Submission: Families and Children Activity: Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Programs

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Executive Summary

The Smith Family welcomes this opportunity to further engage in important work to evolve Families and Children (FaC) activity. This submission to the Department of Social Services focuses on the Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Program Paper, emphasizing the importance of place-based approaches and community-led initiatives.

The Smith Family is a national charity, supports disadvantaged Australian children and families, emphasizing education to overcome poverty. Our programs reach over 220,600 individuals, including 178,000 children and young people.

The Review will influence support for families in communities where The Smith Family operates, particularly affecting the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner sites and their sub-contracted agencies.

This submission responds to the Discussion Paper in the context of Communities for Children, highlighting the importance of place-based approaches and their integration with broader government policies and objectives. It covers:

- **Context of the Review**: The Department of Social Services seeks feedback through the Review to strengthen three key programs under the Families and Children Activity: Children and Parenting Supports, Communities for Children Facilitating Partner, and Family Mental Health Support Services.

- **Defining Place-based Approaches**: The document discusses the importance of place-based strategies in addressing disadvantage, emphasizing the need for integration with existing policies, multi-level governance, collaboration, tailored solutions, resource allocation, and evaluation.

- **Challenges in Implementation**: The current policy environment in Australia does not fully support place-based approaches, with issues such as lack of coordination between governments, tension between local solutions and government structures, and inadequate evidence sharing.

- **Recommendations for CfC Program**: The Smith Family recommends strengthening community-led partnerships, improving delivery against commitments, and measuring actions and outcomes through flexible, community-driven approaches.

- **Program Design Principles**: Key principles for program design include community engagement, cultural safety, holistic services, empowering First Nations families, and leveraging existing networks for place-based initiatives

Context

The Department of Social Services is seeking feedback on the Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Program Paper (the Review), December 2024. The discussion paper aims to further engage the sector and the wider community in further strengthening three key programs funded under the Families and Children Activity (FaC):

- Children and Parenting Supports (CaPS) – which delivers prevention and early intervention services to improve children's development and wellbeing, and support the capacity of those in a parenting/carer role
- Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) – which is a place-based program run in 52 locations that delivers services similar to CaPS, and works to improve service integration and community development, to deliver outcomes for children and create strong child-family communities
- Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) – which provides early intervention child and family non-clinical services to improve a child's lifelong mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

The Smith Family acknowledges the range of consultations and exploration already undertaken with the sector and we have appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the development of the discussion paper through working groups and other forums.

Relevance to The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity which has supported Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where **every child** has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to **overcome educational inequality** caused by poverty.

We are working at **scale** to support Australian children to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty. In FY24, our education-focused programs supported more than **220,600** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals, including over 178,000 children and young people. This includes over 67,000 children and young people on our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life.* We are working in over **90 communities** across all states and territories and have partnerships with around **800 schools** supporting high proportions of children and young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our programs intersect with and are reliant on a strong and coherent wider service system and we are cognisant that the Review will influence the support for families available in the communities across Australia in which we work. that we have a presence in.

In addition, The Smith Family is the facilitating partner for nine Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) sites across Australia. We sub-contract sixty-three community agencies to deliver early intervention and prevention support to families and children in these communities. The Review will have direct impact on the services provided through CfC FP and the outcomes achieved for families and children in these communities.

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper. Our submission is informed by the insights and feedback gathered through the on the ground experiences of our CfC FP Managers as well as our experience in working with communities and families experiencing complex challenges over generations.

Focus of this submission

The discussion paper sets out a range of key Government actions and priorities and seeks to understand their intersection with FAC programs, and how they might need to be changed to enable access or improve outcomes for specific cohorts,   Given The Smith Family's role as a provider of CfC FP services, in a place based context, this submission acknowledges these strategies and focus areas as well as broader government service delivery, are important policy context for the work that we endeavour to do in the places we work. Their application in the communities in which CfC (and our *Learning for Life* teams) influences the resources available to support community members in those contexts. Well integrated place-based approaches recognise and adapt for cohorts who experience additional compounding complexities in their life circumstances.

In this submission, we respond to the Discussion Paper primarily as it relates to **Communities for Children**. As a place-based approach, the potential of CfC FP, when well implemented, is much broader than this specific initiative – extending both to other programs within the Families and Children Activity, and to the Government's policy objectives for place-based initiatives and for joined-up ways of working with governments, community members, people with lived experience of disadvantage and the community services sector.

Defining Place-based approaches

The discussion paper notes a growing recognition of the importance of place-based strategies and approaches in tackling entrenched disadvantage within Australia. We acknowledge and welcome the Government's stated increased commitment to disrupting traditional Government approaches to addressing intergenerational disadvantage through the Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage package and building on other place-based initiatives.

However, we consider that the present policy settings for and implementation of place-based approaches is hampered by current government policy approaches and does not fully consider the interplay between place-based approaches and other government services and policies. A recent OECD workshop paper sets out a range of factors for consideration in leveraging the real potential of place-based approaches[1]. These include

1. **Integration with existing Policies**: Place-based policies do not operate in isolation but need to be integrated with other government services and policies, including economic and welfare related policies. This integration helps ensure that efforts are co-ordinated, and resources are used efficiently.

2. **Multi-level Governance**: Effective place-based policies require multi-level governance, involving coordination between different levels of government (national, regional, local) and across various sectors. This helps address the complexity of local issues and ensures that policies are aligned with broader governmental objectives.

3. **Collaboration and Partnerships**: Successful place-based approaches depend on collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, the private sector, civil society, and local communities. These partnerships help mobilize resources, share knowledge, and achieve common goals.

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[1] Beer A. (2023), "The governance of place-based policies now and in the future?", Background paper for the OECD-EC High-Level Expert Workshop Series on "Place-Based Policies for the Future", Workshop 5, 15 September 2023, https://www.oecd.org/regional/place-based-policies-for-the-future.htm.

4. **Tailored Solutions**: Place-based policies must be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of each locality. This requires flexibility in policy design and implementation, allowing for adjustments based on local conditions and feedback from stakeholders.

5. **Resource Allocation**: Adequate and sustained resources are critical for the success of place-based policies. This includes financial support, as well as access to information, networks, and technical expertise. Effective resource allocation often involves combining funding from various sources, including central and local governments, philanthropic organizations, and the private sector.

6. **Integration and Coordination**: Place-based policies require integration across various sectors and levels of government. Achieving effective coordination vertically (between different levels of government) and horizontally (across different sectors) is complex and can be hindered by bureaucratic silos and competing interests.

7. **Evaluation and Accountability**: Establishing clear targets and regularly evaluating progress are important for ensuring accountability and continuous improvement. This helps align place-based policies with other government services and policies, ensuring that they contribute to broader goals.

8. **Political and Institutional Context**: The success of place-based policies is influenced by the broader political and institutional context. This includes the willingness of central governments to share power and resources, the capacity of local institutions, and the presence of supportive regulatory frameworks.

The OECD paper also examines the Latrobe Valley in Australia and Moravia in the Czech Republic as case studies (see Attachment A for further detail). In the Latrobe Valley, the interplay between place-based approaches and other government services has been challenging due to central government control and competing interests across levels of government. In contrast, Moravia has seen success through local leadership and effective integration with regional innovation systems and smart specialisation strategies.[2]

Relevance to Communities for Children

Our observation of, and experience in implementing Communities for Children over many years is that Australia does not yet have an enabling policy environment for meaningful place-based work and place-based approaches remain at the margins of public policy. In particular:

- Initiatives established by state and Commonwealth governments rarely include coordination between governments at the level of design. The changing policy focus of Communities for Children over the 20 years of implementation has reflected the policy priorities of the Commonwealth government of the day rather than the concerns of the community. The opportunity for an alignment of efforts is not being realised.
- There continues to be significant tension between implementation of localised solutions and the organisation of government departments, program structures and government funding and service agreements.
- Place-based initiatives require a pool of funds that can be flexibly applied even when solutions might result in some cost shifting between levels of government.
- Initiatives that include people with 'lived experience' of the issues being addressed and local employers in decision-making appear to generate stronger results than those that principally involve services and government agencies.

[2] Ibid

- Initiatives seem to fare better when built on universal platforms such as child and maternal health services, schools and Centrelink – aside from some family and children's hubs as 'one stop shops' this is not the case in Australia.
- The evidence base of what works and how it works is patchy and opportunities to map and share learnings are inconsistent and undervalued. Published evaluations vary in quality and funding for them is also inconsistent.

- **Integration and Coordination**: Place-based policies require integration across various sectors and levels of government. Achieving effective coordination vertically (between different levels of government) and horizontally (across different sectors) is complex and can be hindered by bureaucratic silos and competing interests.

- **Political and Institutional Context**: The broader political and institutional context can significantly impact the success of place-based policies. Program delivery and successive unsuccessful interventions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities demonstrate this point clearly. Central governments may be reluctant to share power and resources, and local institutions may lack the capacity to implement complex policies effectively. Political instability and changes in government priorities can also disrupt place-based initiatives.

Overall, the paper emphasizes that while place-based policies have the potential to address complex local challenges, their success depends on overcoming these significant implementation challenges through **effective governance, adequate resourcing, and strong local leadership.**

This section of our submission responds specifically to the following questions in the discussion paper:

1. To strengthen community-led partnership in the CfC program, should CfC committees provide guidance across all CfC activities? Should any other changes be made to strengthen community-led partnerships in the CfC program?

2. Are there other changes that could be made to the CfC program, which build on existing strengths to improve delivery against the Working Together Agreement commitments?

3. How should FPs actions and outcomes be measured? Would these be best done through the ideas proposed above or through another approach?

4. Should the current Evidence Based Program requirement be changed? Would this be best done through the changes proposed above or through another approach?

As previously noted, we welcome and commend the Government's commitment to improve long term social and economic outcomes and see the potential for Communities for Children to continue to evolve beyond service integration and community development to more deeply address the **system integration challenges** that myriad reviews, enquiries and literature reviews have identified as holding tough social problems in place. This approach would emphasise a specific focus of the centrality of place while maintaining a focus on the broader outcome of improving life circumstances for families and children in those communities.

There is increasing acknowledgement that our current public policy environment does not optimally support place-based approaches, and we welcome the Government's drive to explore alternate methodologies within the constraints of political and economic forces.

A 2015 paper by the Brotherhood of St Laurence[3] summarises ten key recommendations from (then) recent major reports that identify good practice in place-based interventions. The paper notes that building a conducive public policy approach requires:

1. A combination of targeted local economic and social policy measures with a scale of investment that can make a difference.
2. A willingness to be part of collaborative governance arrangements, together with the appropriate devolution of power and decentralisation of decision-making that allow significant and meaningful local involvement in determining the issues and solutions.
3. Translation of data for community-level use.
4. Flexible policy and program responses that allow different places to do different things and empower communities to play to their strengths.
5. Rethinking the way government funding is provided to foster local collaborations and innovation.
6. Alignment of efforts and resources between different parts and levels of government.
7. A focus on tracking and assessing outcomes, research and evaluation.
8. A long-term commitment of 10–20 years.
9. Supporting trials of collective impact approaches.
10. Building on existing networks and infrastructure rather than establishing new platforms for place-based initiatives.

We note the inclusion of a number of these factors in recent place-based work and as stated above, believe that CfC FP can evolve to provide a further platform for this work. A proven framework to support the development of this work is the Four Keys (Purpose, Power, Resource Flows and Relationships) systems innovation framework developed by Charles Leadbeater.[4] This approach emphasises community led initiatives and the role of convenors in unlocking and agreeing approaches tailored to community contexts. This framework can be applied to CfC FP broadly as follows:

Purpose: The Communities for Children (CfC) program has a strong foundation that can be built to evolve into a truly place-based and community-led initiative. The vision is for all CfC sites, over time, to work towards becoming genuinely place-based and community-led, recognizing that community leadership is key to sustainability and better outcomes for children, their families, and their broader community. The desired outcomes retain focus on improved child development, stronger family relationships, and enhanced community cohesion, but differentiated for the circumstances and resources in different locations. By empowering communities to take the lead, the program seeks to create environments where children can thrive, and families can access the support they need. It is essential to ensure that First Nations Voices are central to this process, acknowledging their unique perspectives and contributions to community leadership and child development. Additionally, fostering learning networks within and between CfC sites could enhance knowledge sharing and innovation, leading to better outcomes.

Power: The power-sharing involved in community leadership necessitates a new approach to the requirements of government as a funder. DSS will need to specify its minimum requirements for aspects including governance and the extent to which CfC convenors committees can make resource allocation decisions.

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[3] What next for place-based initiatives to tackle disadvantage? A practical look at recent lessons for Australian public policy. Brotherhood of St Laurence August 2015 https://youthlaw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/What-Next-for-Place-Based-Initiatives-to-Tackle-Disadvantage.pdf

[4] https://www.systeminnovation.org/article-building-better-systems/#intro-6

The flexibility recommended to be built into the program guidelines must be seen through the lens of the power-sharing arrangements inherent in community leadership. This approach ensures that communities have the authority to make decisions that best suit their unique contexts and needs. It is crucial to include First Nations people in governance structures and decision-making processes to ensure their voices are heard and respected. We support the intent to broaden the requirements for quotas of evidence-based programs to an evidence-based framework incorporating practice, informed by current evidence of First Nations' experiences and knowledge.

Within the broad intent of monitoring and evaluation, we recommend establishing learning networks within communities and between locations that can provide feedback loops on progress and could support the development of community leadership by facilitating the exchange of best practices and lessons learned. First Nations' experience of knowing, doing and being can be explicitly incorporated into learning systems.

Resource Flows: To support this shift, we recommend that CfC programs give communities the power and flexibility to respond to their place context.

Ideally, future iterations of CfC should commit to funding work in communities for ten years, given that stable and predictable funding is essential for collaboration and sustained results. Ensuring that the funded convenors are working constructively can be accommodated through the further development of the proposed framework to enable CfC FPs to record and adapt their efforts.   This should, of course include elements of constructive work with First Nations peoples and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Flexible funding models that allow innovation and evolution over time should be adopted, rather than a rigid approach. This will enable communities to adapt and innovate, ensuring that resources are used effectively to address local challenges. Again, the value of building in learning networks (in addition to monitoring and evaluation) could play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge about effective resource allocation and innovative funding models.

Relationships: CfC sites should act as platforms for service system integration across different funded programs in the child and family space. This role naturally extends to State and Territory Government funded programs and services. Ultimately, we see CfC FP as an ideal mechanism for enabling and resourcing coordination, joined-up service delivery, and integration to reduce duplication, streamline resources, leverage investment, and optimize impact. By fostering strong relationships between various stakeholders, the program could, with enabling settings, create a cohesive support network for children and families, including building and maintaining strong relationships with First Nations communities, ensuring their active participation and leadership in the integration process. Learning networks could facilitate the sharing of experiences and strategies for building effective relationships and service integration.

Program Design

Beyond the role and potential of supportive Governance arrangements and enabling public policy settings we recognise that the vehicle through which community members engage with key aspects of the service system in addition to universal services is through supportive, targeted programs. The discussion paper sets out a range of questions regarding how different services needs and preferences of specific cohorts can be better supported through FAC programs and activities. Program design across a range of settings can go a long way to enabling this ambition. Our CFC FP program managers have sought input from their communities to offer the following as principles to embed in all program design and guidelines.

- **Community Engagement**: Strengthening community involvement in program design and delivery to ensure services meet local needs. This includes engaging with local stakeholders, families, and community leaders to co-design programs that are culturally appropriate and

responsive to the unique needs of each community. For instance, holding community forums and focus groups to gather input from families about their specific needs and preferences can help tailor services more effectively. Advisory and working groups should include representatives from diverse communities at the program design stage to help ensure programs are inclusive and effective.

- **Cultural Safety**: Ensuring programs are culturally appropriate and safe, including being trauma-informed and co-designed with community-controlled organisations. This involves providing training for staff on cultural competence, engaging with Elders and community leaders, and incorporating cultural practices and traditions into program delivery. Incorporating cultural teachings and practices into parenting programs can strengthen outcomes for First Nations children and offering language support services such as interpreters and in-language workers can help CALD families feel more comfortable accessing services.

- **Holistic and Interconnected Services**: Offering services that wrap around a family, providing support for different members and various needs. This includes integrating services across different sectors, such as health, education, and social services, to provide comprehensive support for families. For example, creating a centralised online hub where families can easily find information about available services and supports can improve navigation. Or providing inclusive playgroups and support groups for children with developmental concerns or disabilities can improve access and inclusion, or offering respite care and therapy services for children with disabilities can help support families.

- **Empowering First Nations Families**: Addressing mistrust and concerns from past trauma by involving Elders and providing culturally appropriate services. This includes creating safe spaces for First Nations families, offering culturally specific supports, and ensuring that services are delivered by or in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Prioritising funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations can increase the number of ACCOs delivering these program

Conclusion

The Smith Family is committed to supporting the wellbeing and development of children and families across Australia. We believe that the recommendations outlined in this submission will help strengthen the FaC children, youth, and parenting programs, ensuring they continue to deliver positive outcomes for all Australians.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion and look forward to working with the Australian Government to achieve these goals.

Attachment A –Overview of Case Studies

The document discusses two case studies: the Latrobe Valley in Australia and Moravia in the Czech Republic. Here is a summary of each:

Latrobe Valley, Australia

Background: The Latrobe Valley, in the Gippsland region of Victoria, has a history of heavy industrial activity, primarily focused on brown coal mining and power generation. The region has faced significant economic challenges due to the privatization of electricity generation and the closure of coal-fired power plants, such as the Hazelwood power station in 2017.

Policy Intervention: The Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) was established in 2016 to manage the economic transition of the region. The LVA aimed to bring together government, business, research, education, and civil society to develop a vision for the Valley's future, focusing on prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social wellbeing.

Challenges: The LVA faced difficulties in achieving long-term regional development due to the central government's reluctance to share power and the complexity of resolving significant issues related to the region's landscape and competing interests. The implementation of smart specialisation strategies was also hindered by the focus on the broader Gippsland region rather than the Latrobe Valley alone.

Outcomes: While the LVA was successful in finding new employment for workers made redundant by shutdowns, it struggled to deliver on its broader ambitions for long-term regional development. The central government's control and the political dynamics within the region limited the effectiveness of place-based policies.

Moravia, Czech Republic

Background: Moravia, a former brown coal mining region, has undergone substantial economic and institutional change since the collapse of state socialism in the 1980s. The region has transitioned from low and medium value-added manufacturing to a focus on high-value, knowledge-intensive industries.

Policy Intervention: The South Moravian Innovation Centre (JIC) was established in 2003 through a collaboration between three universities, the Regional Office, and the City Office of Brno. The JIC aimed to develop a regional innovation system by providing support services to firms, fostering research and development, and encouraging collaboration among entrepreneurs.

Success Factors: The JIC's success was attributed to the development of trust among regional stakeholders, a focus on high-value sectors, and the effective use of EU structural funds. The JIC also ensured political support across electoral cycles by building a consensus around its value.

Outcomes: The region saw a rapid rise in start-ups and emerging technology firms, significant public sector investment in research and development, and the attraction of major firms like Honeywell. The broader Moravia region improved its position as a 'moderate innovator' and achieved notable success in transitioning to a knowledge-focused economy.

Key Insights

Latrobe Valley: The case study highlights the challenges of central government control, competing interests, and the need for local empowerment in achieving successful place-based policies.

Moravia: The case study demonstrates the importance of local leadership, trust-building, and effective use of resources in driving regional transformation and economic development.