

**Submission
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CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

Organisation: SDN Children's Services

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Submission to the Parliament of NSW Committee on Children and Young People Inquiry into the child protection and social services system

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

SDN Children's Services has supported children and vulnerable families in NSW since our beginnings in 1905. We continue to find innovative solutions for children who are not in safe and supportive family environments. We work in partnership with families, communities and government to improve outcomes for children and strive towards our vision for an equitable world where all children thrive.

1. About our submission

This submission will focus on our insights as an organisation which supports vulnerable families across early childhood education, state-funded family support programs and disability services. This means we can speak from the front line of child protection and see the challenges from many angles, but always with children at the centre of what we do.

Our submission contains practical examples and innovative approaches based on evidence and experience which could be expanded in order to better support more children and families across the state.

2. About the SDN Group (SDN)

SDN Children's Services is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1905 and is one of Australia's most experienced and trusted leaders in mainstream early education and childcare, disability services for children, and family support. The SDN Group includes a wholly owned subsidiary, SDN Child and Family Services Pty Ltd.

Our purpose is to promote and enhance children's wellbeing, learning and development in inclusive environments. We build strong connections within communities, challenge discrimination and help remove barriers to full inclusion. We operate an integrated model of service delivery using our Pathways Approach that brings together our expertise in mainstream and specialised service delivery. In all, around 5,000 children, families and other service providers benefit from SDN's work each year.

SDN is one of the lead agencies funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to provide the Brighter Futures program. SDN is contracted to work with families in Sydney and the Eurobodalla region, with offices in Redfern, Caringbah, Canterbury and Moruya.

More information about SDN is available at: www.sdn.org.au

3. The optimum evidence-based prevention and early intervention responses that the current system should provide to improve life outcomes

In responding to the Inquiry's terms of reference, SDN's position has long been that an early intervention, 'ecological' and community focus is required to protect and enhance the

welfare and wellbeing of children. This approach requires stepping back from crisis management to early intervention, as recommended by many inquiries over the years.¹

We have long been saying that the key elements of a successful approach are:

- Child-centred and family focused, with the workforce skilled in working with both children and adults. This includes the importance of the early years and play-based intervention
- Easy, non-stigmatising, welcoming entry points
- Integrated approaches and links with a range of services and professionals
- A base of mainstream service delivery
- Fostering ongoing trusting relationships.

Our knowledge is based on experience providing government funded programs for vulnerable families and pioneering innovative approaches and supported by decades of research.² SDN has developed effective approaches based on all these elements, and the next section will outline examples from our work.

Initiative: SDN Practice Framework

We are proud of our most recent innovation, the SDN Practice Framework, designed to support all families from low to very high risk, and ensure flexible tiered support based on need with a focus on sustainability of outcomes. The Practice Framework is based on consultation with staff and families and covers a shift across all areas of our work with families.

Input from parents who had been part of the program themselves was key to the success of the development of our Practice Framework. Parents assisted with designing and testing of tools, and shared valuable insights from their experiences. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to be heard and to support other families in the future.

Based on this experience, SDN may also be able to assist in facilitating appropriate and respectful participation of vulnerable families in this inquiry. Please see contact details at the end of this submission if you wish to discuss this.

¹ See the analysis by Fams, *Reviews of the NSW child protection system 2008-2019: an analysis of key findings and degree of implementation*, included in their submission to the Inquiry.

² Research includes the work of early childhood researchers such as McCain and Mustard, beginning with their first *Early Years Study* in 1999 and further research since then, as well as research into neurodevelopment such as the work of the US-based Child Trauma Academy. SDN has also commissioned research and evaluation to inform our work. The following is a selection of key early research which has continued to influence approaches to child and family support.

- Irwin, L, 2007. *Early child development: A powerful equalizer. Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the social determinants of health.*
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/69729>
- McCain, MN and Mustard, JF, 1999. *Early Years Study Final Report.* Toronto: Ontario Children's Secretariat.
- Perry, BD, 1997. Incubated in Terror: Neurodevelopmental Factors in the 'Cycle of Violence' In: *Children, Youth and Violence: The Search for Solutions* (J Osofsky, Ed.). Guilford Press, New York, pp 124-148

Initiative: SDN Beranga model

In 2011, SDN was funded by the NSW Government to establish SDN Beranga as an Autism Early Years Demonstration Service with a long day care centre for children aged between 2-6 years with autism, and an outreach service to 13 childcare centres operated by a range of providers that were supported to develop autism-specific practices. The program prioritised children at risk and vulnerable families, including children at risk of entering out of home care (OOHC).

Analysis by an external consultant demonstrated clear economic and social benefits of operating such a service for families, the community and government. It showed that the model led to reductions in child safety investigations and child removals into OOHC and, for children already in OOHC, it reduced escalation into higher intensity OOHC.

When NSW Government funding for the service ceased in 2018 the service transitioned to a community preschool for children with autism. SDN continues to support vulnerable families attending SDN Beranga, including through NDIS-funded children's therapies and the Family Resource Worker. However, the loss of funding meant that the level of support we could provide to families and other providers was reduced.

Initiative: The Parent Resource Program

The SDN Parent Resource Program supported disadvantaged families through a family-centred and strengths-based approach. Families in the program accessed early learning and care for \$5 per day under a scholarship arrangement. The centre provided opportunities for parents to develop skills and knowledge in parenting and child development, build self-esteem and access other services.

The program was funded by the Federal Government in 1999, initially in Waterloo, and then expanded to six centres. This program was trialed and evaluated over several years and demonstrated that this innovative approach achieved positive advances in social inclusion, child protection and education. The program was recognised by the National Child Protection Awards in 2003.

The program is no longer funded but elements of the program informed the development of the Brighter Futures program and the SDN Beranga model. SDN continues to provide scholarships to children from vulnerable families funded by staff giving and private philanthropy.

The model of the Parent Resource Program using early childhood education as a base for service delivery has great potential to benefit children and families if it were funded and expanded to other communities.

Initiative: Supported playgroups

SDN established the PlayLinks supported playgroup in 2004 to address a gap in the system for families concerned that their child may not be developing typically, and who may face delays to access assessment and therapy. The program continues to run as a mobile play-based early intervention model in locations in Western Sydney, while adapting to changing communities, funding and systems, including the operating remotely due to COVID-19 for several months in 2020.

SDN also runs the Glebe Supported Playgroup (also known as Ngara Nanga Mai Aboriginal Playgroup) which works with Aboriginal families through the local primary school. The group has built strong relationships with the community and has a focus on health, child development and learning through play.

Both playgroups are funded by the NSW Government under DCJ Targeted Earlier Intervention.

4. The child protection intake, assessment, referral and case management system including any changes necessary to ensure that all children assessed as being at risk of significant harm receive a proactive and timely in-person response from child protection staff

As a service which receives many referrals for children assessed as being at risk of significant harm, SDN is well placed to respond to the fourth item in the terms of reference.

SDN is funded to deliver the Brighter Futures program in Sydney and the Eurobodalla region. We work with many families and communities including Aboriginal families, refugees, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and families experiencing entrenched disadvantage. Families may experience domestic violence, mental illness, addiction, intergenerational trauma and poverty.

In recent years there have been significant changes to Brighter Futures with a shift to focus on referrals from DCJ and children reported as at risk of significant harm. This has led to a shift in our approach to working with families due to the increase in complexity and risk. However, the funding model for Brighter Futures does not reflect the higher cost of service provision due to increasing risk and complexity.

Other challenges for providers of Brighter Futures include:

- Delays in receiving referrals from DCJ which then delays the response to children at risk of harm;
- Working with DCJ, including co-working in some districts, while differentiating our role from statutory child protection; and
- The legacy of the Stolen Generations and the fear that children will be removed which continues to impact working with Aboriginal families today.

The Brighter Futures program is facilitated differently by each service provider, reflecting different organisational values and the needs of the communities they serve. At SDN we have high expectations of our staff and invest in our workforce to ensure the best outcomes for children and families. We recruit case workers with university qualifications and provide ongoing training and development for staff. The investment in our staff has supported SDN to manage the increasing risk and complexity of cases.

We listen to feedback from staff about the challenges they face, and this has led to initiatives including the SDN Practice Framework and the Aboriginal Child and Family Practitioner role.

Initiative: SDN Practice Framework - Cold referrals

The SDN Practice Framework is a large piece of work impacting on all aspects of our work with families. One key practical example of this is the guidance and support for staff to manage initial communication with families.

Alongside other changes to the program, there has also been a major change in the referrals to the Brighter Futures program. A 'cold referral' is a referral made without a parent's knowledge or consent, and usually only contains the information provided in mandatory reports to the Child Protection Helpline. Previously, most referrals to Brighter Futures were 'warm' referrals where the family was aware of the referral being made and the contact details and other information regarding the family was also more likely to be accurate.

The initial communication with SDN staff is very important but also highly challenging for both staff and families. Families of children reported through the DCJ Child Protection Helpline are referred to Brighter Futures when DCJ decides that the case will not be further investigated. Despite DCJ's decision not to investigate, the children may still be at risk of significant harm from abuse or neglect. We know that from the point of view of families, the initial contact from Brighter Futures is likely to be stressful and unwelcome, and come at a time of crisis. Participation in the Brighter Futures program is voluntary however families need to understand what may happen if they decline to access the program.

In order to manage the cold calling process for referrals most effectively and efficiently, SDN developed guidance for staff including time frames for calls, the number of calls and a script to follow when speaking to families. This was one component of our work on the SDN Practice Framework. The guidance for cold referrals has increased the confidence and morale of staff alongside a dramatic increase in the percentage of calls which lead to families signing on to the program.

Initiative: Aboriginal Child and Family Practitioner role

In 2018, SDN created a new role within the Brighter Futures program to improve practice in working with Aboriginal families. The Aboriginal Child and Family Practitioner is an identified position and was created in response to feedback from Brighter Futures staff. Case workers in Brighter Futures were concerned about the impact of the Stolen Generations and the fear of children being removed on their work with Aboriginal families.

The Aboriginal Child and Family Practitioner supports the work of Brighter Futures by encouraging staff to reflect on their practice and supporting them to build trust when working with Aboriginal families. Working with the Aboriginal Child and Family Practitioner has improved confidence of staff in supporting Aboriginal communities and improved engagement and practice.

5. Challenges of using data

SDN supports efforts to improve accountability and performance in the child protection and social services system. Monitoring data and measuring outcomes is important to inform changes in policy and practice to improve outcomes for children and families. However, data collection also poses challenges for funded service providers including the resources spent collating data from different systems into the format required by DCJ.

Data regarding families in the Brighter Futures program required for DCJ may not accurately reflect the effectiveness of the program. It may not be possible to draw conclusions from the data without having the full picture of a family's situation and the work with the family. For example, providers need to inform DCJ of mandatory reports made for families in the program. However, the number of mandatory reports is not a true reflection of risk as services are mandatory reporters and therefore by nature of being involved with a family will see an increase in reports due to increased oversight of children and sharing by parents of incidents. Brighter Futures may also support families to engage with other services during and after their involvement in the program, and this also increases the likelihood of mandatory reporting.

6. Conclusion

SDN thanks the Committee for Children and Young People for the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry into the child protection and social services system.

We welcome any further discussion or opportunity for SDN to support the inquiry and improve support for children and families in NSW.

Please do not hesitate to contact SDN CEO Kay Turner to discuss this submission or any other matters on [REDACTED] or by emailing [REDACTED]