

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Plumtree Children's Services

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Submission to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports for Children and Young People in New South Wales

Submitted by Plumtree Children's Services

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Executive Summary

The NDIS is under increasing pressure — and without changes to how we support families, it risks becoming financially unsustainable. Many children with developmental delay or disability do not need lifelong NDIS funding or intensive, therapy-based packages. What they need are parents who are:

- Informed about their child's needs
- Connected with other parents who have walked the same path
- Supported to create a clear, proactive roadmap
- Hopeful and equipped to help their child thrive

Plumtree Children's Services provides this foundation.

For over 35 years — long before the introduction of the NDIS — Plumtree has delivered **community-based foundational supports** that reach families early, without requiring diagnosis or eligibility assessments. These supports are **low-cost, high-impact**, and designed to build families' capacity to navigate services, make informed decisions, and take early action that leads to better long-term outcomes.

At the centre of this submission is *Now & Next* — an award-winning, peer-led program co-designed with families. It provides parents with the tools to:

- Set meaningful goals for their child and family
- Understand which supports are most relevant and effective
- Avoid investing time and resources in services that may not be needed
- Reduce long-term reliance on intensive clinical services

The program's outcomes are backed by rigorous evaluation, showing statistically significant improvements in parent **hope, empowerment, and wellbeing**. A cost-benefit analysis using the New Zealand Treasury's CBAX model found a:

- **Government ROI of 2.9** and **Societal ROI of 4.7** over ten years
- Using a more conservative three-year window, a **Government ROI of 0.9** and **Societal ROI of 2.7**

These figures demonstrate the program's strong value for money — particularly as a scalable, early intervention solution that complements existing service systems.

Plumtree has also developed a proven model for integrating **parent-peer workers** within a child and family organisation. We have trained **98 family leaders**, including **45 peer workers**, who now facilitate programs, mentor other parents, and play a valuable role in the early childhood intervention workforce. While peer work is widely used in mental health and disability sectors, it remains underutilised in early childhood. We have demonstrated that it is not only feasible — it is effective, affordable, and ready to scale.



Now & Next and our peer workforce training model are ready to expand. These supports offer families a clear, community-based alternative to intensive, long-term funding — and provide government with a strategic, evidence-backed option to reduce pressure on the NDIS while improving outcomes for children and families.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak with the Committee and share further insights from our work.

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Introduction

About Plumtree Children's Services

Plumtree Children's Services is a not-for-profit community organisation with over 35 years' experience supporting children with developmental delay or disability and their families. Based in the Inner West of New South Wales, we deliver a range of early childhood intervention services, and family capacity-building programs — including supported playgroups, an online parent education calendar reaching over 2,000 families per year, and community inclusion capacity building.

We also operate a mainstream community preschool, where children with and without disabilities learn together in an inclusive environment that values every child's contribution. Our services span from birth to 8 years old and are grounded in strengths-based practices that promote family leadership, agency, and child voice.

Plumtree is a registered NDIS provider and a proud member of the Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network (ECIBPN) — a collective of not-for-profit organisations committed to delivering high-quality, inclusive, and evidence-based support for children and their families. We are also a member of the Child and Family Supports Alliance (CaFSA), a collaborative body of leaders from NSW's mainstream and specialist community-based and not-for-profit sectors, including national parenting support services. CaFSA was established to advocate for, design, and implement foundational supports systems tailored for children with developmental differences and their families.

Our Foundational Supports

Like other Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network members, Plumtree has been delivering foundational supports for decades, long before the term was formalised in policy. These supports play a vital role in family capacity-building, early engagement, and community inclusion — particularly for families not eligible for the NDIS or those still navigating diagnosis.

Our foundational supports include:

- Supported playgroups, delivered by qualified early childhood educators and therapists and tailored for families of children with disabilities, developmental delays, or concerns about their child's development.
- DSS ILC -funded community capacity-building programs, *Community and Me* and *Libraries as Community Connectors*
- A parent education calendar that provides free workshops, and parenting programs to over 2,000 parents and carers annually



- Our peer-led Now & Next program which includes the novel Pictability planning tool. Both are internationally recognised innovations that build family leadership, participation, and capacity from the earliest stages of a child's journey

Parent-Peer Work as a Lever for Family Leadership and Systems Change

At Plumtree, we view family leadership as a long-term strategy to empower families, strengthen communities, and build a more sustainable and inclusive support system. Since 2015, we have been developing, testing, and embedding paid parent-peer work as a powerful lever for change within early childhood intervention.

Parent-peer workers complement non-peer professionals by offering lived experience, emotional connection, and practical guidance. With 98 parent leaders trained — including 45 parent-peer workers — Plumtree has demonstrated that peer roles can be formally integrated into foundational supports. These workers help families navigate services more independently, set meaningful goals, and build wellbeing from the start.

For peer support to realise its full potential, it must be embedded across a variety of service platforms — including early childhood intervention organisations. But this is only part of the picture. There is also a need for strong, independent, parent-led organisations that can advocate, educate, and connect with families beyond formal services. In recognition of this gap — particularly for parents of young children — **Plumtree auspiced two such organisations:**

- **Reframing Autism**, which supports Autistic people and their families through neurodiversity-affirming education and advocacy
- **BelongSide**, which champions belonging and inclusion through family-led storytelling and leadership development

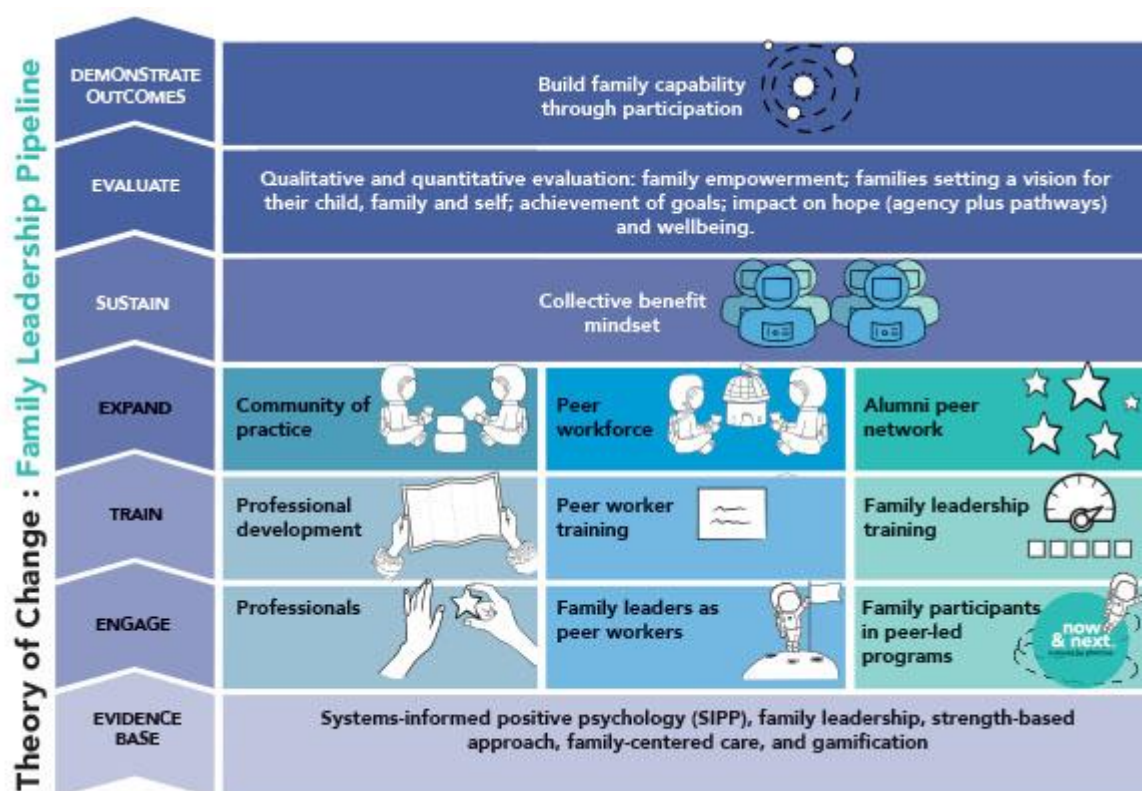
These initiatives reflect our broader commitment to family leadership — not as a program outcome, but as a systems change strategy. When we support families to lead both within and beyond services, we create the foundations of a support system that is truly inclusive, sustainable, and shaped by those it exists to serve.

Frameworks That Guide Our Work

Plumtree's approach to foundational supports is grounded in three practice models developed in partnership with families. These frameworks shape how we design, deliver, and evaluate our programs — and they offer a practical roadmap for building family leadership and child outcomes within community settings:

- **The Bridge to a Good Life** model maps the three essential support pathways families need — peer connection, community inclusion, and specialist services — and shows how foundational supports help families move confidently between them over time.

- **The Child Voice Model** supports parents to nurture their child’s agency and independence from an early age, laying the groundwork for children to become decision-makers in their own lives as they grow.
- **Family Participation: Theory of Change** articulates how families build the skills, networks, and leadership capacity to navigate systems, advocate effectively, and support their child’s development — even in the absence of formal supports.



The Bridge to a Good Life and Child Voice models are included in the following sections and have been applied across Plumtree’s programs, including Now & Next. They reflect our broader vision for a system in which families are not just supported — but equipped to lead.

About the Now & Next Program

Now & Next is an example of a peer-led foundational support program that was developed entirely in Australia. It is local, community-based, co-designed with families, and has been proven to be scalable and effective. The program was created in response to a critical gap in the support landscape: the absence of structured, non-clinical, capacity-building programs to prepare and empower families of young children with developmental delays or disabilities.



From 2015–2017, Plumtree was funded by the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) to deliver capacity-building initiatives to families in the lead-up to the NDIS. It was during this time — in codesign with families — that the Now & Next program was created. It has since evolved with support from two rounds of NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) funding:

- 2017–2019: National pilot of Now & Next through the *Building Capacity in Families of Young Children with Disability: A Family Leadership Project*
- 2020–2024: Large-scale delivery of Now & Next through the *Parents as Peer Leaders Program (PPLP)*

Without funding since July 2024, Plumtree is fundraising to continue providing the Now & Next program to families.

The program is grounded in contemporary, evidence-based practices, including:

- Positive psychology
- Strengths-based approaches
- Family-centred practice

Who Now & Next Supports and Why It Matters

Delivered in a peer-led, interactive group format, Now & Next is not a didactic course — families learn with and from each other, sharing lived experience, strategies, and encouragement. This model fosters social connection, peer support, empowerment, agency, and hope, which are especially critical for families early in their journey including those not connected to formal funding streams.

From 2020–2024, the Now & Next program was delivered through the Parents as Peer Leaders Project funded by DSS ILC to support families whose children do not have a NDIS individual funding package. The goal was to ensure that these families received the support and resources to navigate community and specialist services by participating in the Now & Next program and building family leadership through the development of local parent peer leaders.

The results of the project highlight the unique needs of unfunded families. PPLP's positive outcomes show that early connection with parent peer workers and structured programs like Now & Next are crucial in helping families set a vision and goals for their whole family to thrive.

Demonstrating Economic Value: Cost–Benefit Analysis with the New Zealand Treasury

In 2018, Plumtree worked with the New Zealand Treasury to conduct a cost–benefit analysis (CBA) of the Now & Next program using the Treasury’s approved CBAX tool. This tool quantifies both government and societal returns to assess the value of public investment in social programs.

Two calculation periods were modelled:

Three-year period:

- Government ROI: 0.9
- Societal ROI: 2.7

This means that for every \$1 invested, government systems received \$0.90 in direct economic benefit (e.g. reduced service use, earlier engagement), and society more broadly gained \$2.70 in value.

Ten-year period:

- Government ROI: 2.9
- Societal ROI: 4.7

This shows that over the longer term, Now & Next more than pays for itself — both in terms of reducing government expenditure and generating broader social value.

The analysis used a conservative, risk-adjusted approach, reflecting real-world conditions and service costs. While the Government ROI over three years sits just below parity, this is consistent with early intervention programs that aim to build family capacity before complexity escalates. Importantly, this short-term return is paired with strong long-term savings and social impact.

Government funding decisions often consider more than just direct economic return. In addition to its ROI, Now & Next:

- Serves families outside the NDIS
- Reduces pressure on diagnostic and therapy systems
- Builds parent capacity early, reducing reliance on long-term services
- Strengthens social networks and community connection

These broader system-level benefits — alongside a ten-year Government ROI of 2.9 — demonstrate that Now & Next is not only effective and scalable, but also a cost-effective investment in a more sustainable and inclusive disability support system.



It is important to note that this cost–benefit analysis was conducted in 2018. Since then, the program has expanded nationally and internationally, transitioned to online delivery, and strengthened its facilitation and evaluation model. A future CBA may well show even stronger returns, as these developments enhance scalability, access, and efficiency. The original analysis, using conservative assumptions, should therefore be seen as a baseline — one that confirms the program’s value under early implementation conditions.

Impact and Evidence

Now & Next has been rigorously evaluated and is supported by a growing body of evidence, including peer-reviewed articles, an independent review by the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and a four-year impact study under the Parents as Peer Leaders Project (PPLP). These evaluations have consistently demonstrated statistically significant improvements in parent hope, empowerment, and wellbeing. Plumtree collaborates with academic partners through its national and international Research Group, ensuring that its work contributes to — and is informed by — contemporary research in family-centred practice, positive psychology, and systems change.

Building on this strong foundation, Plumtree is now preparing a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) to further evaluate the outcomes and scalability of Now & Next. This represents the next stage in developing a robust evidence base to inform public investment in peer-led foundational supports.

As the Parents as Peer Leaders Project evaluation highlights:

“The Now & Next program is evidence-based and built on positive psychology... It provides a peer-led environment for participants to develop their goals, connect, support and learn from each other.”

— PPLP Final Evaluation, p. 10

And in the words of a parent participant:

“It has helped me understand there is a framework around making forward movement and progress in my child’s life as well as my own and that of my entire immediate family.”

— PPLP Final Evaluation, p. 40

The Now & Next program and Plumtree’s parent-peer model offer government a tested, cost-effective, and scalable pathway to strengthen early foundational supports — and reduce pressure on the NDIS.

Purpose of This Submission

We welcome the opportunity to contribute insights and evidence from Plumtree's work to inform the future design and delivery of foundational and disability supports for children and families in New South Wales.

This submission responds directly to the Terms of Reference set out by the Select Committee. It draws on our program data, lived experience, and systems knowledge — with a specific focus on **parent-peer work** and the **Now & Next** program.

Broader issues related to early childhood intervention (ECI) are addressed in separate submissions from the **Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network (ECIBPN)** and the **Child and Family Supports Alliance (CaFSA)**, of which Plumtree is a member.

Response to Terms of Reference

(a) the role of such services and supports on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing

Foundational supports — particularly those that empower parents and build community connection — play a vital role in improving a child's development, health, and wellbeing. When parents gain confidence, hope, and leadership skills, they are better equipped to support their child's learning, social inclusion, and emotional wellbeing. Parent-peer led programs like *Now & Next* demonstrate that when families thrive, so do their children.

Now & Next contributes directly to children's wellbeing by supporting parents to become strong advocates, informed decision-makers, and engaged community members. Through this program, families begin to shift from a deficit-based view of their child's development to one grounded in strengths, vision, and hope — leading to more confident caregiving and higher-quality developmental environments at home and in community settings.

To guide this journey, Plumtree developed the *Bridge to a Good Life* model — a practical and strengths-based framework that illustrates how families navigate parenthood from birth to age 18 through three essential laneways of support:

- Community inclusion
- Peer networks and lived experience
- Specialist services

All three laneways are vital to achieving long-term wellbeing and inclusion. *Now & Next* strengthens families across all three, helping them cross the bridge toward a good life with their child.

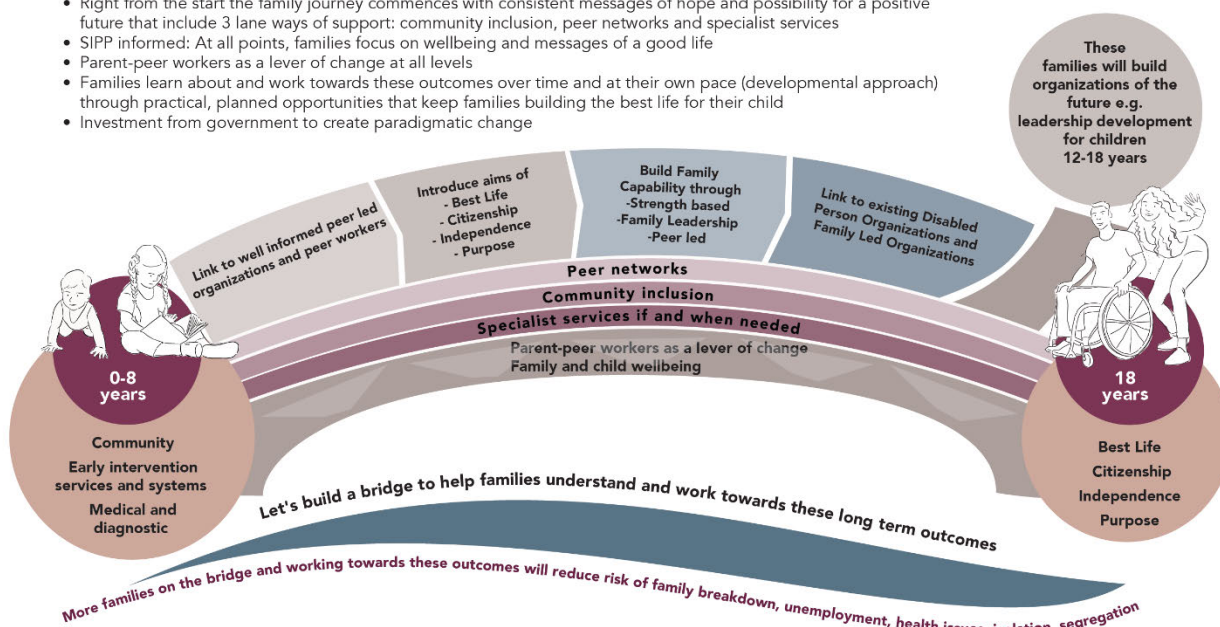
Under the NDIS, the specialist services laneway has become an autobahn — fast-moving, well-funded, and widely understood. In contrast, the community and peer-led laneways are underdeveloped, underfunded, and difficult to travel. To build a more balanced and sustainable system, investment is urgently needed in these two foundational laneways. When families can travel them more confidently, they become less dependent on the specialist services route — and more capable of setting their own direction.

When parents are supported and confident, children thrive. Plumtree has seen the transformative impact of foundational supports that build family leadership, resilience, and connection — increasing empowerment and agency while reducing long-term reliance on therapy-based interventions. Strengthening these supports is not just good for families — it is essential to the future sustainability of the broader support system.

[View the Building a Bridge to the Good Life Model](#)

Family capacity-building framework: An investment and developmental approach using systems informed positive psychology (SIPP)

- Right from the start the family journey commences with consistent messages of hope and possibility for a positive future that include 3 lane ways of support: community inclusion, peer networks and specialist services
- SIPP informed: At all points, families focus on wellbeing and messages of a good life
- Parent-peer workers as a lever of change at all levels
- Families learn about and work towards these outcomes over time and at their own pace (developmental approach) through practical, planned opportunities that keep families building the best life for their child
- Investment from government to create paradigmatic change



The Child Voice Model

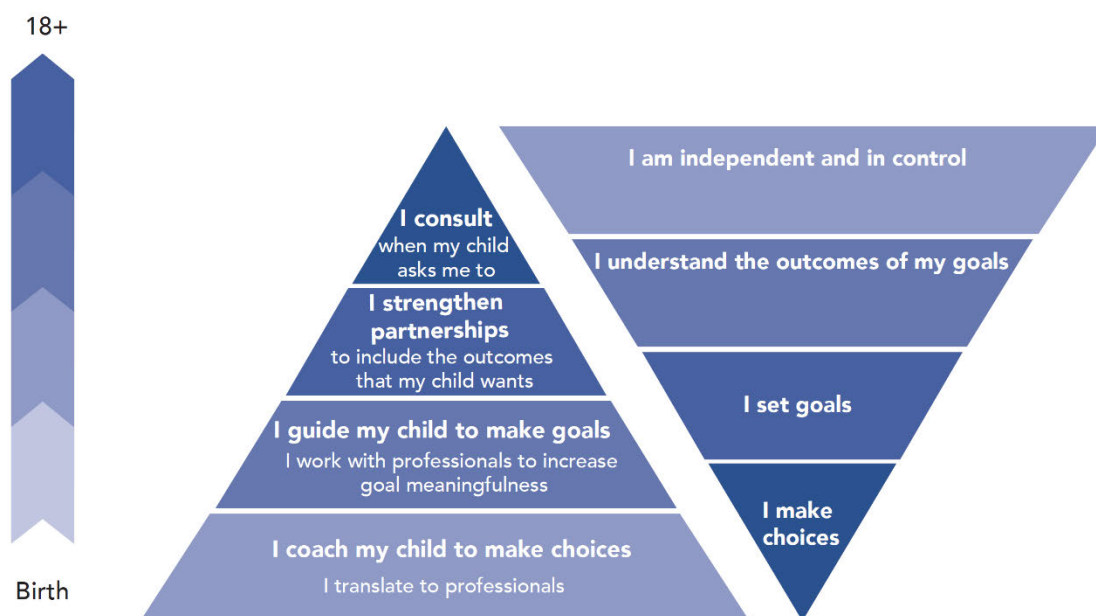
Plumtree's Child Voice Model also supports children with disabilities to gradually develop agency, decision-making skills, and the ability to shape their own lives. This begins in the early years, with parents acting as "coaches," and evolves as the child's capabilities grow.

The model addresses a common gap: children's voices are often excluded from planning and intervention. It encourages parents to start early, recognising their essential role in nurturing their child's voice and building the foundations for independence.

As children move from infancy to adolescence, parents progressively transfer decision-making responsibility. For children with disabilities, this process can be delayed without the right support. The Child Voice Model helps parents understand how to guide this transition — identifying their child's strengths, fostering confidence, and gradually stepping back as their child steps forward.

[View the Child Voice Model](#)

Amplifying the voice of children with disabilities (Mahmic & Janson, 2019)



The inverted triangles show how family role decreases as child voice increases over time

(b) the types of services and supports available and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services and supports in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote New South Wales, including medical, community-nursing, allied health services, NDIS services and other service delivery models

Plumtree delivers a suite of foundational supports — including supported playgroups, parent education workshops, peer-led programs, and community capacity-building initiatives. These services are designed to be accessible across NSW, including in regional and remote communities, and to complement clinical and NDIS-funded services by strengthening family capacity earlier in the journey. This approach reduces pressure on overstretched clinical systems and creates a more balanced and responsive support ecosystem.

The *Now & Next* program, delivered most recently through the *Parents as Peer Leaders Project (PPLP)*, demonstrates that high-quality foundational supports can be delivered equitably across geographic locations — including to families in rural and very remote areas who often face the greatest barriers to access.



Between 2020 and 2024, the program supported **1,008 families nationally**, significantly exceeding its original target. It reached families across all states and territories, with:

- 67% living in metropolitan areas
- 31% in regional areas
- 2% in very remote areas

Families from New South Wales made up **46.3% of participants**, with strong representation across both metropolitan and regional communities.

Originally delivered face-to-face, *Now & Next* transitioned to online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift dramatically increased accessibility — particularly for families in regional and remote areas — by removing common barriers such as travel, childcare, and time off work. Families were able to participate from home and engage with trained parent-peer facilitators regardless of location.

Importantly, the online format did not compromise program quality or outcomes. Families in all locations, including regional and remote NSW, achieved strong results:

- Hope increased by 9.09%
- Empowerment increased by 9.3%
- 98% of participants recommended the program

These outcomes demonstrate that geography does not need to be a barrier to access or impact when foundational supports are designed to be flexible, community-responsive, and led by peers with lived experience.

The success of *Now & Next* reinforces the importance of investing in **scalable, non-clinical supports** that complement traditional services, reduce pressure on clinical systems, and ultimately save government funding by building family capacity earlier and more effectively.

(c) the role of diagnostic services, existing gaps and barriers, and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services

Diagnostic services play an important role in identifying developmental conditions, enabling access to specialist support, and informing tailored intervention. However, access to these services remains inconsistent, under-resourced, and subject to long delays — particularly for families in regional and rural areas or those without private health coverage.

Families often wait many months — sometimes years — for a formal diagnosis. During this critical window of child development, they are frequently left without guidance, isolated, and unsure how



to support their child — despite research consistently showing that early intervention is most effective during this stage.

Now & Next offers a **non-diagnostic, strengths-based entry point** that empowers families to take meaningful action while they wait. It supports parents to build a vision, set goals, and focus on their child's strengths and potential — rather than remaining stuck in a holding pattern that can delay developmental progress.

By offering families timely, peer-led support **before diagnosis**, *Now & Next* helps reduce the emotional and informational overwhelm that often accompanies the wait. This approach improves family wellbeing and readiness, and ensures that once specialist services are accessed, families are more confident and prepared to engage effectively.

Importantly, it also reduces the risk of families turning to inappropriate or ad hoc interventions out of desperation — which can waste both public and private resources, and lead to poor outcomes.

To improve outcomes for children and reduce strain on diagnostic pathways, **governments should invest in accessible, non-diagnostic foundational supports** that are available to all families — regardless of diagnosis or funding status. At the same time, efforts to expand the diagnostic workforce, streamline referral pathways, and better coordinate between primary care and early childhood services are needed to reduce wait times and improve equity of access.

(d) gaps and barriers to accessing early childhood intervention and their impact on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing, as well as on their family or carers and other government services and systems

Current systems too often rely on **formal diagnosis and access to the NDIS as the primary gateway to support**. This creates significant inequity, leaving many families ineligible for help during the critical early years — particularly those whose children do not yet meet eligibility thresholds or are still waiting for assessment. The result is delayed intervention, increased parental stress, and missed opportunities to support a child's development when the potential for progress is greatest.

Historically, before the introduction of the NDIS, **community-based organisations like Plumtree were funded to provide foundational supports** that were inclusive, non-diagnostic, and accessible to all families. These supports enabled families to connect early, promoted social inclusion, and improved developmental outcomes — without requiring a formal diagnosis. The shift to individualised funding has narrowed access and left many families without the early scaffolding they need. This has broader system impacts. Families who don't receive timely support are more likely to experience overwhelm, disengagement, or pursue unsuitable interventions out of



desperation — placing further strain on already stretched diagnostic, education, and clinical services. The burden then shifts to government systems that must respond to more complex needs later, often at greater cost.

Investing in foundational supports — particularly for families who fall outside the NDIS — is critical to improving outcomes for children, reducing long-term costs, and ensuring a more equitable and responsive early intervention system.

Plumtree's evaluation data shows that **families without NDIS funding consistently begin with lower levels of hope, wellbeing, and empowerment**, and are more likely to drop out or not attend services. Despite these challenges, when these families participate in peer-led programs like *Now & Next*, they make the greatest progress — **outperforming funded peers in key outcomes**.

These findings clearly demonstrate the impact of accessible, non-clinical, peer-led foundational supports. When families are supported early — before diagnosis or eligibility — they are better able to engage in their child's development, contribute to their wellbeing, and navigate services with confidence. This reduces pressure on diagnostic systems, improves developmental trajectories, and builds a stronger foundation for lifelong outcomes.

(e) opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improved collaboration across both government and non-government services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, early learning services, educational settings and health services

Our experience delivering the *Parents as Peer Leaders Project* highlighted the ongoing fragmentation of the early childhood and disability support system. While Plumtree has worked in partnership with early learning services, Aboriginal organisations, health providers, and family support agencies, we encountered significant challenges in embedding peer-led foundational supports within mainstream systems. One of the key barriers was **gatekeeping**, particularly within government-funded services where access is often linked to diagnosis or formal referral pathways.

In response, our most effective strategy for reaching families was to **engage with them directly**. We used social media to build awareness and reduce stigma, which helped parents see themselves in the stories shared. Over time, word of mouth became the strongest referral pathway, with families inviting others into the program based on their own experience. This extended our reach well beyond what formal service partnerships alone could have achieved.

This experience reinforced what we see every day: **families trust other families**. Peer-led supports offer a unique opportunity to build trust, promote early engagement, and connect families to both



community and specialist services in a way that feels safe and accessible — especially for those navigating uncertainty or without a diagnosis.

We believe there is a clear opportunity to improve cross-sector engagement by:

- **Investing in peer-led, community-based foundational supports**, which are flexible and accessible to families regardless of where they are in their journey
- **Embedding parent-peer roles within early childhood intervention teams**, including in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and culturally specific services
- Supporting partnerships across early learning, health, and education that are built on trust, long-term relationships, and shared commitment to outcomes — not just short-term contracts or project-based collaborations

Stronger collaboration is possible when programs are built on trust, shared values, and a common goal: to support families as early as possible, in ways that work for them.

(f) other government or best practice child development and early childhood intervention service models and programs operating outside of New South Wales

Internationally, the *Now & Next* program has been **delivered in Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Finland, Croatia, Ireland, and Albania**, demonstrating that **family-led, peer-based capacity building is globally relevant, scalable, and transferable across service systems**. In each of these settings, the program has supported families with outcomes consistent with those achieved in Australia — including measurable increases in parent hope, empowerment, and wellbeing.

Governments and organisations in these countries have implemented *Now & Next* because they recognise that **service-led models alone are not enough** to meet the needs of families — particularly those who are not yet eligible for formal supports or who are navigating uncertain pathways. There is growing international interest in **innovative, cost-effective programs** that build family capacity early, reduce system pressure, and support inclusive community engagement.

Now & Next addresses this need by offering a structured, peer-led program that:

- Builds parent capacity earlier, reducing long-term reliance on specialist services
- Engages families before diagnosis, ensuring action during critical developmental windows
- Reaches diverse communities, including culturally and linguistically diverse and rural families
- Reduces pressure on diagnostic and clinical systems through a scalable, non-clinical foundational support model

A cost–benefit analysis using the New Zealand Treasury’s tool found that *Now & Next* delivers a strong return on investment — with a Government ROI of 0.9 over three years and 2.9 over ten years, and even higher returns to society. The international delivery and recognition of *Now & Next* reinforces the opportunity for **New South Wales to lead in foundational supports** — by investing in peer-led, family-centred programs that are already delivering strong results in both local and global contexts.

(g) workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors, including workforce demand and the availability, quality and capacity of existing workers, and

Workforce shortages across the early childhood intervention (ECI) sector are well documented — particularly among paediatricians, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and specialist early childhood educators. High demand, limited training pathways, and workforce burnout have created a growing gap between need and capacity, especially in regional and rural areas. These pressures have been compounded by the market-based model of the NDIS, which has shifted the sector toward transactional, therapy-driven delivery.

One underutilised opportunity to strengthen and diversify the ECI workforce is the inclusion of **trained parent-peer workers**. While peer work is well-established in sectors like mental health, it remains underdeveloped in early childhood — despite strong evidence that it engages families, builds capacity, and complements professional services.

Parent-peer workers:

- Complement professional services by offering non-clinical, strengths-based foundational support
- Reach families traditional services may miss — particularly those who are isolated, navigating diagnosis, or not eligible for the NDIS
- Bring lived experience, cultural insight, and trust, building relational entry points into complex systems
- Cost less than clinical professionals, while providing high-impact early engagement
- Reduce pressure on therapists by supporting families earlier, easing demand on diagnostic and clinical services

Plumtree has been developing and embedding a peer workforce since 2015. We have trained **98 family leaders**, including **45 parent-peer workers**, through a structured pathway: first as participants in peer-led programs, then as trainees, and finally as facilitators of *Now & Next*. These workers deliver group programs, mentor other parents, and contribute to co-design and systems improvement.

This required changes in how we operate — including coaching, supervision, and integration with clinical teams — but the results have been clear. As documented in *Moore et al., 2018*, peer-led delivery achieved strong engagement and outcomes, including with families who had not accessed traditional services.

We've shown this model works: it is scalable, sustainable, and cost-effective. With modest investment, the parent-peer workforce can reduce system pressure, reach families earlier, and deliver measurable outcomes — at lower cost than clinical-only approaches.

What is needed now is a **framework and investment at the state level**, targeted funding, and recognition of peer work as a legitimate and essential part of the ECI workforce. Plumtree has the track record and infrastructure to support this shift.

(h) measures to implement recommendations of the NDIS Review Final Report and the Disability Royal Commission Final Report in relation to foundational supports, and

Plumtree's work aligns strongly with key recommendations from both the NDIS Review Final Report and the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) Final Report, particularly in relation to strengthening foundational supports, building family capacity, and upholding the rights of children and families.

Key areas of alignment include:

- NDIS Review Recommendation 7: Establish a well-funded system of foundational supports for people with disability, including families and carers
- NDIS Review Recommendation 9: Develop support pathways for children that are accessible and inclusive, regardless of NDIS eligibility
- DRC Final Report – Volume 4: Promote children's voices and participation in decisions that affect them
- DRC Final Report – Volume 6: Invest in inclusive, community-based supports and early intervention

Plumtree is already delivering programs and approaches that operationalise these recommendations, including:

- Now & Next, a peer-led foundational support that empowers families early in their journey, including those not eligible for the NDIS
- Parent-peer workforce development, creating new, scalable roles that reduce workforce pressure and engage families early
- The Child Voice Model, which supports children to gradually build agency, with parental support, from the early years

- Inclusive supported playgroups, co-facilitated by educators and therapists, accessible to all families regardless of diagnosis or funding

To support implementation of these recommendations in New South Wales, we recommend the following practical measures:

1. **Fund peer-led, community-based foundational supports** through a dedicated NSW stream — particularly for families not eligible for the NDIS or waiting for diagnosis
2. **Embed parent-peer workers** within early childhood intervention teams and community organisations, alongside educators and clinicians
3. **Resource inclusive supported playgroups and family capacity-building programs** as part of a universal foundational support offer
4. **Support training and dissemination of models like Now & Next and the Child Voice Model** to build best practice and family leadership across NSW
5. **Work in partnership with community-based organisations** to co-design and scale foundational supports that reflect lived experience and are locally responsive

These measures would not only bring NSW in line with the recommendations of the NDIS Review and Disability Royal Commission — they would build on existing community strengths and deliver early, practical outcomes for families.

Conclusion

The early years matter — and families need more than clinical intervention to support their child's development, health, and wellbeing. They need timely, accessible, and empowering supports that build confidence, connection, and capacity from the start.

This submission has shown how peer-led foundational supports, such as Now & Next, offer a scalable, cost-effective, and evidence-based solution. The program supports families before diagnosis, builds leadership and wellbeing, and complements existing services by reducing pressure on diagnostic and clinical systems.

Plumtree's work also provides a model for workforce innovation through the development of the parent-peer workforce — a trained, lived experience workforce that strengthens early engagement and expands service reach. Since 2015, we have demonstrated how parent-peer workers can be embedded within community organisations, working alongside professionals to deliver high-impact foundational supports.

In 2018, Plumtree worked with the New Zealand Treasury to pilot its CBAX cost-benefit tool on Now & Next. The analysis found a Government ROI of 0.9 and a Societal ROI of 2.7 over three years, and a Government ROI of 2.9 and a Societal ROI of 4.7 over ten years, using a conservative, risk-adjusted methodology. These results confirm what families have told us all along: early investment in family capacity pays off — socially, emotionally, and economically.

The work presented here aligns closely with key recommendations from both the NDIS Review and the Disability Royal Commission, offering practical, tested pathways for state-level implementation.

What is needed now is:

- Strategic investment in peer-led, community-based foundational supports
- Integration of lived experience roles into the early childhood workforce
- Funding models that allow families to access support earlier — not only after diagnosis

We welcome the opportunity to work with government and sector partners to deliver on this vision and ensure that every family in NSW — regardless of diagnosis, postcode, or funding status — has access to the supports they need to thrive.

Publications and Supporting Evidence

Lancaster, K., Kern, M. L., Harding, K., Bayasgalan, M., Janson, A., Mahmic, S., & Bhohti, A. (2024). Exploring long-term outcomes of a peer support programme for parents* of children with disability in Australia. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 50(2), e13236.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13236> **(Demonstrated sustained long-term benefits for families participating in Now & Next)**

Lancaster, K., Bhohti, A., Kern, M. L., Taylor, R., Janson, A., & Harding, K. (2023). Effectiveness of peer support programmes for improving well-being and quality of life in parents/carers of children with disability or chronic illness: A systematic review. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 49(3), 485–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13063>

Mahmic, S., Kern, M.L., Janson, A., Tracey, D., Johnston, C. (In press) Powering Up Family Systems Using Systems -Informed Positive Psychology: Parent Peer Workers as Levers for Change. In M. Wehmeyer (Ed), *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability*.

Mahmic, S., Kern, M. L., & Janson, A. (2021). Identifying and Shifting Disempowering Paradigms for Families of Children With Disability Through a System Informed Positive Psychology Approach [Original Research]. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.663640>

[Parents as Peer Leaders Project Final Evaluation \(2020–2024\)](#) and associated [project materials](#)

[Murdoch Children’s Research Institute Evaluation \(2018\)](#)

[Research on Peer Work in Early Childhood Intervention \(ECI\) Project | Plumtree](#)