be mutual planning. It must be acknowledged that there are differences in skills and understanding across providers, and a number are working hard for the parents, others appear to be meeting targets any way possible. There needs to be better oversight and outcome framework to ensure that the Activities are relevant and timely.

5 Other related matters to be considered.

As with any submission, costings are provided to ensure that service provision is not burdensome to the public purse. This limited scope, in terms of 'hours per unit price', to meet with parents required to engage with Parents Next and find adequate activities in locations with limited services and accessibility is being

seen to create extra financial and psychological burdens on already significantly and targeted disadvantaged members of the community.

Parents we work with are often resource poor:

- no access to internet, or if they have some, it is on limited data plans,
- limited knowledge of how to use IT platforms such as 'mygov'.
- extra costs required to attend scheduled meetings with ParentsNext providers. Such meetings at the time and convenience of the provider, with families given 'must meet' or 'non-compliant' response,
- any disruption to income stream, puts parents and children at risk through inability to access food, medicines, or necessary health supports

The issue of human rights is complex, and the introduction of a compliance framework, while superimposing the hierarchy of child's rights to 'a possible future' is a stretch.

Thanks you for the opportunity to submit our response and share parents and stakeholder issues in the rollout of this system.