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Benedikte Jensen
First Assistant Secretary
Planning for My Future Taskforce
Australian Government
Department of Employment Workplace Relations

By email to: ParentsConsultation@dewr.gov.au

8 September 2023

Dear Benedikte,

New voluntary service for parents

FamilyCare has a keen interest in the development of a new voluntary program to replace ParentsNext. As the main provider of child and family services in the Goulburn Valley, with our head office in Shepparton which was a host city for one of the first iterations of ParentsNext, we have seen firsthand the impact of poorly designed policy on our clients and their families.

We appreciate the opportunities provided already to make contributions to this review. We also appreciate your personal investment in visiting Shepparton as part of the consultations with parents. That consultation process has limitations, both in time and scale. We are confident however those limitations are well understood. We are also confident that the body of evidence compiled over many years, exploring the problems with ParentsNext and suggesting alternative approaches, provides an important foundation. FamilyCare has contributed to that evidence base, including through formal submissions to:

- The Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into ParentsNext in February 2019 [sub65 FamilyCare \(1\).pdf](#) and
- The Senate Select Committee on Work and Care, in September 2022 [Submission 74 - Familycare.pdf](#)

Rather than repeat matters we have already raised, FamilyCare would like to emphasise the importance of incorporating the following features into any new scheme:

a) Prioritising the needs of children:

The design of Parents Next did not pay sufficient attention to impacts of the policy on children. That was especially the case in relation to suspensions and cancellations of benefits, that were applied as a consequence of non-compliance. FamilyCare's consistent view, informed by our service experience, was that each and every compliance penalty exposed children in impacted households, to elevated risks.

Whatever comes next must incorporate the needs of children and their rights to have their safety and wellbeing considered in both design and delivery.

b) The particular importance of the Early Years of childhood:

There is considerable evidence to support the vital role Early Years development plays. We welcome references to parenting in the consultation documents. More emphasis could be afforded to the first 1000 days of a child's life in the design of the voluntary service. We would also suggest:

- Linking options to existing early parenting supports, like playgroups and
- Considering whether this part of the process is better located with family services (under the Department of Social Services), rather than employment (under the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations).

c) Recognising the importance of place:

The consultation documents recognise the relevance of place, in the design of effective services and supports. Issues like access to childcare, availability of public transport and the reality of employment markets, all tend to be highly localised.

Recognising local factors is only part of the puzzle. Engaging local communities in designing sustainable local options, requires flexibility in how central policies are given effect. That flexibility should include appropriate delegation to support local decision making.

d) The value of lived experience:

Again, this issue is canvassed in the consultation documents and that is a welcome progression.

We encourage considerations that are broader than traditional service sector employment. For example, involving current parents in building and sustaining support networks, could be a useful way of enhancing engagement, as well as providing genuine empowerment.

We wish the review team well and look forward to further information as it becomes available.

Yours sincerely,



David Tennant
Chief Executive Officer