

A submission to the:
**Senate Community Affairs References
Committee**

Authorised by:
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yourtown



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Introduction

yourtown welcomes the inquiry into ParentsNext, which covers both its trial and subsequent roll-out, that the Senate Community Affairs References Committee is undertaking.¹ As both a provider of ParentsNext in Elizabeth during the trial (between April 2016 and July 2018) and as a current provider of targeted ParentsNext in Mid-North South Australia, we have rich insight to contribute in relation to its implementation, design and delivery. In addition, as we continue to deliver services to disadvantaged groups in Elizabeth, we have a unique perspective on the rollout of the intensive scheme in that area.

yourtown is also a youth specialist provider of jobactive in 26 sites (as a subcontractor to Max Employment) and Transition to Work in 12 sites across the nation, as well as a provider of parenting programs. It is this expertise and experience that means our organisation and staff are well equipped to deliver ParentsNext in a way that is conducive to its success. Our approach emphasises the importance of developing a trusting relationship with our clients over time so that together we identify their challenges and strengths to deliver support based on their holistic needs - whether that be through tailored programs we provide or through referring them to other specialist support services.

Being flexible and having the ability to adjust our programs to meet the specific needs of our clients and where they are in their journey is key to this approach and, we believe, to the effectiveness of ParentsNext. The discretion that ParentsNext providers have in the program is therefore welcome as it allows us to find ways to engage parents, which builds their confidence in a stepped way rather than further isolate them from accessing formal support. For example, ParentsNext providers have the discretion to determine who should be exempted from the program to reflect clients' specific needs and current circumstances and delay their engagement with the program, or, if appropriate, identify activities tailored to their situations. In the same way, ParentsNext providers can work to ensure that the compliance framework is used as a motivation and engagement tool, rather than a way to penalise those often most vulnerable.

Recognising the importance of education and employment outcomes to the health and wellbeing, familial, social and economic outcomes of a family, we therefore support the delivery of a flexible, client-centred and strengths-based ParentsNext. However, we do believe that to ensure that the program is provided as intended and is able to support parents transition to employment goals, then some amendments to the current guidelines are required. These are explained in the following submission and include recommendations to align the two programs (targeted and intensive) in terms of the provision of an employment fund in both and increasing the age of the parent's youngest child to 1 year old for compulsory attendance. We also recommend changing the focus of activities for parents with children aged 1-3 years old to the provision of support to help them parent and provide stability at home and for themselves, with parents with children at kindy focusing on pre-employment activities.

¹ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ParentsNext

Importantly, we also strongly recommend that providers and other key stakeholders be guided and supported to deliver a compassionate and client-focused program, as outlined above. With the changes we suggest, we are confident that ParentsNext can deliver critical support to parents, empowering them to access the services they need, and to acknowledge and build on their strengths, so that they too have employment opportunities.

yourtown recommendations

Recommendation 1: Cease to refer to long-term welfare dependency or long-term welfare dependents.

Recommendation 2: Further develop the stated objectives of ParentsNext to better reflect its purpose in supporting the holistic needs of parents with the aim of creating the conditions to not only consider their future education and employment, but also more effectively support their children.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that all Centrelink staff are appropriately trained in how best to work and respectfully engage with clients to prepare them for their participation in ParentNext, including providing them with sufficient information about the program, its benefits and their mutual obligations.

Recommendation 4: Provide an employment fund for clients of targeted ParentsNext, like the employment fund in the intensive ParentsNext program, which can be used to subsidise or pay for client activities.

Recommendation 5: Amend the ParentsNext programs in the following ways:

1. Align the eligibility requirements for both ParentsNext programs so that attendance is compulsory for parents who have children aged 1 year and up.
2. Enable parents who are ineligible to participate in the programs to volunteer in both targeted and intensive schemes.
3. Formally switch the programs' focus from pre-employment activities for parents with children aged between 0-3 years old to a focus on meeting their holistic needs, and improving their parenting skills and self-esteem, and make pre-employment activities a focus for parents with children aged 3 and over.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that Centrelink staff are appropriately trained to undertake JCSIs.

Recommendation 7: Consider reinstating regular, local ParentsNext provider and other stakeholder meetings.

Recommendation 8: Provide guidance to ParentsNext providers on how to engage and support vulnerable parents regardless of their current status in the program.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that all ParentsNext providers apply the program flexibly and with a client-centred focus to ensure that client safety and wellbeing is central to the focus of staff and delivery of the program.

Recommendation 10: Review the place-based funding and resource requirements of ParentsNext to ensure clients can overcome activity cost and access issues.

Recommendation II: Support providers to take a compassionate approach to TCF, encouraging them to appropriately apply their discretion and be flexible in the use of TCF, to thereby ensure it is used as a tool to motivate client engagement, not as a tool to penalise the most vulnerable, resulting in their further isolation and risking greater harm.

About yourtown

Established in 1961, **yourtown** (formally BoysTown) is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of young people.

yourtown has extensive experience in working with parents and their children, and delivers the following services to help support their needs:

- **ParentsNext** – based in Mid-North South Australia, since September 2018 we have been delivering targeted ParentsNext. We were also a ParentsNext provider in the trial, delivering the program in Elizabeth, South Australia.
- **Employment programs and social enterprises** to support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, which includes being a youth specialist provider of jobactive in 26 sites across Australia, and provider of Transition to Work in 12 sites.
- **Young parent programs** – which support the development of a range of skills within families, connect them with their local communities and deliver case work, one-on-one and group work support, as well as family child development programs. These include:
 - **Glugor Young Parents Program (Glugor)** – based just north of Brisbane, Glugor supports local young parents under 25 years and their pre-school aged children (0-5). The local area is the thirteenth most highly disadvantaged metropolitan area in Australia and has a high proportion of children and young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living there.
 - **Penrose Young Parents Program (Penrose)** – based in Port Pirie, a small, regional town north of Adelaide, Penrose delivers a program for pregnant young women and young parents and carers aged up to 25 years with pre-school aged children up to 5 years of age. In addition, we deliver the Early Intervention Care Plus Program, which targets families with children mostly aged 0-12 years, and up to 18 years. The local area is the fifth most highly disadvantaged regional and remote area in Australia and has a high proportion of First Australians living there.
- **Accommodation responses** – for young families with children who experience homelessness and women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence including:
 - **San Miguel Family Centre (San Miguel)** – set in the outskirts of Sydney, San Miguel offers transitional accommodation to help young families experiencing homelessness. Residents are respected as tenants and are supported to participate in a range of additional supports offered on site and through referral to relevant agencies.
- **Kids Helpline** – a national 24/7 telephone and online counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues.
- **Parentline** – a telephone counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.
- **Expressive therapy interventions** – for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or who have been exposed to family violence.

yourtown submission

In our submission, we respond to the Committee's requests for information about which we can offer most insight. We would be delighted to answer any further questions in relation to our responses or to provide any required additional information.

(a) The aims of ParentsNext, and the extent to which those aims are appropriate, having regard to the interests of participating parents, their children, and the community

The three broad objectives of ParentsNext are to:

1. Target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency,
2. Help parents identify their education and employment related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve their goals, and
3. Connect parents to local services that can help them address any barriers to employment.

When asked, **yourtown** ParentsNext staff broadly support these objectives and agree that they are appropriate with one significant caveat.² They do not like the terminology 'long-term welfare dependency' and do not believe that this appropriately reflects the attributes of ParentsNext clients for the following reasons:

1. The phrase long-term welfare dependency is simply one outcome of a range of often interrelated challenges that confront some families. It therefore overlooks the complexity, diversity and severity of the disadvantage many ParentsNext clients must overcome in their lives;
2. Not all clients who access ParentsNext are long-term welfare dependents. For example, many single mothers are simply on welfare as a result of divorce or domestic violence outcomes, and may just need to access welfare for a short period of time. Other parents may be seeking support through the welfare system as the family income earner is unable to access jobs which pay adequately or give them sufficient hours of work;
3. The phrase 'long-term dependency' is not strengths-based and overlooks any efforts or progress that families may be making to overcome often intergenerational disadvantage; and
4. This language stigmatises parents who access ParentsNext, with the risk that rather than being regarded as an important source of transitional parenting, education and employment support by the wider community, it will be seen as a way of forcing so-called 'welfare bludgers' into work.

Hence, our staff said that objectives two and three better reflect the intent of the program and their work. Although the thought of getting a job is for some clients something they had thought they would explore when their child attends kindy, and for others is not something they had ever had the opportunity to consider seriously, most clients are enthused by the idea as a stepped goal and are quite keen to participate in the program. As a provider of jobactive and other employment

² **yourtown** ParentsNext staff includes staff who worked on the pilot at Elizabeth as well as current staff working in Mid-North South Australia

services, **yourtown** firmly believes in and sees firsthand the life-changing value of finding a job and securing stable and meaningful employment. Nonetheless, we think it is important to stress (particularly to the media) that ParentsNext is not a jobactive for parents.

Indeed, what we consider to be the real value of ParentsNext is not explicitly articulated in these objectives. For us, the real value of ParentsNext is its ability to support parents to transition to a place where they feel they are able to – perhaps for the first time – consider themselves, their futures and a range of options for their futures, and take steps to intentionally prepare for them.

To this end, ParentsNext must often focus on helping parents address the diverse, and often many, challenges in their life, which prevent them from thinking about themselves and/or recognising their attributes and that they can contribute to society in many different ways. These challenges can prevent our clients from being able to focus on their futures as instead they are trying to live with the day-to-day struggles of, for example, a mental health issue, alcohol and/or drug use or partner violence, and/or parenting itself (for which they may not be inclined to seek help voluntarily). In addition, a lack of confidence and self-esteem is common to all ParentsNext clients regardless of their backgrounds or situations – be they young mothers who have low educational attainment and have never considered a career, older parents who have been burdened with short-term financial difficulties which they cannot manage alone, or parents who lack parenting skills in view of their own childhoods and parents and/or who have children with high needs that have yet to be diagnosed.

Hence, **yourtown** would like to see the existing objectives more comprehensively reflect ParentsNext's aims of supporting parenting and parents' holistic needs – such as mental health and wellbeing for example – acknowledging that supporting better parenting and stability for parents will result in improved outcomes for their children to thereby help end cycles of disadvantage. Through supporting the holistic needs of parents in this way, ParentsNext helps to create the conditions for them to be ready to find employment.

Recommendation 1: Cease to refer to long-term welfare dependency or long-term welfare dependents.

Recommendation 2: Further develop the stated objectives of ParentsNext to better reflect its purpose in supporting the holistic needs of parents with the aim of creating the conditions to not only consider their future education and employment, but also more effectively support their children.

(b) The design and implementation of ParentsNext, including, without limitation:

The implementation of the rollout

Some teething troubles were experienced in the roll-out of ParentsNext and we will focus on these aspects here so that lessons can be learnt for the future. The following problems we were aware of stemmed from the rollout being rushed and included:

- Centrelink did not fully explain to clients when referring them to ParentsNext what to expect from the program and their rights and responsibilities, including their reporting requirements. We had many clients who had simply received a call from Centrelink and were not advised that they had to report fortnightly and so some clients had their payments stopped. Following implementation, some clients continue to arrive at their initial appointments with us lacking information about the program, which is problematic as it means that clients' first impression of ParentsNext is not positive, making them suspicious of the program and its intentions.
- At the commencement of roll-out, there was an influx of client referrals to ParentsNext and a deadline for them to be registered. We heard that this meant some providers in Elizabeth had back-to-back, initial client appointments, which they had to cut short so that important elements, such as compliance, had to be discussed at another scheduled appointment.
- Centrelink did not seem to use all of the information it had available in relation to some clients that they initially referred to ParentsNext. For example, we had some clients referred to us who were working, which unnecessarily wasted their time as well as the resources of the program.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that all Centrelink staff are appropriately trained in how best to work and respectfully engage with clients to prepare them for their participation in ParentNext, including providing them with sufficient information about the program, its benefits and their mutual obligations.

The design of the roll-out program

Given the range of different needs ParentsNext clients have, the program has to be able to support, deliver or coordinate access to a range of different services and activities. The services most often accessed by our clients include parenting programs, education programs including literacy and numeracy and English language, driving licence programs, and career guidance and pre-employment programs. The effectiveness of these programs will depend on how they are delivered, where they are delivered, and whether they are free - as we deliver a targeted program, we do not have access to an employment fund.

In Port Pirie, **yourtown** is able to provide many of these services, which is beneficial as client outcomes are often improved when working with someone they have already formed a trusting relationship and they are also freely accessed by the client (as they are existing services we deliver there). In addition, it allows our staff to build on what they know about the client as well as their local knowledge of the local labour market to help manage the expectations of clients about their

future work prospects - for example, there is no point encouraging a client to undertake a specific TAFE course if there are no work opportunities in that field locally and they have no desire to move. In this case, our staff might suggest that the client undertakes some research of the local labour market themselves so that they are then able to reach their own decision about its viability in a strengths-based way.

Whilst we can provide some programs, their scope is limited and we therefore identify and work with a range of other local services to help meet a client's needs. These include (further) education and training providers, organisations requiring volunteers and a host of community groups as well as specialist mental health and domestic violence services for example. The coordination and referral role of ParentsNext is important as many of our clients are unaware of the local services they can access and we play an important role in connecting services and clients therefore.

Notwithstanding these vital local resources, the design of targeted ParentsNext means that there are still many barriers preventing clients from engaging in activities identified in client participation programs. These include:

- **Relative remoteness of some areas we service.** While we ensure that we deliver ParentsNext in a range of locations to make accessing our services easier for clients, childcare is an issue for our clients in more remote areas (e.g. the York Peninsula), particularly if they are single parents or have no support networks, as there are no childcare services available locally. For these clients, accessing the nearest childcare services would mean having to travel for 40 minutes. The same is true for a range of activities that they might like to take part in, especially if they cannot drive or have no access to a car.
- **Cost of the activity.** As targeted ParentsNext does not have access to an employment fund to cover or subsidise the cost of an activity (e.g. TAFE), many of our clients simply cannot afford to undertake it.
- **Transport.** Although **yourtown** is able to provide access to driving lessons at no cost to the client in Port Pirie (our program Driving Future), there are no similar services elsewhere in the region. As a result, obtaining a driving licence is often cost prohibitive (with costs of driving lessons at around \$90 an hour) to our clients who do have driving licences (most commonly under 25 years old), whilst parenting responsibilities make achieving the number of hours needed for their logbook extremely challenging. As we have found with our clients in jobactive, the lack of a driving licence remains a top barrier to young people obtaining work in Australia.

We would strongly recommend that government provides an employment fund, as is available to the intensive program, to the targeted ParentsNext program. This fund would help overcome a significant number of barriers preventing our clients from fully engaging with the program. An employment fund could be used to help find solutions to childcare, to help parents access relevant training and education courses and to help them gain confidence and independence through obtaining their drivers' licence and thereby further open up their options.

By aligning the targeted program with the intensive program in this way, it would also help address some issues that are beginning to emerge for parents who move areas from an intensive to a targeted area, for example, or who have friends in intensive ParentsNext areas. For these parents,

it does not make sense and indeed feels unfair that they are not able to access the same resources as their peers living in intensive program areas.

Recommendation 4: Provide an employment fund for clients of targeted ParentsNext, like the employment fund in the intensive ParentsNext program, which can be used to subsidise or pay for client activities.

(i) The appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participation

At the heart of this question is whether it is appropriate to make a parent shift their focus from their child to engage in a program in exchange for state support. It raises questions over the way our society views parenting, with some claiming that in being compulsory the program devalues parenting.³ In our experience in delivering the program, we have seen that most parents derive considerable benefits from the program and indeed go on to become more effective parents because of it. Many of our clients readily embrace the program from day one, and for others although it can take more time, they end up appreciating that it can help them, be that in terms of social, mental health and wellbeing, parenting, educational or employment outcomes. Therefore, through appropriately applying the program flexibly, using strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches and supporting our clients to decide their own goals (for more on this see our response to question ix), we see enormous value in ParentsNext. Rather than devaluing their role, we see that it can empower parents and help them to recognise their attributes, overcome their anxieties and lack of confidence, and believe in themselves to see that they too can have education and employment goals.

That said, and in the words of one of our ParentsNext staff, joining the program “does turn [parents] lives upside down” for it is a commitment demanding a complete change in mind shift and journey from their “housebound parenting bubble” to actively confronting immediate issues and engaging with the future. This is a program that would be a considerable challenge for many people without children, without the additional issue of being parents to a young child, and often more than one. For this reason, we advocate some changes to the eligibility criteria applied for clients who are part of the intensive program to mirror those of the targeted program.

For targeted areas, youngest children must be 1 years old not 6 months as is the case for the intensive area. Parenting babies below the age of 1 years old is particularly demanding and can be highly stressful, and in addition to the daily worries that come with caring for a baby, they will be sleep-deprived. **yourtown** does not consider this to be an optimum or even realistic time, therefore, to seek to engage parents into the program. We believe that it would be beneficial to both parents and children that they are free to focus on their new child until they turn 1 year old without feeling like they have to attend ParentsNext appointments and activities, or to remember to report every two weeks to Centrelink.

³ E.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/06/single-parents-forced-to-attend-story-time-or-lose-centrelink-payments>

Instead, participation in the program for these parents could be voluntary as is the case for other parents in intensive areas who do not meet the program's eligibility requirements. We would also recommend allowing parents to volunteer to participate in ParentsNext in targeted areas, as ineligible parents can in intensive areas, again to address the equity issue but also as we found in the pilot that some parents who had been employed in the last six months, for example, would have appreciated being able to access the program's support immediately following the loss of their job and not following a six months' wait.

In addition, we would advocate some changes to both programs that make the requirements for those parents with children between 1-3 years old less onerous and/or with a different emphasis and different activities. For example, we know that the first 1000 days of a child's development is critical and we would like to see ParentsNext's focus during this time being on working with parents to make sure they are best positioned to support their child's development and create a stable home environment. Supporting parents to provide stability and become more effective parents during their child's early development should make intergenerational disadvantage a less likely outcome as their children will be better equipped to navigate life's challenges. For this reason, **yourtown** currently applies considerable discretion and flexibility to parents of younger children in the program. However, other ParentsNext providers, for a host of reasons, may not, which risks the program becoming another source of stress to the parent and family. Furthermore, many parents see their child's attendance at kindy as a natural time to consider part-time work and we feel that this is a better time to seek to engage parents more fully and with more focus on pre-employment activities subsequently.

Recommendation 5: Amend the ParentsNext programs in the following ways:

4. Align the eligibility requirements for both ParentsNext programs so that attendance is compulsory for parents who have children aged 1 year and up.
5. Enable parents who are ineligible to participate in the programs to volunteer in both targeted and intensive schemes.
6. Formally switch the programs' focus from pre-employment activities for parents with children aged between 0-3 years old to a focus on meeting their holistic needs, and improving their parenting skills and self-esteem, and make pre-employment activities a focus for parents with children aged 3 and over.

(ii) The protocol for providers' conduct of Capability Interviews with participants

During the ParentsNext pilot, there was no Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF), therefore, we did not conduct any Capability Interviews with participants. At ParentsNext Mid-North South Australia, to date, we have not yet had to conduct a Capability Interview with any participants but intend to use our client-focused approach and the flexibility within the system to help ensure that the TCF works as intended – as a tool to support client motivation to participate and not as a tool to exclude or punish those who may be more challenging to engage.

(iii) The design of participation plans, including the range of economic and social participation requirements

Our ParentsNext staff find that participation plans are equipped with sufficient flexibility to enable staff and clients to capture and work towards all of the goals that clients want to work towards.

(v) The interaction between ParentsNext, business, education and training providers, and health, community and social services

It is worth noting here that much of the effectiveness of ParentsNext depends on the services available locally, as well as the way in which those services interact with each other and clients. **yourtown** would like to see more investment into local services in Mid-North South Australia, including in specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, driving lessons, and childcare services.

(vi) The effectiveness of the communication between:

- (A) participants,**
- (B) the Department of Jobs and Small Business,**
- (C) Centrelink, and**
- (D) ParentsNext providers,**

We believe that some improvements can be made in relation to the communications between Centrelink and participants and Centrelink and ParentsNext providers. It seems that Centrelink can sometimes be responsible for causing unnecessary anxiety amongst participants with respect to the way it communicates how the reporting requirements work. Some clients have informed us that they have been told by Centrelink that if they fail to make the first scheduled appointment with us then their payments will be stopped. However, there is much greater flexibility in the system to ensure that an appointment can fit around a parent's schedule. Clients have also reported to us that Centrelink can be generally less respectful in dealings with them and less supportive in terms of understanding issues relating to their reporting requirements.

In addition, the quality of the JSCLs that Centrelink undertakes varies significantly. For example, one of the JSCLs connected to one of our female clients said she was working when she was not. In addition, it would be helpful if Centrelink provided as much detail as it has available to us on referral so that as far as possible, we do not have to make clients tell us the same information during our assessment that they have already told Centrelink during the JSCL. We recommend that training is rolled out to Centrelink staff to address these issues.

Finally, during the pilot, ParentsNext providers, and sometimes representatives from Centrelink and the Department of Jobs and Small Business, would hold regular meetings. Our staff who ran the pilot in Elizabeth found these to be useful in terms of: sharing local information with each other; providing an opportunity for providers to pool resources to support a certain issue for clients locally (e.g. the group was successful in its lobbying for the establishment of a TAFE program locally); and in ironing out communication issues or better ways of working with organisations such as Centrelink.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that Centrelink staff are appropriately trained to undertake JCSIs.

Recommendation 7: Consider reinstating regular, local ParentsNext provider and other stakeholder meetings.

(vii) The measures, if any, in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims and/or survivors of family violence

Through our experiences of delivering ParentsNext support to vulnerable clients, including women experiencing partner violence, we found that we could provide a useful source of support by working with them flexibly. The onus for us was on ensuring that they trusted us and that they could contact us whenever they needed to, regardless of whether they were currently registered with us or whether they had been exempted, particularly as many of the women we worked with were highly vulnerable, isolated and lacked support networks.

We believe that by delivering the program flexibly to all our clients in this way and appropriately using the discretion that we have over the program's application, we are able to ensure that we can effectively manage any potential risk of harm to clients.

Recommendation 8: Provide guidance to ParentsNext providers on how to engage and support vulnerable parents regardless of their current status in the program.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that all ParentsNext providers apply the program flexibly and with a client-centred focus to ensure that client safety and wellbeing is central to the focus of staff and delivery of the program.

(viii) The appropriateness of the broader program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents outside target communities

We consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and communities and peoples to be best placed to respond to this question. The only insights that we can offer in this area are:

- Currently, we have 41 First Australians who are ParentsNext clients, or some 12% of total clients, yet in the areas where we operate, there is a distinct lack of specific Indigenous support services to whom we can refer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.
- We noted some differences in issues that seemed to be more prevalent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in our pilot; at times they could be more challenging to consistently engage which could be related to another difference in that they often had more numerous and more complex challenges to overcome, including domestic and family violence in particular.

(ix) The effectiveness of the program in supporting the long-term wellbeing of parents and children, and the longer term skills and earning capacity of parents

Key to being able to work towards a stable platform from which parents can consider, choose and start to work towards their futures, is ParentsNext commitment to **long-term** support which solely focuses on the needs of clients. Indeed, our staff see ParentsNext as a journey that they undergo with clients. When clients first arrive they can often be suspicious of the program and not understand that it is a program designed to help and support them achieve their goals. For those who have had a negative experience of jobactive (more often fathers), they can even at first be aggressive towards staff. They see ParentsNext as another form of jobactive, and as they have viewed their past interactions with jobactive as a waste of time as, to their minds, they were obliged to apply for 20 jobs each month which were never attainable, they are reluctant to cooperate.

However, given time, our ParentsNext staff are able to work with these clients and develop trusting relationships so that they realise that they can identify and set the goals to which they will receive the help they need. It is this time which allows parents to see that their employment is an attainable goal.

“The objectives [of ParentsNext] are achievable as it’s really based on what [clients] want, what they want to achieve, where they want to be – the beauty of ParentsNext is that it helps them to think about the future”.

ParentsNext staff member

ParentsNext case study

Dean is a 41 year old father of three children. His son is aged 11 and has special needs, and he has twin 4 year olds. He had completed year 9 at high school but had no references for work or qualifications in any area. On starting the program, he had no idea about the type of career he wanted, having previously ruled a career out of the question for himself given his son’s needs.

On commencing ParentsNext, Dean severely lacked confidence and found it difficult to interact with new people and to be in public places. Hence, he was resistant to engage with us at the beginning, which was compounded by the lack of information he received from Centrelink about the benefits of ParentsNext. Through explaining the benefits of the program to him and building rapport with Dean, we gradually gained his confidence and he agreed to attend personal development workshops to improve his social confidence and phobia.

As a result of these workshops, he gained enough confidence to enrol on a foundation course. With additional emotional support from our staff to encourage his continuation of the course as well as support to help him access services for his son, he continued with the course. During the course, we noticed that his time management improved significantly and that he started enjoying attending appointments with us. He even started to research career pathway options. Following his participation and success in some workshops and events that we ran on food

preparation, which he said had really helped build his self-esteem and social skills, Dean decided to enrol in a kitchen operations course at TAFE.

After completing the course, Dean found a full-time role as a cook, a position which he has now maintained for the past 12 months. Dean's son is now regularly accessing specialist services, which has not only been good for his development but allowed Dean to attend work without worrying about his son. Dean still visits us and keeps us up-to-date with his progress.

When delivered well and appropriately, ParentsNext can provide support that empowers parents, being tailored to the needs of a parent wherever they are on their journey – whether they be a parent suffering from severe family issues such as domestic violence, with ParentsNext being a continued source of social support as well as support to referral services in their journey towards safety, or whether they be a parent who readily wants to further themselves educationally or to obtain pre-employment skills and experience needed to secure a job.

“Their world opened up, they were prouder and the roll on effect from being a better parent made them feel they could have something to offer to an employer”.

ParentsNext staff member

ParentsNext case study

Mary is a young Aboriginal single mother with a 3 year old daughter. She had completed year 9 and part of year 10 at high school but had little work experience or skills, and had never properly considered entering the workforce.

Mary lived with her extended family, which was an unstable and volatile environment, with family violence present. Unsure about what she wanted to do, Mary attended personal development and career planning workshops to identify a career pathway and improve motivation and confidence. Following research and consideration, she consequently enrolled at university to complete a health studies degree, and hopes to become a radiology specialist.

As well as gaining her learners permit and working towards her provisional licence, Mary has also worked with us to access housing support and personal counselling services to assist her to live independently of her family. In addition, Mary has attended parenting programs and has enrolled her daughter into early learning to help improve her daughter's skills in readiness for school.

However, how effectively ParentsNext can deliver on long-term objectives depends on the following:

- The accessibility of services locally to meet clients' holistic needs.
- The cost of activities and services that clients will want to access.
- The availability of a fund from which parents' activities can be financed or subsidised.

- The flexibility of the approach that the provider takes in applying exemptions, the TCF and in accommodating the realities of a client's situation within the program.
- The provision of an intensive, one-to-one and consistent approach to case management to develop trusting relationships
- The provision of a strengths-based approach to identifying goals and activities.
- Being child friendly and a welcoming place for parents and their families to come.

Recommendation 10: Review the place-based funding and resource requirements of ParentsNext to ensure clients can overcome activity cost and access issues.

(x) Best practice pre-employment programs for parents

yourtown provides a number of different services designed to support young people including programs and helplines specifically tailored to meet the needs of young parents and their children. Each program or service we have developed is based on a number of evidence-based principles, which effectively meet the needs and preferences of vulnerable young parents.

Below, we set out four key principles that we feel are critical to supporting young parents. Whilst these are not specifically pre-employment programs, the principles have relevance to engaging with young parents more widely.

Principle 1: Ensure services are easily accessible by young parents

As young parents may not be willing or able to access mainstream services, it is important to understand the barriers they face and design services to help them overcome them. Appropriate responses or considerations for enhancing the accessibility of current service provision include:

- Developing purpose-built facilities and a welcoming environment for the whole family including young parents – both mum and dad – and their children. Incorporating child-friendly spaces is important so that parents not only can bring their children, overcoming childcare issues, but also so that their children can receive the support they require at the same time.
- Providing options for anonymous and confidential help-seeking so parents can effectively overcome the fear of being judged. This can be through delivering services online or by telephone.
- Delivering outreach services so young parents can receive support in their own homes, and without feeling concerned for encountering people they may know.
- Building an application or portal service for young parents and pregnant women which holds details of the full range of services that they can access in their local area.
- Providing specific services for young parents (e.g. Melbourne Hospital and Redcliffe Hospital have delivered antenatal groups specifically for young parents).
- Delivering integrated services, so that young people do not miss out on important support steps in their parenthood journey, and are not put off by disjointed and complicated services and structures that are difficult to navigate and require them to

repeat their stories several times, which may be difficult for them given their complex backgrounds.

Models of support: Kids Helpline (KHL)

Kids Helpline is a free, professional and confidential counselling services designed to support the needs of children across Australia. Since its establishment in 1991, it has evolved to adapt to changing technologies and now offers telephone, email and web counselling services, as well as substantial online support resources, tip sheets and a referral database.

KHL is a 24/7 counselling and support service for children and young people aged 5-25 years. The different channels through which children and young people can contact KHL ensures that our clients can choose a method of contact that best suits their needs or is available to them. For young people in rural and remote areas, we know that KHL increases access to support; providing vital assistance outside of local face-to-face or mainstream service delivery hours.

Principle 2: Provide for the holistic needs of young parents

Given the complexity of challenges faced by young parents, services need to consider their holistic needs – and provide wrap-around services that are equipped to manage multiple issues. Holistic service delivery includes:

- Providing early intervention support to optimise the impact of support in terms of equipping parents with the skills and resources in a timely manner and of providing support to their children at key foundational and developmental stages.
- Delivering a wide range of services for young parents to access in a coordinated way including support to develop personal skills and capabilities not just in areas of parenting and child development, and specific child needs (e.g. in learning difficulties) but also in life skills such as budgeting, maintaining home, cooking, shopping and developing healthy and safe relationships and social and peer networks. They also require support to help them develop employment skills, search for work or continue education, psycho-education and emotional wellbeing support, and transport and guidance in relation to accessing services and attending appointments so they can fully understand the processes, information and terminology involved in their care, support and treatment.
- Training staff to deal with the full range of complex and inter-related issues that young parents have, and to be able to uncover information about their background and understand their current situation to work out what services they require. Staff cannot assume any knowledge of the young person and instead provide basic information in a non-judgemental and non-patronising manner. We have found that currently some support staff may not understand the complexity of the challenges and barriers that young parents may face. For example, one of **yourtown's** program participants was banned from accessing another organisation's services as they 'made a scene' as a result of their mental health and parenting issues.
- Facilitating collaborative work and an integrated service support network amongst local service providers so that young parents do not fall through service gaps in critical times of need.

Models of support: yourtown's young parents programs

yourtown's young parent programs – 'Glugor' just north of Brisbane and 'Penrose Port Pirie' north of Adelaide – offer holistic support and help to develop a range of skills with families.

Activities that we undertake in these programs include:

- weekly workshops, courses, and activities for parents and children on a wide range of issues including:
 - healthy child-parent relationships, child safety and protection, and child social and emotional development
 - respectful partner relationships and parent self-care
- social, emotional and cognitive skill development activities for children delivered by dedicated skilled workers in early childhood– including our highly specialised expressive therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence and applying the Early Years Learning Framework
- workshops based on theories of attachment and trauma- informed practice
- practical life skills development support e.g. on budgeting, nutrition, hygiene, parenting, employment and training preparation
- appropriate referrals to address the broad range of needs of young parents and children, including child, family, maternal and at time child protection agencies
- opportunities for children to develop socially, emotionally and physically at an appropriate and individual rate
- opportunities for young parents and children to interact in small groups and be exposed to and share their own approaches to responding to young children
- transport to and from our centres given many of our young parents do not have driving licences and/or cars

We also promote community involvement and links to local informal networks e.g. playgroup, school communities, neighbourhood connections so that our young families have wider support networks and do not come to overly rely on one support partner.

In establishing our Penrose program, older first time parents also asked to be included as there is no specific support in the community for their needs.

Principle 3: Identify a dedicated point of continued, coordinated and trusted support for young parents

We have found that building a trusted relationship with young parents seeking support is critical to effective outcomes. In **yourtown**, we do this in a number of ways, including through:

- Allocating a case manager to the young pregnant woman or parent to provide a consistent contact point, providing wrap-around and coordinated care throughout their interaction with us. The case manager assesses and monitors and reviews the young parent's needs throughout and becomes a trusted source of support for the young person. The case manager also acts as a one-stop shop for the young person, and

therefore, it is also important that they have access to information on, and work well with, the full range of referral services as they can help young parents build rapport and learn to trust and access other support services in the local community.

- Providing long-term support, rather than short interventions, to help build trust and to effectively address the complexity of the issues young parents can face. This includes, providing continued support to the young person – through phone or home visits – as they transition from the service or program to other services or as support is withdrawn/ends.

Models of support: San Miguel Family Centre

San Miguel offers a holistic and integrated system of practical and emotional support and education for parents aged 25 years or younger, and their children, who are experiencing homelessness. Support services delivered include onsite accommodation, access to legal, employment, training, education and medical support, training in life skills such as budgeting, hygiene, health and parenting, access to housing and tenancy information, transport to attend referral appointments, social integration activities and support, expressive therapies for children and their parents, individual activities for children linked to developmental assessment and support for children's education (e.g. supported playgroups, enrolment and homework club, after school activities, school readiness program for under 4 years old).

To ensure that young families feel able to fully engage with the full range of activities we offer, we build trust through ensuring that every individual's needs are assessed, monitored and reviewed by a dedicated case manager who supports the family's transition from supported housing to independent living. We also deliver a significant number of these activities onsite in an environment within which young families feel safe and comfortable. Case managers will also accompany young parents to external appointments to further ensure that they feel able to access the important services that they need, and so that they have good experiences with these external services so they can build a wider support network and feel able to interact with the wider community when they leave San Miguel.

Principle 4: Identify and work with young parents' individual strengths

Services and programs designed for young pregnant women and parents should adopt a strengths-based approach. This approach is underpinned by the firm belief that every individual and every family has potential, and it is their experiences and capabilities – not their limitations – that will determine their future and define their journey as individuals and as a family. From our experience, as many young parents are affected by low self-esteem and confidence in particular, supporting them in a way which enables them to identify their strengths and empowers them is critical to them becoming a confident and capable individual and parent. To this end, services should focus on:

- Providing personalised and flexible support that is focused on strengths, skills and self-determination rather than pathology, and recognises every individual's and family's inherent capacity to grow, learn and change.

- Helping young parents to identify their own resources and strengths, and setting high aspirations and expectations for themselves.
- Recognising young parents bring their own expertise and capacities that they can share with their peers (e.g. increased energy and interest in play).

Models of support: Parentline

In 1995, prior to the creation of Parentline, close to 10% of calls in Queensland to Kids Helpline were from parents and carers asking for help in relation to being a parent. As a result of this demand, **yourtown** established Parentline to provide evidence-based, counselling support to help parents and carers to enrich their parenting strategies and skills by:

- obtaining a better understanding of the way their family works;
- believing in themselves and their own skills and strengths;
- developing strategies for changing how things are done in their family to suit their family's needs.

Today, we also provide **yourtown** clients who are parents access to a dedicated counselling line as an additional and alternative support mechanism when, for example, regular services which operate during the week in office hours are closed.

(c) The appropriateness of the application of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) to ParentsNext, and the impact of the TCF on participants

yourtown recognises that there is some value in compliance in relation to support services, like ParentsNext, given those who may most benefit from it are often less inclined to access such services voluntarily. As yet, we have had no clients subjected to the TCF and we have found that merely mentioning that a lack of engagement could lead to payment suspensions is sufficient to encourage clients to become active. We feel that the appropriateness of the TCF to ParentsNext clients depends on how flexibly it is applied and the efforts providers go to work with their clients to engage them and to make sure that the program is reflecting and accommodating their needs and wishes. The use of the TCF in ParentsNext must be compassionate and used to encourage engagement, not penalise disengagement and to this end, much work must be undertaken by the provider to ensure that clients understand their responsibilities and all possible outcomes in not meeting them.

We believe that in relation to clients reporting requirements that the following issues need to be reviewed by government:

- All clients – whether they are exempt from the program or not – have to report to Centrelink every two weeks. However, we believe that it is inappropriate that those who have been exempt from ParentsNext should have to report to Centrelink as there will be a significant reason – be that a personal crisis, health issue or family violence for example – which they need to focus on. One woman who was pregnant that we worked with was due to report on her due date. It is simply unhelpful and unnecessary to ask this group of parents to report.

- ParentsNext providers now cannot see when clients are due to report until they have registered with them, which is not helpful if the first appointment that Centrelink sets up needs to be rescheduled, and we unknowingly reschedule it after their next payment, risking a system warning or payment suspension.
- The ages of parents enrolled in our program range from 18-59. Some of the older parents find it difficult to access myGov and report online.
- ParentsNext clients find it confusing that the myGov system they access is set up for jobactive users and so it refers to them, for example, as jobseekers and to their job search.

Recommendation II: Support providers to take a compassionate approach to TCF, encouraging them to appropriately apply their discretion and be flexible in the use of TCF, to thereby ensure it is used as a tool to motivate client engagement, not as a tool to penalise the most vulnerable, resulting in their further isolation and risking greater harm.

(d) The oversight of ParentsNext, including:

(ii) The fairness and efficiency of any complaint handling processes, including protocols around changing providers; and

yourtown advises ParentsNext clients about **yourtown** and ParentsNext complaints processes at the start of the program. However, we have yet to have any experience dealing with these processes in relation to ParentsNext.