

Early Childhood Development Expert Reference Panel Meeting Communique, 7 March 2017

During the first meeting, the Panel members reviewed challenges that had been previously identified for ECD in the Northern Territory. They discussed 10 themes (10 Characteristics Theme schema) to address these challenges and build a stronger smarter comprehensive Early Childhood Development services system. Panel members identified 3 high priority themes: Evidence (impact and evaluation), planning design (top down/bottom up, equity and needs based) and times frames.

The Panel meeting on 7 March engaged members in discussion of 2 high priority themes.

Evidence (data, impact and evaluation)

Experts agreed there is a need to will build our knowledge base about how programs and the system are working for children and families across the Territory.

Internationally there is a call to action to increase investment in implement of Evidence Based programs and practices in Early Childhood. All members agreed NT discussion is broader than 'scaling-up the use of evidence based' interventions and program fidelity.

Measuring effectiveness, focusing on outcomes and designing interventions to work in the specific local contexts and align to the cultural values of Aboriginal families have to remain key directions.

This theme cannot easily be separated from the strategic imperative to improve needs based planning. The Aboriginal Health Forum Core Services approach to early childhood health and development planning was cited as a rigorous attempt at specifying the quality (and levels) of evidence to guide comprehensive service provision and better investment decisions. Discussion pointed to a balance between responsive service implementation (flexibility for tailoring and designing), local decision making and the need for centralised and technical leadership.

Planning design (top down/bottom up, equity and needs based)

There was consensus that the NT system needs stronger services to improve the lives of our most vulnerable and high needs children. A priority of a prevention and intervention focused system is the early identification of needs and the ability to provide timely appropriate scale of response. The panel focused on the principles that underpin system design to increase equity in outcomes in the NT context. Members agree that needs based planning, the model used in the Aboriginal health sector, is one appropriate approach. Developing innovative quality service models capable of responding to a range of needs and vulnerabilities was endorsed (proportionate universal response). They also raised challenges:

- competitive tendering not consistent with equity and needs-based planning
- workforce capacity limits potentials for system building and change initiatives
- and balancing universal provision with the delivery cost to highly geographically dispersed small centres of population

The potential benefits of regionalised planning and vision-based planning strategies were raised.

A call for action from the Expert Reference Panel - the imperative to align investments

The members raised a call for action to improve alignment of AG and NTG investment. They highlighted that alignment and pooling of funds is critical to reach the threshold to match the scale of needs (high levels child vulnerability) in the Territory.

Expert presentations to the Children's Sub-Committee

A schedule of Expert presentations to the Children's Sub-Committee is scheduled to commence on 28 March.

The panel is due to meet again in April.