SUBMISSION TO THE HUMAN SERVICES: IDENTIFYING SECTORS FOR REFORM

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ISSUES PAPER

JUNE 2016.

Introduction

This submission has been prepared in response to the abovenamed Issues paper

The provision and delivery of human services to the Australian community should be a direct response to the conditions and situations in which citizens find themselves. It is the mark of a just, humane and caring society that lifts everyone up to a higher standard of living and seeks to create equity and accessibility for all. This is irrespective of the geographical, social, economic and cultural circumstances experienced by Australians.

I am particularly focused on human services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and also young people.

RESPONSE NO 1

What are human services? How should these services be measured and assessed to ensure that the desired outcomes are obtained?

Human services are established with the objective of meeting human needs using an interdisciplinary knowledge base; including both prevention and remedial approaches to problems and maintaining a commitment to improving the quality of life for service users and the wider community. [1]

Human services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are established to address a range of benchmarks and human rights targets. It has been focused on uplifting the position of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander to be equitable with that of other Australians. Issues such as health, housing, education, life expectancy, employment, access to food and water and maintenance of cultural practices are all areas where human services operate. They can also be engaged in reducing welfare dependency and improving economic participation.

There have been any number of government initiatives undertaken to address these concerns but these have failed due to the following:

- Lack of commitment by funders
- Poor planning and coordination between all levels of government and non-government participants

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[1] http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/what-is-human-services

- Funding being consumed by higher end administrative costs with limited resources reaching the activities or people it has been meant to assist
- Lack of accountability by governments of all levels in reporting back against targeted outcomes e.g. Closing the Gap
- Failure to listen to the consumers about what they need. It has been about what they get or use which is not the same as what they need.

One of the ways to turn around what has been the failure of measuring or addressing outcomes is to implement the Outcomes Mapping approach.   Outcome mapping (OM) is a methodology for planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives in order to bring about sustainable social change. [2] It identifies issues and brings partners together to develop and implement responses to the problem. It is used world-wide as a way of assisting developing nations to implement major reform projects.

RESPONSE NO 2

What should be considered in determining which human services are best suited to the application of competition, contestability and informed user choice? What else can be considered?

It would be more desirable to ask would competition, contestability and informed user choice offer any enhancement to the delivery of human services.   Many services already have informed user choice built into their structures. A number of not for profit organisations both large and small have to ensure that this is within their service delivery models and have to report back to government funders on their application of user choice.

I found the comments about competition and contestability akin to 'keeping agencies on their toes' disrespectful and patronising. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services have been very familiar with the need to be competitive especially in this new era where any provider, both as profit or not for profit, can tender for services that were traditionally provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies.

Bigger is not always better in terms of service delivery for our people.

The ability to engage in evaluation, research and analysis are the tools that are needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to be competitive.

RESPONSE NO 3

How can performance data and information be improved to ensure that human services are efficient, accessible, equitable and cost-effective?

Funders must utilise technology to develop data systems that are robust to work in regional, remote and isolated areas. These systems must be able to link with similar systems and not create additional burdens for both the service provider staff and the consumers. The lack of coordinated and consistent data systems within the human service system lends itself to additional costs and cumbersome outcome management analysis.

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[2] http://www.researchtoaction.org/2012/01/outcome-mapping-a-basic-introduction/

A service can have staff running programs and using up to 5 different data collection and reporting systems. These systems do not 'talk' with each other and information is duplicated across the systems where clients may engage in more than one program operated by that service.

Then there is data reporting back to funding bodies. Despite efforts to reduce 'red tape', the fallout has been additional paperwork and more time spent on preparing and sending reports which takes time away from direct client contact. Not all services have dedicated staff to do the data entry and field staff work with clients and then enter data.

Services do not receive any feedback from the data that has been provided. There is limited information provided back to the service providers that could assist them in ongoing planning and development. The comment is that the data goes into a 'black hole' and is never seen or heard again.

The collection of data should be to inform practice and enhance the quality of service delivery and outcomes. If the providers do not get this then neither do the clients and user choice or information is impacted.

RESPONSE NO 4

Which human services address the listed characteristics?

Apart from disability, aged care and early childhood services, the remainder of services have mechanisms for clients to make decisions on their own behalf. However, issues such as the profile of the provider, their geographical location, the method of contact and location of services does influence the consumer's decisions.

Consumers, particularly Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander, will use services that are known to them or their family and where the staff are well known for their work with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander clients and community.

Queensland services funded by government have to provide information for consumers as part of their service accreditation. This can be in print and electronically.

Having staff located in services who are known to the consumers assists in the ability of consumers to utilise these services. Front-line staff who can welcome and make consumers feel welcome break down the barriers and allow clients to enter and seek services.

RESPONSE NO 5

What characteristics are relevant for specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human services and for Youth human services?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human services must address the following characteristics.

- To elevate the position of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander to a standard that is equitable to all other Australians. This means to have improved health, housing, education, employment; increased life expectancy; access to information; human rights; legal and

justice; freedom from discrimination and harassment and in accordance with international covenants the right to practice culture and all that this includes.

- Be delivered from an Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander practice framework that recognises and respects the history of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people in Australia; our contemporary position and our future aspirations and rights.
- Services are developed, implemented and delivered by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people
- There must be a national Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Human Services policy and framework

Youth human services must address the following characteristics.

- Be delivered in accordance with international covenants and conventions such as the Rights of the Child
- Be delivered within a youth driven framework that acknowledges that youth have the right to determine the services they require.

RESPONSE NO 6

What supply characteristics are relevant for specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human services and for Youth human services?

Supply has to be connected to demand for services. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander populations have a higher number of young people than older people and services will need to be developed to response to this profile.

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people want suppliers who can provide the following:

- The service that they need when they need it
- The service to be delivered as close as possible to where they live
- If the service is not close then the ability to get to that service with minimal cost and inconvenience
- Service providers who have taken the time to understand them and their way of life
- The service to be delivered in a way that is responsive to their particular needs including an understanding of their cultural practice and framework
- The ability to enhance their well-being and lifestyle so that they and their families are not locked into a cycle of poverty, illness or dislocation.

RESPONSE NO 7

What is the range and scope of costs, regulatory arrangements, compliance and type of service delivery (one-off or ongoing) for specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human services and for Youth human services?

The imposition of costs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human service consumers has not been applied in a wholesale way across services particularly within the not-for-profit sector. This can be attributed to the following factors viz

- The socio-economic status of those seeking human service support

- The establishment of the organisations providing the human services programs. Organisations established as Public Benevolent Institutions (PBI's) have to demonstrate within their Model Rules and Constitutions that they are established to alleviate poverty and other social disadvantages and that the generation of any form of profit must be returned to the organisation for the advancement of its objectives.
- Not for profit organisations funded through government are required to utilise this funding as agreed to in the service contracts. Any surplus funds are either resumed by the funder or the next quarterly allocation to that service is reduced.
- Government funding agencies require funded organisations to report on any monies that are generated by the organisation through a particular program or programs. This reduces the ability of the organisation to generate income.

The not for profit sector in Queensland has witnessed a range of regulatory changes and arrangements over the past 10 years. The aim of reducing the amount of red tape incurred by organisations has not resulted in gains in efficiency and effectiveness. There are monthly, quarterly, bi-annual and annual reporting regimes. The reporting frameworks are on-line but each uses a different program software and operating platforms. This is where there is wastage and duplication of effort. The reporting systems do not actively interact with each other and it is not uncommon for there to be up to 5 different reporting systems within the one organisation and to multiple government funding bodies.

Compliance and the introduction of accreditation systems and standards frameworks has seen the sector become more focused on addressing the regulatory frameworks. This includes work around privacy, risk assessment and management and governance upgrades. Whilst there is a requirement for funded services to engage in these compliance standards, there is little funding by government to ensure that organisations are ensuring that their service is taking the steps needed to be complaint and well- functioning.

The introduction of intermediary agencies who act as brokers or commissioners for contracting, funds distribution and delivery arrangements has disrupted the traditional funding arrangements between governments and service providers.

The analogy is one of a 'funnel' system where government puts in the resources at the top of the funnel and it is drip-fed down to the service providers on the ground. Service providers who have the endorsement and knowledge of the communities that they serve can lose out to bigger national or international corporations who have the ability to market and promote their services. However, the community engagement with the consumers is not there and there is no ownership or sense of community strengthening deployed by the larger non-local providers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engage with their services in a different way to others. The creation of many of the not-for-profits and community operated businesses arose through the advocacy and commitment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait people who formed these services in response to the lack of services available to them. Larger organisations responsible for Aboriginal & Islander Legal services, Aboriginal Medical services and Aboriginal & Islander Child Care organisations were established from these community based and community-controlled objectives.