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Department of Social Security
Early Years Strategy Team

by email: earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au

9 February 2024

Dear Early Years Team,

Feedback on the Draft Early Years Strategy

FamilyCare is the main provider of Child and Family Services in the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria. We are an active participant in the Best Start Partnership, hosted by Greater Shepparton City Council, as well as a provider of specific early years services through our Parent Child Program. From previous communications, DSS is also aware of our involvement with the More for Children Research project, under the leadership of Professor Sharon Bessell from the Children's Policy Centre at the ANU.

Our ability to participate directly in all elements of the Early Years Strategy consultations, has been limited. We have however been following with great interest. Thank you for providing an opportunity to comment on the Draft Early Years Strategy 2024-2034. There are many important and valuable concepts reflected in the draft and we look forward to its continued development and eventual release.

One issue on which we would like to make direct comment, is the references in the draft to material basics. Throughout the document, both directly and by implication, the vital importance of basic material support to the safety, wellbeing and development of children is acknowledged. We welcome that priority. We also welcome the clear and unambiguous commitment to do better, outlined on page 4 of the draft:

We want to ensure every child, no matter their circumstances including where they grow up, can reach their full potential. This is not where we are now, but with a targeted focus on the early years we can turn this around.

The strategy provides the framework to act on opportunities to keep doing well for children, as well as to help ensure no child is left behind.

With this as context, we are deeply disappointed that there is limited recognition of the role the Commonwealth plays, specifically by ensuring the social security system is safe, fair, and adequate. Research like that being conducted by the Children's Policy Centre, underlines the negative consequences associated with children living in poverty. Those consequences are profound and increasingly inter-generational. A central underlying cause is an inadequate, often punitive social safety net.

The strategy in our view should commit to addressing unfairness in the social security system generally, but especially for families that have very young children. Only two outcomes are

identified for ensuring material basics are met, on page 48 of the draft. The second of those notes that 'economic participation is the best way to alleviate poverty and disadvantage and that one of the best ways of achieving this is through having a job'.

We do not deny the importance of economic participation, or employment but its prominence as one of only two aspirations in an Early Years Strategy, ignores the special needs and vulnerability of very young children. Rather than suggesting parents or carers get a job, we should be helping them to care for their children at the most crucial point in their development.

We would be happy to expand on these views if useful and look forward to continuing updates.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Tennant', enclosed in a light grey rectangular box.

David Tennant
Chief Executive Officer