



Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services – ParentsNext

A submission to: The Parliament of
Australia, House Select Committee on
Workforce Australia Employment Services

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Authorised by Tracy Adams,
Chief Executive Officer, **yourtown**

email: advocacy@yourtown.com.au **tel:** 0435 081 939

yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

Our services

- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments.
- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School and Kids Helpline @ High School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary and secondary schools
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills, and
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs.

ParentsNext

We provide specialised support for parents with children under six years of age, to plan and prepare for their future employment in regional South Australia, from Port Pirie. Our primary goal for ParentsNext is to empower parents to embrace life changes, improve their skills and self-confidence, and achieve their education and employment goals. In 2021, 409 young parents participated in our ParentsNext program.

Employment Services

For over 18 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work and ParentsNext, provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. Over the last six years we have secured 36,449 job placements for young people, with 8,345 young people currently supported across our Employment Services programs across 14 locations around Australia including Queensland, New South Wales, and Tasmania.

Parentline

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2021, parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory attempted to contact Parentline over 12,000 times and our Parentline website attracted almost 100,000 visitors.

Family and Domestic Violence Refuge

Our Family and Domestic Violence Refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to re-build self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their



lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs. In 2021, we supported 78 mothers and their young children.

Early Childhood Development Programs

We support vulnerable pre-school aged children to make a successful transition to school by using prevention and early intervention approaches to create health families and strong, child-friendly communities. This includes working with parents to better understand their child's barriers to reaching social development milestones, how to help them thrive at school, collaborative case management and support, and in-home help. In 2021, we supported 46 children / 44 families.

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives House Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services in relation to the ParentsNext program. We acknowledge the Committee's extension of their inquiry to include pre-employment and complementary programs within the scope of its inquiry. To consider the appropriateness and effectiveness of ParentsNext's policy settings and operations in providing early intervention services to disadvantaged parents.

For more than 20 years **yourtown** has been helping young people find and keep jobs throughout Australia. We deliver face-to-face employment services that provide specialised support for young job seekers who are at high risk of long-term unemployment including early school leavers, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and other young people not eligible for income support. In 2021, 17,848 participants were engaged through a range of employment services programs provided by **yourtown**.¹ These programs not only helped young people identify and access employment opportunities or commence apprenticeships and traineeships. They also supported young people to develop essential social, emotional and communication skills needed to be successful employees and maintain stable employment.

yourtown is also a ParentsNext provider. We currently operate in regional South Australia, working with 409 parents in 2021. We have observed firsthand the value and opportunities that the ParentsNext program brings to disadvantaged parents who would otherwise not have access to critical study or employment supports.

yourtown strongly supports the continuation of the program but recommends that the program be re-designed to adopt a human-centred approach. In particular, **yourtown** recommends the following issues be addressed to ensure the ParentsNext program continues to play an important and positive role in providing early intervention for disadvantaged parents, including:

- providing targeted training and support to Centrelink and provider staff to better understand and engage with ParentsNext clients, and equip them with the essential and specialist skills needed to engage participants in the ParentsNext program
- adopting a client-centred focus to ensure that client safety and wellbeing is foundational in the delivery of the program
- providing access to place-based funding and resources to support clients to overcome activity cost access issues (particularly in rural and remote locations)
- amending the key performance indicator for accredited learning, and
- ensuring flexibility in the program design to support tailored client plans, expanded exemptions and encourage voluntary participation as far as possible.

re-design from a human-centred design approach

The ParentsNext model would improve as a program if:

- (1) it is re-calibrated to reflect a human-centred design approach, re-designed as a specialised support service delivering pre-employment support to facilitate the attainment of positive long term and stable employment for parents, and
- (2) its goals are shifted from being a punitive compliance regime, to a flexible pre-employment support model for parents with complex needs

Recommendation 1:

That ParentsNext be retained but re-designed from a human-centred design approach as a specialist support service delivering pre-employment support for disadvantaged parents.

¹ **yourtown**. (2021). **yourtown's** Annual Report 2021 (<https://publications.yourtown.com.au/yt-2021-annual-report-publitas/page/1>).

Recommendation 2:

That the ParentsNext program be re-designed to operate through the prism of support and engagement, not a compliance and punishment regime.

Train staff to deliver client-centred support

As part of the human-centred design approach, Centrelink and provider staff need to be equipped with an understanding of the complexities and challenges that participants face, and the skills to positively engage participants in the program.

From the observations of both **yourtown**, and other ParentsNext providers, the level of personal engagement by parents in ParentsNext is highly dependent upon the skills of the staff they encounter when they first enter the program, and the information they receive prior to attending the program and when they first connect.

It is well known within the industry that the quality of Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) assessments completed by Centrelink staff can vary considerably. Assessments should take a 'human centred design approach' focused upon making the whole experience positive for the parent, rather than punitive. Appropriate training and development of the skills of assessors to complete comprehensive JSCLs would ensure that:

- accurate and detailed client information is presented on referral
- clients do not have to repeat their story, especially where they are experiencing family and domestic violence, mental health issues or other trauma,
- compassionate flexibility to enable assessors to understand and work with the individual circumstances and context of the parent, and
- seamless transition into provider assessment processes.

While **yourtown** recognises that the compulsory nature of ParentsNext is integral in engaging the vulnerable cohorts the program is designed to reach, there are also downsides to not first trying to seriously engage participants voluntarily. Anecdotal reports from our ParentsNext staff indicate that the program serves as an important channel to identify, connect with and provide support and referrals for parents experiencing family and domestic violence. However, a strict compliance framework for such individuals does not work. A good worker will gather relevant and current client information and use discretion on how to best support the parent to increase their work readiness so they can achieve success in obtaining stable employment. However, they need flexibility to respond to the individual circumstances of the participant. To be effective, staff need to understand the client cohort and how to assist the parent in a flexible manner that accounts for extenuating circumstances that can arise in families, particularly single parent families.

Recommendation 3:

That all Centrelink and provider staff are trained in human-centred design approaches to best work with and respectfully engage clients to prepare them for participation in ParentsNext.

Recommendation 4:

That Centrelink staff are appropriately trained in human-centred design approaches to implement the Job Seeker Classification Instrument assessment so clients have a positive experience and feel comfortable in disclosing their issues.

Safety and wellbeing of the client

ParentsNext can support and empower parents when delivered appropriately and tailored to the needs of the parents wherever they are on their journey to further education and stable employment. However, the effectiveness of ParentsNext to deliver long-term objectives depends on the individual circumstances of each person who participates in the program including:

- accessibility of local services that meet the clients' holistic needs
- cost of activities and services that clients access
- access to the Participation Fund from which activities can be financed or subsidised
- flexibility of the approach that providers take when applying the targeted compliance framework and accommodating the circumstances of the client
- provision of intensive, one-on-one, and consistent case management approaches to develop rapport and trust
- delivery of a strengths-based approach to identifying goals and activities, and
- offering child friendly, safe, and welcoming places for parents and their children when they attend the service.

Recommendation 5:

Retain the inbuilt flexibility within ParentsNext, requiring a client-centred focus to ensure that client accessibility, safety, and wellbeing are central to the program.

Tailored plans to ensure the right balance of face-to-face and tele/online activities

Parents in regional areas face additional barriers to those in urban settings including lack of affordable and/or accessible transport to attend appointments and activities. The logistics of travel are often exacerbated by not having licences, access to a car, and/or reliable, safe, and affordable childcare. Tailoring appointments and activities to suit the clients' circumstances will help to improve engagement and build positive outcomes. ParentsNext providers currently have discretion to determine what types of activities clients engage in based on their circumstances, their education/employment goals, and their capabilities. Maintaining such an approach will ensure providers work with their clients to formulate the best solutions and clients plan which builds their confidence in a stepped way rather than further isolating them from accessing formal support.

Recommendation 6:

That Providers continue to be allowed to conduct appointments and activities with parents by phone or online.

Exemptions

The situations of parents and children vary across families, and there are cohorts of parents who may struggle to balance looking after children with ParentsNext requirements. These cohorts include:

- Parents who care for four children, and
- Parents who care for three children who are close in age.

ParentsNext should have the option for these cohorts of parents to decide if they have the capacity and are ready to attend and access support from the program.

There should also be flexibility within the program to exempt other extraordinary individual situations that may arise and are not anticipated through these examples.

Recommendation 7:

That parents of four or more children and parents who have three children who are close in age be exempt from compulsory participation and be allowed to decide if they want to participate in the ParentsNext.

access to flexible place-based funding to participate

Parents in regional and remote areas often travel further to attend activities such as appointments, training, and job interviews. Some parents may need to travel more than one hour which can be costly in terms of petrol for their own car or public transport fares. The Participation Fund should adequately reflect the costs and requirements, particularly for clients in rural and remote areas to fully participate in ParentsNext.

Recommendation 8:

That place-based funding and resources adequately support clients to overcome activity cost access issues, particularly in regional and remote areas.

accredited learning requirements

ParentsNext currently provides support for parents to undertake accredited learning. The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for accredited learning requires that 25 per cent of parents who have been registered with a provider must be enrolled in an accredited course. This is an inappropriate KPI given it is open to manipulation to achieve quotas; distorts outcomes; and is often impossible to achieve, particularly in regional and remote areas.

Registered Training Organisations are in short supply in regional areas and require a minimum number of enrolments for a course to be offered. There is a risk of unethical behaviour occurring where a provider enrolls a parent in a course to get the required number of enrolments, regardless of the interests and aptitudes of the parents. The KPI should be re-designed to measure course completions, rather than enrolments, ensuring any study undertaken is tailored to the individual.

Further, the accredited learning KPI is based on all parents who have registered with a provider. This includes not only current parents, but also those who have already left the service. This is an impossible situation for a service provider. It can be difficult to keep track of parents who have exited the service (e.g. due to relocation) and detracts from resources that should be utilised to support existing parents in the program. Therefore, the KPI for accredited learning that includes the parents who have exited will not accurately represent everyone supported through accredited training. Amending the KPI for accredited learning and basing it on the active caseload will provide a more accurate picture of those engaged in accredited learning.

While the proposed adjustments to the KPI may offer a short-term remedy, it is worthwhile looking towards the longer term. This involves developing a relevant KPI that takes into account people's learning needs and measures how accredited training has increased the work readiness of clients and the attainment of employment when they client near the end of their time in ParentsNext and their children are attending school.

Recommendation 9:

That the KPI for accredited learning:

- a) measure completion of courses rather than enrolments in courses, and**
- b) is based on the active caseload, not total caseload.**

Voluntary participation

Compulsory participation in pre-employment programs creates risks for children. In the last review of ParentsNext, the compulsory participation requirement for parents was changed from those whose youngest child is 12 months to parents whose youngest child is nine months. This can provide added stress to mothers caring for infants. The program should reflect the rights of the child² and their needs for care and parental attention.³ Importantly, support for participants' employment and education goals should not come at the expense of a child's wellbeing.

Changing compulsory participation requirement back to parents whose youngest child is 12 months and allowing for voluntary participation supports parents who balance caring for their children and engaging in pre-employment programs.

Further there is little evidence that compulsory participation requirements improve parents' employment outcomes or economic security.⁴ Instead punitive sanctions, because of lack of participation, can have negative consequences, including increased poverty and destitution, potential movement into survival crime and ill health and impairments.⁵

yourtown's learning from our ParentsNext program, covering Mid-North South Australia, has shown that applying appropriate flexibility, using strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches to support our clients to decide their own goals results in positive outcomes.

Recommendation 8:

That the compulsory participation requirement be changed back to parents whose youngest child is 12 months with flexibility to allow for voluntary participation to be available for parents with a child under nine months.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email at kmandla@yourtown.com.au.

² See Articles 3 and 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>).

³ Bessell, S 2021, 'Rethinking child poverty', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969.

⁴ Wright, S, Fletcher, D & Stewart, ABR 2020, 'Punitive benefit sanctions, welfare conditionality, and the social abuse of unemployed people in Britain: transforming claimants into offenders?', *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 54, pp.278–294.

⁵ Welfare Conditionality Project 2018, Welfare Conditionality Project 2013–2018: final findings report, Welfare Conditionality Project, University of York (https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/154305/1/1.FINAL_Welfare_Conditionality_Report_complete.pdf).