



Empowered Communities East Kimberley

Response to the Australian Government Early Years Strategy

April 2023



We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of the East Kimberley, the people of the Balangarra, Miriwoong Gajerrong, Yurriyangem Taam, Goring, Malarngowem, Koonjie Elvire, Purnululu, Ngarrawanji, Uunguu, Wilinggin, Gajirrabeng, Gooniyandi Kija, Walmajarri Kwini, Jaru and Tjurabalan groups.



Binarri-binyja yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation, backbone for Empowered Communities in the East Kimberley (2023)

Response to the Australian Government Early Years Strategy.

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About Us

Empowered Communities East Kimberley

Empowered Communities is led by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people and operates in ten regions across Australia. The Indigenous-led reform initiative is underpinned by the principles of empowerment, development, and productivity. Indigenous leaders from each region are working together with government and corporate Australia to change how Aboriginal policy is designed and delivered. It aims to shift the Indigenous affairs agenda from passive welfare and government overreach to empowerment of Indigenous individuals, families, and communities.

Empowered Communities East Kimberley was established in 2015 by Aboriginal leaders and has grown its opt-in membership base to include 28 Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations from across the region. ECEK drive reforms to bring about a future in which East Kimberley is a region with a sizeable Aboriginal population consisting of high-functioning families who own their own homes, who have well-educated children, who participate equally in the economy and who value their culture.

Vision

We want for our children the same opportunities and choices other Australians expect for their children. We want them to succeed in mainstream Australia, achieving educational success, prospering in the economy and living long, healthy lives. We want them to retain their distinct cultures, languages and identities as peoples and to be recognised as Indigenous Australians.

Purpose

Enduring and effective Aboriginal-led reform, which transfers power and responsibility to Aboriginal people and creates opportunity for the social, cultural and economic development of our children and families.

Binarri-binyja yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation (BBY) is the 'backbone' organisation supporting the implementation of ECEK. Using a place-based collective impact model, BBY performs key secretariat functions to support and facilitate joint action by Aboriginal organisations, government, NGOs, and corporate partners.

Executive Summary

The Minister for Social Services and Minister for Early Childhood Education are leading the development of the Australian Government Early Years Strategy (The Strategy), which intends to create an integrated approach to the Early Years, including by reducing program and funding silos and better integrating and coordinating program functions. The intention is this will increase accountability for the wellbeing, education, health, safety, and development of Australia's children.

This submission to the Department of Social Services in reference to the Early Years Strategy has a focus on our region, the East Kimberley, and our Kimberley Aboriginal children and families. We are a young population and evidence suggests that our children face significant vulnerabilities across every development domain.

We would like to see:

- A Strategy structure that addresses the need for ACCO-led, place-based arrangements that allows for integration, better joined-up investment, and greater coordination.
- Strategy indicators that are drafted with success measurements sourced from within initiative target groups.
- A Strategy vision that upholds themes of equity, education, economic and physical health and cultural safety.
- Strategy outcomes that align with the Commonwealth's commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly outcomes 2, 3, 4, 12, 13 and 16. Which, like initiatives in our Early Years Regional Development Agenda, focus on early immersion in language and culture; safe homes, strong families, empowering communities; babies born healthy and grow up strong; children thriving in their early years, empowered parents; and a quality service system.
- Strategy policy priorities that align with the Commonwealth's commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly the four Priority Reforms: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making; Building the Community-Controlled Sector; Transforming Government Organisations; and Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.
- Strategy inputs be tested against our policy reform test: empowerment, development, and productivity. That is, does this empower Aboriginal people and organisations? Does this support Aboriginal-led development? Does this improve the productivity of investment and hit the ground where it is needed to close the gap?

Background

The Minister for Social Services Amanda Rishworth and Minister for Early Childhood Education Dr Anne Aly are jointly leading the development of the Australian Government Early Years Strategy (The Strategy), a Discussion Paper has been released along with a call for feedback on the Strategy.

The Discussion Paper outlines a focus on the role of the Commonwealth, which intends to create an integrated approach to the Early Years, including by reducing program and funding

silos across Commonwealth departments and better integrating and coordinating program functions.

The Government intends this will increase accountability for the wellbeing, education, health, safety, and development of Australia's children. The aim of the Strategy is to maximise outcomes of Commonwealth investment in the Early Years.

Introduction

This submission to the Department of Social Services in reference to the Early Years Strategy has a focus on our region, the East Kimberley, and our Kimberley Aboriginal children and families.

Children and young people make up nearly half of Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley and we know that our children need a strategy that better supports their needs. Our children are experiencing significant developmental vulnerabilities, which carry with them through their adolescent years and beyond.

Demographics

The East Kimberley region, which includes the Shires of Halls Creek and Wyndham – East Kimberley, has a relatively young population. Almost a quarter of the 11,080 resident population are aged 14 years and younger.¹

The East Kimberley has a higher proportion of Aboriginal People than average for Western Australia. Almost half (48%) living in the region are Aboriginal, of which 38% are aged 14 years and younger.²

Gaps in development

Evidence from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows East Kimberley children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable (in the bottom 10th percentile) compared to the rest of Western Australia.³ The AEDC also highlights the significant gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in our region. On every development indicator our children are behind their non-Indigenous peers by up to 30%.⁴

Discussion

Strategy

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The proposed structure of the Strategy takes a hierarchical form, of vision, outcomes, priorities and indicators. The hierarchy, set out in Attachment B of the Discussion Paper,

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2021. [Online].

² Ibid.

³ Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Early Development Census, 2019. [Online].

⁴ Ibid.

dictates a separated structure which will lead to separate approaches to achieving separated outcomes. The proposed reform hierarchy overlooks the cross-cutting and intersecting issues, and the potential for an integrated model.

To achieve successful outcomes for our children, we recommend the Strategy considers the child's experience wholistically and establishes a structure that addresses the need for integrated approaches, with better joined-up investment and greater coordination. We believe this can only be achieved in-place. We emphasise the role of the Commonwealth should be to work with and support (but not displace) direct place-based, partnership arrangements. For our children, these place-based approaches need to be led by local ACCOs.

Indicators, too, need to be informed through a place-based approach. With diverse people and needs cross the country, success looks different to different groups. In developing appropriate indicators to accurately measure initiative success, we submit definitions of success need to be sourced from within the initiative targeted groups, so that the measurement of initiative success is in line with their ideas of success.

In our region, we are leading the way with our Early Years Regional Development Agenda, which sets out regional reform and priority initiatives, supported by the development of related indicators based on our definitions of success (and Closing the Gap indicators).

Vision

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Our ECEK vision is straightforward:

'We want for our children the same opportunities and choices other Australians expect for their children. We want them to succeed in mainstream Australia, achieving educational success, prospering in the economy and living long, healthy lives. We want them to retain their distinct cultures, languages and identities as peoples and to be recognised as Indigenous Australians.'

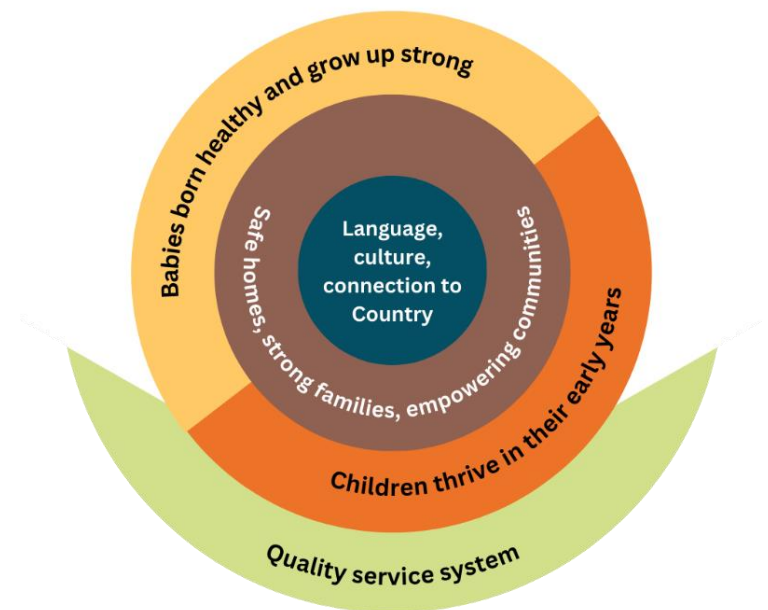
Outcomes

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

In our Early Years Regional Development Agenda, we have identified the following as critical development outcomes for our children and families:

1. Language and culture are essential and are at the centre of a child's start to life. Families and children in their early years are speaking their Aboriginal languages, have connection to Country, and have strong sense of belonging and cultural identity.
2. Families live together in safe, nurturing homes where mums, dads and extended care-giving family networks are empowered, children are thriving, and communities support families to succeed.

3. Strong and healthy mums before, during, and after pregnancy. Babies are born healthy and children grow up with positive social and emotional wellbeing, including physical and mental health and meeting developmental milestones.
4. Children achieve their full potential in early learning, both at home and through participating in high-quality early childhood education and care. Parents and care-givers are empowered to take the lead in children's early learning and development.
5. The Aboriginal community-controlled early years sector is strong and sustainable and supports self-determination. The early childhood education and care workforce delivers high-quality, culturally appropriate services for our kids.



These outcomes mutually reinforce the Commonwealth's commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap:

Outcome 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong.

Outcome 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.

Outcome 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

Outcome 12: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.

Outcome 13: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.

Outcome 16: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.

We submit that our vision and development domains should be reflected in and find a central place in a national strategy, vision and set of outcomes for Australia's youngest children. We submit the Early Years strategy maintain these themes of equity, education, healthy economic participation, maternal and child health, cultural safety, strong families and communities, and a quality service system.

We submit the Strategy specifies an outcome for strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, culture and country. This will benefit not only our children but all Australian children and families. We believe that educating all children at a young age about our rich cultures will be a step towards overcoming racism in this country.

Policy priorities

4. *What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?*
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?*
6. *What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?*

To achieve sustained improvement in early years outcomes in the East Kimberley we need joined-up, place-based investment, integrated approaches, greater coordination and enforced accountability for outcomes. This can only be obtained in-place. This cannot be achieved at the national level, nor at the jurisdictional level, but in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our communities, and our towns. We believe this to be true for all children, but especially so for First Nations children in remote areas, like our children. To achieve outcomes for Aboriginal children, these place-based approaches need to be led by local ACCOs with access to appropriately geographically disaggregated data.

ECEK submits that where the Strategy is focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, it embeds the Priority Reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG) to inform policy priorities and achieve the above-mentioned outcomes:

1. **Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making**
 - Genuine partnership is critical to accelerating policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap.
 - Governments commit to sharing decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.
2. **Building the Community-Controlled Sector**
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services usually achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can be given preference over mainstream services.
 - Governments commit to building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.
3. **Transforming Government Organisations**
 - Effective mainstream organisations should understand and recognise what is happening in communities; recognising and understanding the skills that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold.
 - Governments commit to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability, and to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
4. **Shared Access to Data and information at a Regional Level**
 - Disaggregated data and information is most useful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities. It provides a more comprehensive picture of what is happening in their communities and supports better decision making about their futures.
 - Governments commit to enable shared access to location-specific data and information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

The Closing the Gap Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership, while supported and necessary, will not, without deliberate design and implementation lead to place-based approaches that improve child and family outcomes. We need the right intervention at the right level.

Regional level coordination, joint decision making and coordinated investment from relevant funders (Commonwealth, State and philanthropy) must be guided by an Aboriginal-led, long term agenda for sustained improvements in the early years.

In our Early Years Regional Development Agenda, we have established a set of initiatives that we have identified as the most essential next steps for our children and families:

Language, culture and connection to Country

- Bilingual education
- Two-way learning
- Whole of family approach to Connection to Country
- Birthing on Country

Babies are born healthy and grow up strong

- Improve access to and availability of culturally safe maternal and child health services
- Support mums to have healthy pregnancies
- Investment in Aboriginal-led maternal health services

Quality service system

- Early years community data project
 - Government enables shared access to data
 - Communities collect and analyse our own data on early years
 - Publish regional dashboard of locally relevant data for early years
- Improving access to and awareness of early years services
- Regional workforce development for early childhood education
- Integrated service delivery

Safe homes, strong families, empowering communities

- Housing for families
- Parenting education and support

We submit the first priority of the Strategy is to embed the Closing the Gap Reforms. This will ensure a place-based, ACCO-led approach, which we believe is the only path forward. These reforms will then create an environment which enables place-based initiatives to succeed, including the outcomes and strategies that we have established in-place. Ultimately, leading to the development success and outcome achievements our children need.

Principles

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Empowered Communities has developed a set of principles against which all inputs to EC regions can be tested, the policy reform test. This captures the principles which should guide all efforts of Indigenous people, governments, and NGOs in all work in Indigenous Affairs:

- **The Empowerment test:** Is what is proposed consistent with the Indigenous Empowerment policy?
- **The Development test:** Is what is proposed supported by the international lessons of development?
- **The Productivity test:** Is what is proposed the most productive use of the available resources and opportunities?

We submit the national Strategy be tested against these EC principles. Does the Strategy empower Aboriginal people and organisations? Does the Strategy support Aboriginal-led development? Does the Strategy improve the productivity of investment and hit the ground where it is needed to close the gap? In testing Strategy principles against our EC principles, the process will ensure the Strategy promotes empowerment and ultimately achieves Aboriginal development.

Recommendations

We would like to see:

- A Strategy structure that addresses the need for ACCO-led, place-based arrangements that allows for integration, better joined-up investment, and greater coordination.
- Strategy indicators that are drafted with success measurements sourced from within initiative target groups.
- A Strategy vision that upholds themes of equity, education, economic and physical health and cultural safety.
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East Kimberley Context

Early Years in the East Kimberley⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹



Young population

868 children aged 0-4 years across Wyndham-East Kimberley and Hall Creek (~8% of population)



~48% of Indigenous population in the Kimberley are aged 24 and under compared to ~37% for overall population. Median age of Indigenous population is 25.

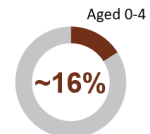


Low access to education & care



All early childhood education & care services across the region (excl. Wyndham) have extensive waiting lists for children 0-2 years

~16% of children aged 0-4 attend an educational institution in the Kimberley



Over-represented in state care



In the East Kimberley, **87 children** are in state care and are all Aboriginal

Aboriginal children in WA are **18 times more likely to be in out-of-home-care** than non-Aboriginal children and young people



Vulnerable babies



From 2008 – 2016, the **low birth weight rate** for Kimberley Aboriginal babies born full term was **6.1%**.

89% of FASD births within the WA population between 2012 – 2013 were Aboriginal

FASD birth prevalence



Limited data on FASD in the EK; However, **84.7%** of 78 antenatal assessments by OVAHS reported alcohol use during some part of pregnancy



Gaps in development

AEDC domains

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows a significant gap (up to 30%) between East Kimberley Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children on every developmental indicator



Physical health & wellbeing



Language & cognitive skills



Social competency

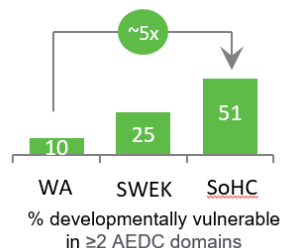


Communication skills & general knowledge



Emotional maturity

Children in the **Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley** (in which 59% are Indigenous) are **more than twice as likely** to be developmentally vulnerable (in bottom 10th percentile) in two or more AEDC domains compared to the whole of WA



Children in the **Shire of Halls Creek** (in which 93% are Indigenous) are **five times as likely** to be developmentally vulnerable (in bottom 10th percentile) in two or more AEDC domains compared to the whole of WA

⁵ Wunan Foundation, "Kimberley Children Services Plan," 2015.

⁶ Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, "The Early Years – Investing in Our Future," 2020.

⁷ Rural Health West, "Kimberley – population and health snapshot," 2016.

⁸ P. Bridge, "Ord Valley Aboriginal Health Service's fetal alcohol spectrum disorders program: Big steps, solid outcome," Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin, 2011.

⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Early Development Census, 2019. [Online].

Conclusion

The AEDC evidence clearly indicates that our children are facing significant developmental vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the current strategy is failing to close the gap. Moving forward, we need the Commonwealth Government to honour its commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to achieve equity for our children. The Early Years Strategy needs to reflect the CtG reforms and so prioritise place-based, ACCO-led Early Years initiatives in our region. This approach will enable integration, better joined-up investment and coordination, to take the necessary steps towards closing the gap for our children.

Contact

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