

9 July 2019

To the Productivity Commission,

**RE: Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory Issues Paper – Submission**

Community playgroups are a crucial element of the family support and child development sector. They are unique in their ability to fill a gap left by other valuable services, but sometimes suffer from a lack of cohesion and cooperation amongst sectoral elements. Early education programs, family support services and community playgroups should be enabled to work together through effective management of funding distribution and a collaborative sector structure.

The role of community playgroups is to facilitate the development of children through play and enable families to socialize, access further related services, and engage in peer support. Crucially, community playgroups are volunteer-participant-led and require that children be supervised and engaged by their caregivers, which makes them valuable as tools of whole family and community engagement. Whilst other services within the sector are valued for their own merits, and should be complementary and interlinked with playgroups as part of an holistic, cooperative sector, they cannot fill the specific social and developmental role for families and children that playgroups satisfy. The peer support that playgroups create is essential to the general community, and it is even more needed for families experiencing disadvantage, illness, disability and/or social isolation. Many families require supported playgroups to gain the peer support and create positive outcomes for their children.

Playgroups provide peer support options for those in a parenting role in the context of the long-term erosion of extended family and informal community supports for families in Australia. The reduction of family and community supports is due to the changing demographics of modern life such as an aging population, family mobility, housing stress and changes in work patterns. For many families, community playgroups are an introduction to a civil society pathway that leads them to participate in school, junior sports and other community activities

Around 200 000 families participate in Community playgroups and they exist in over 80% of all Australian postcodes—in metropolitan, regional, rural and even remote areas.


Community playgroups have been running in the Northern Territory since 1977, and as of the financial year ending June 2018, playgroups in the Northern Territory consisted of:

446 member families, and

1679 community playgroup sessions;

the value of community playgroups is thus demonstrated by the fact that they are consistently accessed by the community.





In recent years, community playgroups have been forced to close due to factors such as rising venue hire fees, and many funded playgroups have been set up either very close to a community playgroup or in the same venue. Occasionally they are set up to run on the same day and at the same time. This is detrimental to families that have to choose between complementary support services, as well as detrimental to the playgroups themselves, which are forced to compete unnecessarily instead of cooperating to ensure families have access to the best support for their circumstances and preferences. It would be more beneficial for the playgroups and their attending families if the new playgroups were to run on different days or at different times to the existing community playgroup.

Playgroup Australia has commissioned a Cost Benefit Analysis of community playgroups in 2019 which Playgroup NT will be happy to share when completed.

### **What can we do?**

- Value the cultural, social and economic contribution of community playgroups to Northern Territory families and communities;
- Increase consultation and collaboration within the sector;
- Allow community playgroups use of NT Government facilities rent free, e.g. Child and Family Centers and provide storage for community playgroup toys and resources or share those already there;
- Leverage local community engagement for all local services;
- Collaborate at community events to increase knowledge of local services and supports for families;
- Encourage referrals between services, creating a more symbiotic environment to assist families in accessing the help they need;
- Ensure grant agreements contain mandatory collaboration clauses.

It has taken four decades to reach the position of connectivity that Playgroup NT enjoys with the Northern Territory community. Playgroup NT has worked hard over these years to engage communities to set up valuable community playgroups, and sustaining them financially and socially has involved considerable effort. The hard-won and invaluable support service that community playgroups offer should not be underestimated, and it would be regretful indeed to see them undermined. New services have an important role to play, and would benefit alongside community playgroups from a collaborative, open sector, but it would be unreasonable to expect them to be able to entirely replace a community playgroups system that has worked for four decades to achieve its success and unique, necessary position in family support, community engagement and child development. In this way, a potentially devastating loss to communities across the NT could be avoided simply through increased cooperation and consultation, and great benefits could be reaped from the provision of the additional services.

Yours sincerely,

Susan Wellfair

CEO

PLAYGROUP ASSOCIATION OF NT ABN 63 791 968 509

Cnr McMillans Road & Marrara Drive MARRARA NT 0812

Telephone: 08 8945 7777 Email: [admin@playgroupnt.com.au](mailto:admin@playgroupnt.com.au) Website: [www.playgroupaustralia.com.au](http://www.playgroupaustralia.com.au)

