



Early Years Strategy

Submission in response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

April 2023

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While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.

1 Executive summary

The Municipal Association of Victoria is the peak representative and advocacy body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the *Municipal Association Act 1907* appointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.

Today, the MAV is a driving and influential force behind a strong and strategically positioned local government sector. Our role is to represent and advocate the interests of local government; raise the sector's profile; ensure its long-term security; facilitate effective networks; support councillors; provide policy and strategic advice; capacity building programs; and insurance services to local government.

The MAV welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Australian Governments Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

In Victoria all councils plan for their children and families and are the major provider of the infrastructure for the delivery of kindergarten and maternal and child health services. If a single outcome is achieved from this Early Years Strategy, it is a joined-up early years system that follows the child's journey not the services, programs or funding. National policy must lead to improved understanding and coordination of joined up planning by the three levels of government to optimise outcomes for all children.

Victorian councils remain critically interested and involved in improving the policies, practices and outcomes that impact the health, education, safety, wellbeing, and quality of life of young Australians.

2 Introduction

In 2023, the three levels of government in Australia are more aligned than ever in their understanding of the need to recognise the early years of human development as a time of significant importance and opportunity to create, support and release the potential of individuals, families, and communities. How each level of government considers and responds to the early years life stage differs, but with these differences come opportunities to partner, strengthen and leverage overall capacity to amplify positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

A key responsibility of Victorian councils, and one they have a long and proud history of delivering, is strategically planning for the health, wellbeing, safety, connection to culture, access and participation, and development of its youngest citizens. Councils take a whole-of-community, whole-of-system approach to building community strength and addressing the underlying causes of inequity and vulnerability of children and families. This approach is demonstrated through strategic planning processes such as the Health and Wellbeing or Municipal Early Years Plans. These plans describe a place-based focus on prevention, equity, health, and long-term social and educational outcomes for children.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) recognises the important commitment, and potential of the partnership between the Federal, State, and local governments to respond to this opportunity and focus on the early years. As governments we have a social obligation to our children. It is in the context of this mutual commitment to children and families the MAV provides this submission.

3 Report information

The following addresses the set of questions posed in the *Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper*

Q1. Comments on the proposed structure of the strategy

The representation of the Vision and Strategy does not include any reference to the Australian Values. The Values provide an overarching aspiration for social cohesion and a country in which all citizens thrive including children. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolio/social-cohesion/australian-values>. Increasingly many organisations are putting their values up front and this strategy would benefit from doing the same.

MAV also suggests that greater attention or emphasis is made visually to the Principles and Evidence that underpin the Strategy. Rather than them sitting underneath the Vision etc. perhaps a better visualization is that they wrap around the Strategy and continually inform the outcomes, priorities and indicators.

Q2. What Vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

There are many 'visions' by Australian organisations representing or involved in early childhood education, care, keeping children safe and health and well-being. MAV suggests there are key themes that focus on safety, education, and access to health care regardless of where children live.

MAV puts forward that any vision must first and foremost focus on children's safety as arguably a safe environment including culturally safe, leads to better education, care, health, and well-being for that child. A safe environment free from trauma and abuse should underpin any further aspirations. The second part of any vision needs to include reference to the child's voice and the best interests of the child.

In short, the Vision MAV has is:

All children have an inherent right to be safe, healthy, and well, to play and be educated to realise their full potential regardless of where they live or their cultural background.

Q3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

In Victoria State and Local Government have a ten-year agreement 2017 -2027. This Agreement titled *Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years A Compact between DET (Department of Education and Training), DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services) and Local Government (represented by MAV) 2017-2027* is also known as the Early Years Compact.

This Compact:

- *establishes, for the first time, a commitment between state and local governments to work together to improve outcomes for young children and their families*
- *clarifies the roles and responsibilities for each of the three parties - recognising the key role local government plays in supporting and responding to the needs of children and families at the local level*
- *provides a common set of principles to support how the parties will work together*
- *improves coordination, collaboration, information sharing and accountability across the early years system*
- *sets strategic priorities for joint effort.*

This is a significant commitment because it is the first-time parties will work together at the local level to integrate planning, coordination and information sharing across the early years sector in Victoria.

The MAV puts forward that the outcomes contained in the Compact are just as relevant at the Commonwealth level as they are to the State of Victoria.

They are:

- *All young children are engaged, confident and creative learners*
- *All children are safe, cared for and experience optimal health and development*
- *Vulnerability, location and disadvantage do not determine outcomes for young children*
- *Families feel well supported by high quality, inclusive services for children and families in the early years*
- *Families are connected to culture, actively participate in community life and can access help when and where they need it*

MAV also puts forward that an additional outcome for this Early Years Strategy should be:

- Commonwealth/State and Local governments undertake long-term joined up planning for families and children.

In addition, there is a need to undertake this joined up planning to drive better outcomes regardless of a child's location, culture or family circumstance. To do this MAV puts forward the following:

- better use of evidence and evaluation to continuously improve the planning, delivery and practice of services to drive stronger outcomes
- that the three levels of government and other partners work together to build a more coherent and empowering system that responds to families' and children's health and wellbeing needs
- stronger place-based governance and planning that responds to the needs of local communities and Australia's changing population
- raising family, business and community awareness about the importance of early childhood to a nation's future
- more inclusive services through the improving of early identification and support for all children, including children at risk; vulnerable children and families; and children with health, disability and developmental needs.

Q 4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

- a) **Workforce** - shortages and retention issues are well documented and are also the focus of ongoing work at the Commonwealth (<https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/early-childhood-workforce/national-childrens-education-and-care-workforce-strategy>) and the Victorian Government level
https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/Next_steps.pdf

In addition to the strategies targeting the workforce in the early education and care sector there are other workforce strategies for the health, well-being, safety, and care elements of a child's overall well-being. Arguably the plethora of strategies do not address the key issues of competition for the same pool of potential workforce and pay and conditions of what is a largely feminised workforce across the education and care professions.

A quick review shows a sample for Victoria all of which impact the early years. The links below are all workforce strategies developed either by State Government departments or Peak Bodies. None relate to each other, yet all are targeting workforces that work with children.

<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/strategy-and-planning/workforce-strategy>

https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/Policy-Paper-Working_Together_to_Build_Victoria%E2%80%99s_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce.pdf

<https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/aboriginal-workforce-strategy-2021-2026>

https://childprotectionjobs.dffh.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Child%20protection%20workforce%20strategy%202021_24-2105029.pdf

<https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Child-and-Family-Services-Workforce-Capability-Framework-September-2019.pdf>

<https://www.fvrim.vic.gov.au/report-family-violence-reform-implementation-monitor-1-november-2020/workforce>

b) Equity Funding

(See question 5)

c) Place-based approaches to solutions and outcomes within a system

Local government in Victoria are often central to any place-based approach. We know that they work best when communities and government share the right capabilities, policies, commitment, and intent. Key factors for success include; leadership, connections, commitment, collaboration, effort, reflection and learning from the past and resources and skills.

According to Murdoch Children's Research Institute *A place-based approach targets an entire community and aims to address issues that exist at the neighbourhood level, such as poor housing, social isolation, poor or fragmented service provision that leads to gaps or duplication of effort, and limited economic opportunities.*

Local government in Victoria do target their whole community through their Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plans and their Municipal Early Years Plans.

Q 5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

The Commonwealth could provide stronger leadership and investment in child-focused, place-based initiatives to effectively respond to specific (such as level of disadvantage) and universal issues in policy, research and service coordination and delivery.

MAV has previously stated that an approach lead by the Commonwealth to joined up planning and improved data and information sharing can then support the development of tailored and specific place-based strategies and responses targeting disadvantage and improving the outcomes for children.

Provision of equity funding for services and individuals to build the capacity of services that work with vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children. Building the capacity of services and the service system in identified areas where populations of disadvantage exist.

Local government is a key holder and user of data on their communities. The Victorian Maternal and Child Health Service (MCH (Maternal and Child Health)) through the Child Development Information System holds valuable data on the development and progress of children from birth to school entry. This in addition to the Australian Early Development Census can provide a useful snapshot of the early development of our children regarding their health, wellbeing, abilities and developmental progress. MAV suggests that for any National Educational Evidence Base to be truly comprehensive and effective in informing policy development and improving education outcomes in education, the early childhood data and information must be captured.

Q 6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

The Commonwealth can ensure certain conditions are in place by taking an approach that clearly defines a unified purpose and by providing strong leadership and governance whilst at the same time encouraging the system/sector to be agile, adaptive and well-informed.

There is a need to understand and review the system as it currently operates across the health, well-being, education and care and safety of children. It is important to understand the role of the family in a marketised system where arguably families have choice, but this is often limited by access, affordability, availability, and quality. These markets are often localised and yet very little if any joined up planning or system delivery review takes place. Very siloed with small amounts of often limited funding available to assist the more vulnerable and urgent needs. Demand often exceeds supply in early years services.

The Commonwealth should also recognise the role local government in Victoria plays in operating in thin markets where private services providers chose not to.

In Victoria local government takes an approach of joining up services by providing infrastructure that integrates services children and families' access. In developing policies for families and children the Commonwealth could consider a National policy for Maternal Child and Family

Health and the linkages with Early Childhood Education and Care which should consider how families access services, where they access services and how to make it easier for families to access services through things like co-location, provision of funding for planning infrastructure to support co-location and integration and use of technologies that support families with the services and information they need.

Q 7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The work undertaken in Victoria on The Compact augers well in informing a set of principles that could be included in this strategy. The principles MAV puts forward are:

- Using a systems-based approach to deliver well-planned, well-connected, inclusive and high-quality services tailored to local communities, with a particular focus on vulnerable children and families.
- Systemic sharing and analysis of information, data, and evidence
- Working in a respectful, transparent and mutually accountable way to design, plan and deliver on agreed priorities and outcomes
- Engaging families and children in decision making about the services and supports they need

The Strategy could also articulate the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in the funding, planning and delivery of all services that support the health, education and care, safety and well-being of children. Governance Structures for Implementation – across Departments and across levels of government will need to be clearly articulated.

QUESTION 8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

The safety of children must be paramount. Whilst there is a body of research and evidence about child safety, the development of the Strategy must examine and respond to the gaps in the current framework where safety is a) largely seen through the lens of domestic violence, b) the role of maternal and child health practitioners and educators in fostering safety and well-being for children should be examined for its great potential, and c) the challenges of having state-based child protection systems that are broken.

Where is the National Office for Child Safety in this discussion?

4. Conclusion

The early years system in Australia is a complex system where arguably the stakeholders do not fully understand the problem and are often diverse and varied in their suggestions for solutions. There is a role for all three levels of government to shape the provision of public



services for children that places them at the centre of policies, planning and service delivery and focuses on outcomes not outputs.