

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

Organisation: Australian Association of Social Workers
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Foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in NSW

Background

The Australian Association of Social Workers is the professional body representing 17,000 social workers in Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work in Australia. Many of our members work in the NDIS providing support co-ordination, therapeutic supports and early intervention supports. Others work in the services that intersect with the NDIS such as mainstream early childhood, family support and health services. This gives us unique insights into the most effective way to support children and young people with a disability.

Response to select terms of reference

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

- Universal mainstream services will be important to provide the entry point to all General Foundational Supports. Because they are designed to reach all families and children, they enable all families to receive services without having to wait for a particular need to be identified. From this generalist platform, parents and carers can access added resources without having to go through the processes of establishing need and eligibility which act as barriers for many families. Therefore, it will be important that State and Federal governments ensure that universal mainstream services are adequately resourced, alongside the process of establishing General Foundational Supports.
- Existing services such as Maternal and Infant Health services, early childhood education services, schools and Community Health Centres have already established reputations as trusted sources of information, and have built connections to other community based services and networks. Again, this makes them invaluable as avenues through which families can connect easily with appropriate, trustworthy, resources and supports.
- In many of the communities in which universal mainstream services are working well, local governments have played a key role supporting them and facilitating the mechanisms for co-operation between health services and community service organisations. It has been social workers managing community services in local government and regional community health services who recognise the potential of collaboration across all providers in a community to create an effective and inclusive network of supports. They have also possessed the community development expertise to realise that potential.
- AASW members anticipate that this local experience will be relevant to developing the foundational and disability supports, by ensuring they respond to actual needs and articulate effectively and seamlessly with the existing services.
- AASW recommends that local governments, existing universal children's services and community sector organisations should provide direct input into planning and establishing foundational and disability supports.

(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.

- It will be important that adequate, effective and appropriate universal, mainstream services are available to all families as a reliable gateway to the service system. Services such as Maternal and Child Health and early childhood education are already frequented and trusted by a broad section of the community. They can provide an accessible, and supportive avenue to both categories of Foundational Supports, while ensuring the family and child remain connected to all their existing community networks.

- This does not mean that existing staff in these services should be the professionals who determine which supports a family needs, nor provide the supports nor undertake the capacity building as described in the discussion paper. Assessing the needs of children and families, providing direct supports, building capacity and connecting families with the most appropriate supports are all specialist tasks. They should be undertaken by appropriately qualified professionals, such as social workers. If these tasks are assigned to the new navigation role, it demonstrates that social workers should be filling that role.
- Therefore, the AASW recommends that social workers should be listed as one of the professionals to undertake the assessment and referral of families to foundational and disability supports.
- To maintain the seamless connection between mainstream universal services and foundational and disability supports, the professionals undertaking the assessments and referrals into appropriate pathways should be located as close as possible to the communities using them. This will be in both a geographic and service sense. Assessment and referral services should be embedded in communities using approaches such as physical co-location, the ability of families to self-refer, jargon-free titles and easily accessible materials. Again, this points to the need for existing health and community services to be incorporated into the design and implementation of these supports.
- Therefore, the AASW recommends that existing local government and community sector organisations provide input into the decisions about the location of and access to the assessment and referral arms of foundational and disability supports.

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

- The individualised nature and higher intensity of foundational supports means that they are more effectively delivered face to face. Building the capacity of families and carers depends on building a trusted three-way relationship between the social worker, the child and their family. The AASW is concerned that the possibility of telehealth is providing a disincentive for governments to invest in developing appropriate levels of face to face services for rural and remote communities.
- Therefore, the AASW recommends that in-person and face-to-face be the preferred option for delivering foundational and disability supports.

(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

- The AASW endorses the vision of children thriving in their families and communities. We agree with the principle that the best way to ensure that all children develop cognitively, socially and emotionally is to intervene early to support them and to ensure that their families, kin, carers and communities can also support them.

(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 Integrated services that include allied health

- In communities in which local government, universal services and the community sector is co-operating effectively, there will already be mechanisms to ensure that services are appropriate to the diverse needs of that community. Some of these will relate to the physical location and will consist of arrangements to cover a widely dispersed population over a large area. In other instances, services will have links with services appropriate to the cultural or linguistic characteristics of the people who live in that area. It will be important that these mechanisms are also incorporated into the planning

and delivery of general supports, so that they replicate the measures that make the universal services successful.

- The AASW recommends that public and community sector organisations with established expertise in meeting the needs of diverse groups should provide direct input into planning and establishing foundational and disability supports.
- In the instances where these services are functioning well, it is often because they have already incorporated mechanisms for ensuring that they address needs specific to their communities. The AASW believes that approaches that have so far been successful in building the capacities of families from diverse groups to support children's and young peoples development and to draw on a wide range of services, should be incorporated into designing and providing foundational and disability supports. For example: Aboriginal Controlled Community Health Organisations, mobile and outreach services, and culturally specific clinics within generalist services.
- Therefore, the AASW recommends that public and community sector organisations with established expertise in building the capacities of diverse groups should provide direct input into planning and establishing foundational and disability supports.

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

- The system described in this paper will be complicated, and the process of establishing it will be protracted and confusing for professionals and families. This suggests that it will be difficult for families to connect to the combination of services which is most appropriate for their child; and also that there will be a period when staff in the system have similar difficulties identifying and recommending the most effective and appropriate combinations of services. Even after the establishment period, the combination of universal mainstream services, specialist health and education systems, foundational supports, disability related early intervention services and the NDIS will constitute a complex and confusing array.
- In this context, the envisaged roles of navigators, specialist navigators and lead practitioners will be critical. We note that the current description of the navigator roles refers to their similarity with Co-ordination of Supports and Specialist Support Co-ordination. Again, these are roles in which social workers' capabilities, training and value base give them particular expertise. Social workers understand the complexities of the service system and are skilled at building an individualised, holistic, culturally appropriate program around a family to assist them support children. They communicate with all providers to ensure that all services share the same empowering, strengths - based vision. When applied to foundational supports, social workers will ensure that children's families, communities and networks are providing the optimum supports to promote their development. It will be important that social workers are incorporated into the descriptions of these roles.
- Therefore, the AASW recommends that social workers be included in the examples of professionals who can undertake the role of navigators, specialist navigators and lead practitioners.

(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

- We have already indicated that AASW members already have the professional value base, education, and capability to fill many of the new roles that will be created around foundational and disability supports, and that many AASW members report many instances where existing NDIA staff show an inaccurate understanding of social workers' full scopes of practice. Elements of plans have been disallowed, downgraded or mistakenly re-assigned to other workers, some of whom had no professional education. Despite multiple reassurances from management, this misinformation

persists through the NDIS. Simultaneously, reports of lack of services and waiting lists, refer to services that social workers provide.

- This leads the AASW to the inevitable conclusion that some elements of the workforce shortage are caused by poor understanding by NDIA staff of the scope of social work practice. Better education of NDIS staff of each profession's capabilities will be an important first step in avoiding workforce shortages.
- The AASW recommends that processes are established to ensure that official documents about foundational and disability supports contain accurate information about the scope of social work practice.

(i) Any other related matter.

- AASW members have concerns regarding the listing of Allied Health professionals in the Consultation Paper: Response to research request which omits social workers from the list of Allied Health professionals who could offer Diagnostic and therapeutic services under 3.3 Types of services and supports available.
- Although the descriptions of these supports fall well within the scope of a qualified social worker's practice, social workers are not identified as allied health professionals who could offer Diagnostic and therapeutic services.
- As university qualified Allied Health professionals, social workers can be a vital component of the service offering for foundational and disability supports as envisaged in this paper. Because they operate from a 'person-in-environment' approach, social workers understand that a person's functioning is a result of the interaction between their individual characteristics and their families, carers and surroundings. They are trained to intervene in both domains simultaneously, making social workers uniquely well suited to providing both the low intensity child and family centred supports as well as the one-on-one capacity building supports that the document describes. Many AASW members have specialist knowledge in early childhood development and are currently working in this way: providing evidence based early intervention supports to children, while building the capacities of their families and carers, while also assisting them locate the most appropriate services. The capacity of social workers to undertake both roles with a child and their family simultaneously gives their work a dynamic, flexible quality, enabling them to adapt to the child and the family's evolving needs.
- The AASW's experience with the NDIA indicates that if social workers are not specifically identified in all documentation, NDIA staff will not consider them to be eligible to perform this work. Therefore, the AASW recommends that social workers should feature in all public and internal descriptions and listings of Allied Health professionals providing foundational and supports.

CONCLUSION

The AASW welcomes this consultation on the design of foundational and disability supports for children and young people and look forward to participating in the next steps in this process.