



MFC response to the  
Draft Early Years Strategy  
2024 - 2034

## Executive Summary

Mallee Family Care (MFC) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the government's draft Early Years Strategy 2024 - 2034 (the Strategy).

MFC supports the government's vision for the Strategy "to help children reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn, are supported by strong communities." We also endorse the five guiding principles and eight outcomes identified in the Strategy.

MFC would like to provide some additional feedback on the Strategy in the following three areas:



### Coordination and integration

The perspective of a cross-border organisation



### A place based approach

How to embed this across all areas of early childhood policies and programs



### Housing and poverty

The need to address these two crucial determinants of early years outcomes as part of the Strategy

## About Mallee Family Care

MFC is a place based, not-for-profit community service organisation (CSO) that has been supporting the regional, rural and remote communities of northwest Victoria, far west New South Wales and across the border in South Australia since 1979. Our organisation employs almost 300 staff to deliver more than 70 federally and state funded programs reaching thousands of community members across the Mallee region. These programs span family, youth and children, disability, mental health, housing, legal, financial, research, education, philanthropy, and advocacy.

MFC embodies what it means to be truly place-based, creating and leading local solutions targeted to the specific needs of our community. We are committed to ensuring that clients get the right support, in the right environment, at the right time. We work tirelessly to achieve the best outcomes for vulnerable children, individuals, and families, who are facing disadvantage.



## Response to the draft Early Years Strategy 2024 - 2034

### Focus area 1: Coordination and integration

MFC supports the Strategy's focus on fostering collaboration and coordination across jurisdictions and portfolio areas to deliver a more efficient and seamless approach to early childhood.

The integrated, holistic whole-of-government approach outlined in the strategy aligns with our commitment to providing wrap-around and comprehensive support for children and families. We know from our experience that this reflects the multidimensional and dynamic nature of child growth and provides the best outcomes for our clients. We therefore support a system-wide response that enables collaboration, coordinated policies, and integrated supports in the early years. This approach is essential to reduce the risk of fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and missed opportunities to address gaps.

This approach also relies on improved policy integration and coherence within government in order to break down existing silos and drive greater coordination and collaboration. It is vital to include all levels of government, including state, territory, and local, as well as other stakeholders, such as philanthropic organisations and the non-government and community service sector, to ensure that the experiences of children and parents are as seamless as possible.

Currently, there are many missed opportunities within existing early childhood education, health, and social systems to identify challenges and risk factors within families. For example, there is a lack of integrated early childhood programs and services that effectively combine health, early learning, parental education/support, and related initiatives. The integration between state funded kindergarten programs and long day care, along with programs for children with special needs, are other areas that also remain inherently complicated spaces to navigate. The Victorian government and recent NDIS reform proposals have highlighted the growing demand for these services and the need to action them quickly. All of these areas would therefore benefit from a system level approach that reduces barriers and minimises confusion where possible.

Increased collaboration between the federal and state governments is crucial in order to identify these opportunities and to address longstanding and structural barriers to the provision of more comprehensive, integrated and holistic services to children and families. One example is the need for an integrated service system for people experiencing housing insecurity looking to rent in the private market that assesses risk factors, tenancy history, and support needs early to improve outcomes and stabilise tenancies. Another example is the need to work across portfolio areas of government to eliminate hindrances to professionalising foster care. This includes addressing taxation and other federal laws that limit the evolution of care models and impede recruitment and retention strategies for foster parents dedicated to the well-being of children.



It also important to consider and address the specific needs of border towns in working across jurisdictional boundaries when developing a more integrated approach to the provision of support services and programs. MFC has permanent offices in Mildura, Wentworth, Dareton (within the Wentworth LGA), Swan Hill and Kerang. We also offer outreach services to Birchip in Victoria, the Riverland in South Australia and Balranald and Broken Hill in New South Wales, meaning that we are deeply embedded in communities across borders. Our total catchment spans over 100,000km<sup>2</sup>. Funding, legislative and administrative processes which are not aligned can create additional burdens and barriers to access for cross border organisations, are more costly to deliver and can make advocating for clients on housing and other issues with shared federal and state government responsibilities much more difficult.

Specific attention should be given to meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in cross-border communities, particularly when the main service hub lies in a different state from where communities are located. This should include efforts to align relevant state government policies and programs and provide support for organisations servicing people across multiple jurisdictions.


#### **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen collaboration and coordination across jurisdictions, portfolio areas and levels of government in order to deliver a more efficient and holistic approach to the provision of services for children and families.
- Embrace and implement a whole-of-government approach to early childhood and family support.
- Ensure that policies and programs integrate health, early learning, parental education/support, and related initiatives to provide comprehensive support to children and families.
- Streamline funding, legislative, policy and administrative processes to reduce burdens and barriers for cross-border service providers and the communities they serve.

#### **Focus area 2: Place-based approaches**

In order to support the achievement of these outcomes we also would like to provide the following additional information on the importance of place-based approaches.

MFC supports the Strategy's **Priority Focus Area 3.1: Place-based approaches**. There is widespread Australian and international evidence to support the role of place-based policy responses targeting specific geographic areas to improve the inter-related and mutually reinforcing aspects of health, social and economic well-being. Place-based approaches offer the advantage of targeting multiple and interrelated forms of disadvantage within



communities and enable the delivery of integrated and holistic policies and programs that work synergistically<sup>1</sup> to improve equity and strengthen community resilience and well-being. We believe that aligning policies and services with local needs is essential for fostering responsive and contextually appropriate support within communities. This approach not only leads to effective and efficient services but also ensures that children from diverse communities have the necessary opportunities to thrive.

Take for example the transport limitations that can significantly hinder access to vital services in rural areas. At MFC, we have observed how these challenges affect families with young children in particular. The necessity for suitable child car seats can further complicate matters – a factor often overlooked in resource and funding distribution for community service programs. Addressing transport barriers (through solutions like the MFC Mildura playgroup bus) are indicative of the type of place-based transport approaches that must be a priority in funding for community initiatives going forward.

Workforce shortages in rural and remote regions are equally affecting children, with many waiting too long for essential services due to a lack of specialists like paediatricians, doctors, allied health professionals, educators, and social workers. Such delays in accessing crucial developmental support can have lasting negative effects.


Place-based solutions rely on a local workforce that is embedded in the communities they serve and has significant local knowledge. National organisations with minimal presence in local communities are not delivering a truly place-based solution. Regional organisations like MFC have staff who live and operate locally, and this element is vital to place-based service provision. Place-based incentives to attract and retain high-quality professionals in these areas are necessary, as well as funding models that encourage innovative, community-driven solutions to assist families during service wait times.

A place-based approach also supports the Strategy's broader goal of local flexibility and responsiveness. By tailoring initiatives to the unique circumstances of a particular place, these approaches actively engage the community, including residents, service providers, businesses, governments, and other stakeholders, as active participants in policy development and service delivery. We believe this will result in a more inclusive and participatory approach to policy and service development and support the development of local solutions to address local challenges.

### **Development of a place-based framework for government programs**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.chnact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PHN\\_BNA\\_Families-with-complex-health-and-social-needs\\_18-9-17.pdf](https://www.chnact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PHN_BNA_Families-with-complex-health-and-social-needs_18-9-17.pdf)



To support the embedding of a place-based approach into early childhood policies and programs, MFC proposes the development of a place-based framework to guide governments at all levels.


At present there is no comprehensive framework to guide the implementation of place-based approaches to achieving government policy aims, such as the inclusion, equity and fairness goals outlined in the Government's Wellbeing Statement. Often place-based programs are accused of not being as representative as they might claim, either by limiting the role of community or not being fully representative of it. To that end MFC is committed to advancing practical examples of place-based initiatives that can begin to consolidate an effective understanding of what the term encapsulates and can achieve.

MFC's approach to place-based initiatives is rooted in designing and delivering programs targeting a geographical location and/or particular population group in order to tackle complex social problems. Programs highlight collaborative elements within communities, using a bottom-up approach to achieve success. Place-based funding approaches recognise the differences between and within communities, including demographic characteristics of community members, their level of requirements, and the configuration, availability, and accessibility of services. This is why place-based CSOs like MFC are so effective in delivering outcomes – as we are deeply engrained in the local communities that we serve, trusted to provide appropriate services, and connected to community members and their needs. Research continues to validate these factors by suggesting that wellbeing outcomes can be maximised when people feel connected to a place – a notion that takes on a special prominence for Australia's indigenous communities.

Yet, despite these advantages, our experience is that funding for place-based initiatives is not always appropriately targeted at, or directed towards, truly place-based organisations. Large national organisations who have geographic spread (and in some instances, only a small presence in regional and rural communities) tend to dominate the national discourse around place-based initiatives and funding, which undermines the unique value that truly place-based organisations like MFC offer in solving complex societal issues.

**MFC therefore proposes the development of a comprehensive place-based framework, building on existing knowledge and expertise within place-based community services organisations, experts and relevant international experience.**

Place-based community service organisations (CSOs) have crucial expertise and insights which can contribute to the development of government policies aimed at addressing disadvantage. CSOs work directly with individuals and communities experiencing various forms of disadvantage and possess firsthand knowledge and deep understanding of the challenges, needs, and barriers faced by these communities. This experiential knowledge is



crucial in shaping policies that are responsive and tailored to the real needs of those affected.<sup>2</sup>

Through their direct service delivery, CSOs also have significant expertise in developing and implementing place-based programs and initiatives aimed at addressing complex forms of disadvantage. Through working in collaboration with other stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profits, academia, and businesses, CSOs also have the ability to build partnerships and networks which are crucial to successful place-based strategies.<sup>3</sup>

Identification of the spatial concentration of disadvantage within Australia and targeted data collection, analysis and dissemination are still needed to inform the development, implementation, and evaluation of place-based policies and programs. A place-based plan is needed to deliver on identified goals within the Strategy, and other relevant government initiatives, such as Australia's Well-being Statement<sup>4</sup>, using localised data, engaging with communities, collaborating with local stakeholders, and establishing region-specific strategies to effectively address poverty, reduce inequality, and promote well-being within diverse geographical contexts.

**Recommendation:**

- The government should work with the community sector – including truly place-based CSOs – to develop an evidence-based, nationally cohesive framework for place-based responses to address geographic inequalities and spatial concentrations of disadvantage. This framework should be used to guide governments at all levels in development and implementing effective place-based policies and programs, including those designed to improve outcomes for children and families.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.croakey.org/why-the-community-and-charitable-sectors-are-vital-partners-in-policy-making/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2020/04/five-reasons-why-co-design-is-the-future-of-social-impact/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721\\_0.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721_0.pdf)

## Focus area 3: Drivers of early childhood outcomes – housing and poverty

### Housing

MFC would also like to propose the inclusion of housing in the Strategy, which is recognised as an important factor but not directly addressed.

Ensuring the safety and security of housing is crucial for the well-being of children. Those who experience homelessness face potential disruptions in education, food insecurity, and an increased likelihood of enduring homelessness into adolescence and adulthood. Children in families dealing with housing stress also confront risks to their health and overall well-being, impacting education, food quality, and parental mental health.<sup>5</sup>

However, the rising cost of housing is pushing numerous families into precarious living situations or homelessness. Average rents have risen<sup>6</sup> over 9 percent in capital cities and 6 percent in regional areas in the past year. According to Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot<sup>7</sup>, only 0.1 percent of rentals were affordable for single-parent families on Parenting Payment. Even families with both parents working full-time at minimum wage can only afford 15.9 percent of rentals. Zero percent of rentals were affordable for people on Jobseeker or Youth Allowance.

As a result, many families are compelled into homelessness or forced to choose substandard housing—cramped, inadequately insulated, damp, rundown, or located in less desirable neighbourhoods—in order to make ends meet. Poor living conditions can have adverse effects on children<sup>8</sup>, impacting not only their physical health but also leading to emotional and behavioural issues, compromised academic performance due to poor sleep quality and noisy environments, and limited space for play and exploration. A child's perception of safety in their community and home significantly influences their emotional health.<sup>9</sup>

Given the substantial impact of housing on children's lives, and the fact that access to adequate housing is a human right, it is imperative to ensure that all Australians have access to secure, affordable, and safe housing, aiming to enhance the life opportunities of children and break cycles of disadvantage.

While the Federal Government historically invested significantly in social housing to address the need, there has been a notable withdrawal from this responsibility over the last three decades. Social housing stock has failed to keep pace with population growth, with demand

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/housing/housing-stress>


<sup>6</sup> <https://www.domain.com.au/research/rental-report/december-2023/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/2023-rental-affordability-snapshot/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.habitat.org/our-work/how-housing-affects-child-development>

<sup>9</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/research/family-matters/no-84/neighbourhood-influences-young-childrens-emotional-and-behavioural>





now surpassing supply.<sup>10</sup> Recent analysis indicates that Australia requires an additional 500,000 social and affordable homes to meet community needs.<sup>11</sup>

We strongly urge the Government to reconsider its approach to housing affordability and address the social housing shortfall. In the short and medium term, as efforts are made to rectify the social housing deficit, Commonwealth Rent Assistance should be increased to a level that alleviates rental stress and reformed to ensure it effectively benefits individuals with the lowest incomes.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Include measures to address housing affordability and security for families in the Strategy. This includes addressing the rising cost of housing and implementing measures to alleviate housing stress for vulnerable populations.

#### **Poverty**

Australia has enjoyed two decades of continuous economic growth and stands among the world's wealthiest nations. However, despite this prosperity, the recent ACOSS Poverty in Australia report<sup>12</sup> reveals that one in six (761,000) children are living in poverty. Single-parent families facing barriers to paid work are at an elevated risk of poverty, with 40% of children living in poverty coming from single parent households. At the same time education and care subsidies fail to sufficiently remove participation barriers for the most vulnerable children.

Addressing poverty has far-reaching positive impacts for everyone involved. Children and young people experiencing deprivation may disengage from school due to hunger, shame, exclusion, or marginalisation, affecting their development, education, and, ultimately, their employment prospects.<sup>13</sup>

Research demonstrates that reducing poverty leads to improved health, education, and employment outcomes for children, even when they have equal access to health and education.<sup>14</sup> We therefore urge the government to take swift and resolute action to alleviate child poverty. Australia's current trend in child poverty is moving in the wrong direction, and it is within our power to reverse this course.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://blogs.unsw.edu.au/cityfutures/blog/2021/01/social-housing-production-continues-to-languish-while-demand-is-soaring/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://everybodyshome.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/EH-Priced-Out-Report-2023.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://research.acer.edu.au/well-being/5/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper203.pdf>



## Recommendations:

To achieve this, the Federal government should:

- Commit to reducing poverty by at least 50% by 2030, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Increase the Newstart Allowance, especially for single parents.
- Establish a single-parent supplement that grows as children age and incur higher support costs.
- Index working-age and family payments to wage movements and prices.
- Enhance employment and training programs for single parents, incorporating career counselling and vocational training.
- Ensure secure affordable housing, collaborating with state and territory governments to eliminate no-cause eviction.
- Introduce free and universal access to early childhood education and care.

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