



Early Years Strategy

Logan Together response to draft
strategy

February 2024

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Overview

Logan Together welcomes the Australian Government’s commitment to a 10-year plan for the early years. We know that the early years of a child’s life are critical for shaping pathways and opportunities into adulthood. We also know that the local communities, supported by data and evidence, need to lead the work that sees our children and families thrive.

In our April 2023 submission, we proposed five policy priorities to create impact for children:

- Place-based, community-led solutions and shared decision-making
- Quality offerings and strong practice principles
- A strengthened and energised Early Years workforce
- Data to support shared decision-making
- Resource allocation and procurement to enable holistic wellbeing

It is great to see that these areas are reflected in a variety of ways throughout the draft Early Years Strategy. We look forward to seeing how these priorities are translated from intention to impact as they are implemented through Action Plans created under the Strategy.

We also note that there is significant interest in the early years across Australian and state and territory governments, alongside the service sector, communities and families. We know that a holistic systems approach to the early childhood system involves working across jurisdictions and policy domains. Having a national strategy that puts children at the centre of this work, alongside families and communities, creates an important focus and reminder of what we are all working towards – children thriving, happy and healthy now and for generations to come.

In realising the vision set-out in the draft Strategy it will be important to keep front and centre that what is needed is systems-change, and that this requires a different way of working. In reimagining the early childhood system with children, families, and communities at the centre we will need to work differently, grapple with ambiguity, be courageous and share decision-making. We all have a role to play in this important work, and this includes keeping each other accountable for translating good intentions into impact.

About Logan Together

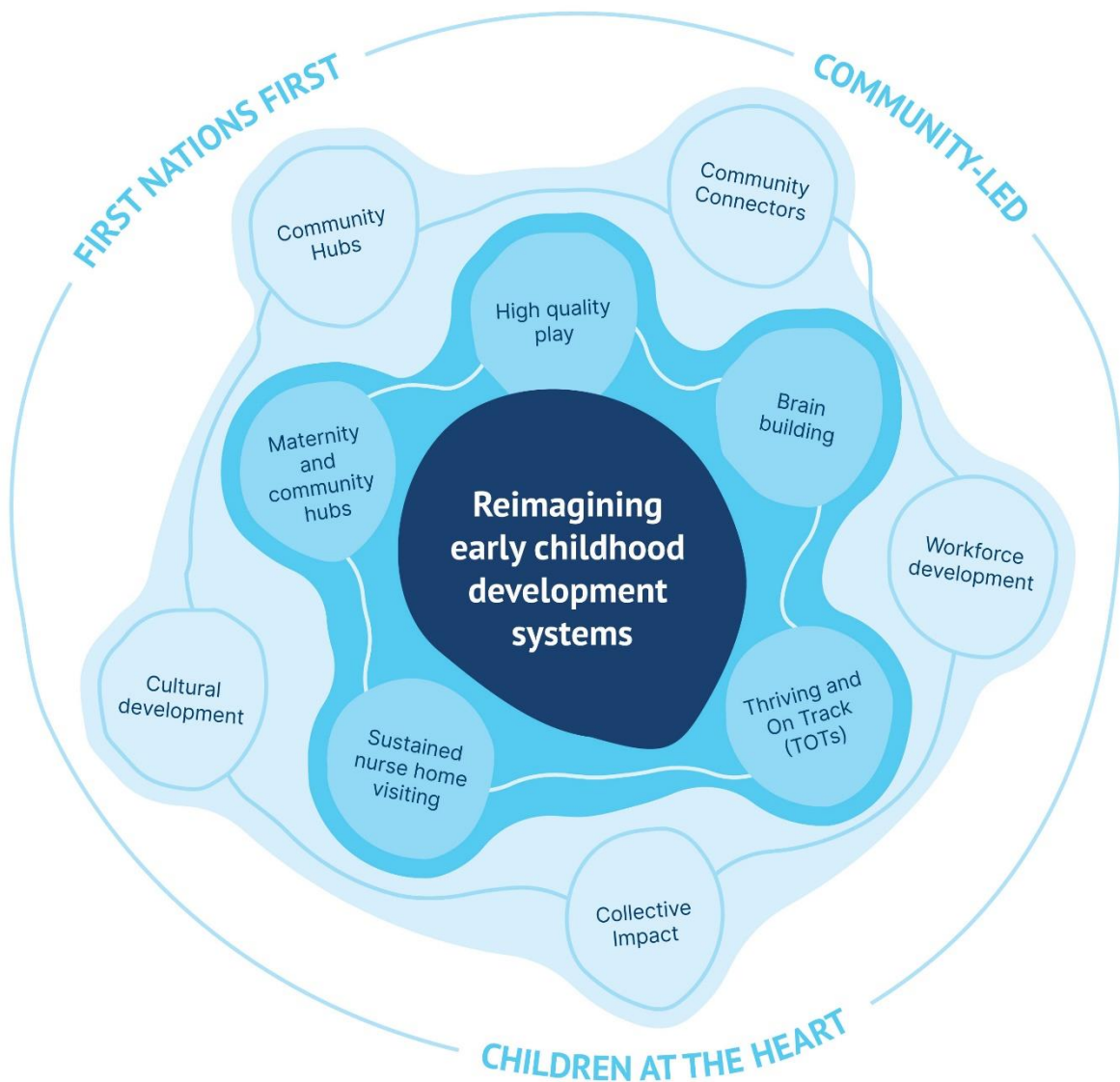
Logan Together is a community movement committed to the wellbeing of every child in Logan from 0 to 8 years of age. Our big goal is to see Logan’s children happy, healthy, and thriving now, and for generations to come.

We put First Nations First. We believe we need to do the work to strengthen cultural ways of knowing and embed First Nations principles, practice and learning in our ways of working.

We are community-led and place-based. We believe power should be shared equally with our diverse community. We enable community members to share decision-making and accountability with government, the service sector, business and other partners.

We make sure children are at the heart of all our work. We want to see Logan’s children loved, safe, valued and thriving. This means making sure our children can directly influence the decisions we make together.

Logan Together is guided by our community’s Collective Plan and Roadmap. This includes our work to reimagine the early childhood system for communities in Logan. This means creating a joined-up and coherent system for children and families, from pregnancy to 8 years of age. To realise our community’s priorities, we have worked with state and Commonwealth governments, the service sector and philanthropy to walk alongside our community to put community at the centre of this work. This will see Logan continue to embed its “Core Suite”, which includes five initiatives and five enablers. The elements show the work that we can do together to see Logan’s children happy, health and thriving in ways that put First Nations First, see Children at the Heart, and are Community-led.



Response to draft strategy

Does the Vision reflect a strong aspiration for children in the early years?

The draft Strategy includes the following vision:

“Our Vision: All children in Australia thrive in their early years. They reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities.”

The draft Strategy vision sets a strong aspiration for children and families in Australia. It is particularly great to see children at the heart of the vision, with a whole-of-child view that understands that thriving children need families and communities that are supported and connected.

This aspiration aligns with the goal of Logan Together to see all of Logan’s children happy, healthy and thriving now and for generations to come. Logan Together will interpret this Vision using the three pillars that underpin all of our work:

- First Nations First
- Children at the Heart
- Community-led

It is critical that the Vision is understood and realised in ways that are valuable and important for the children, families and communities in different circumstances and places throughout Australia. This means being responsive to the different needs of different children, families and communities, and seeing work driven by those most impacted by decisions. For Logan Together, our three pillars help ensure that this is what we do in all our work.

Does the Early Years Strategy include the right outcomes?

The draft Strategy includes eight outcomes that describe what success looks like in the early years.

Achieving the outcomes will help achieve the Vision:

- Children are nurtured and safe
- Children are socially, emotionally and physically health
- Children are learning
- Children have strong identities and connections to culture
- Children have opportunities to play and imagine
- Material basics are met
- Families are empowered, connected and supported
- Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or carers to live, grow, play and connect

The eight outcomes in the draft Strategy reflect a holistic approach to childhood wellbeing. As noted in the draft Strategy, while the outcomes are tailored to the draft Strategy, they also align with the six domains of the The Nest (a wellbeing framework developed by ARACY – the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth).

Logan Together has also used The Nest to co-create our Collective Plan and Roadmap with community. The Nest ensures that our work reflects the holistic nature of child wellbeing, and the important and central role of families and communities seeing children happy, healthy and thriving.

Having the Strategy focus on child, family and community-centred outcomes also supports a systems-based approach to the early childhood system as these outcomes cut across jurisdictions, sectors and policy domains. The outcomes clarify what we are all working towards, together.

Do you agree that the five guiding principles align with the Australian Government’s goal of supporting children and families in the early years?

The guiding principles in the draft Strategy are:

- Child and family centred
- Strengths based
- Respect for families and the community
- Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity
- Evidence informed

The five guiding principles make clear what is important to the Australian Government and how the delivery of the Strategy will be shaped. The principles reflect a commitment to a child-centred and whole-of-child approach.

While the detail accompanying each of the guiding principles highlights where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are an important part of doing this work, we believe that the guiding principles could reflect this commitment more explicitly. We understand that the draft Strategy acknowledges and seeks to amplify the work of the National and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

However, including a more explicit commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the guiding principles would be an important way to ensure that the Strategy does in fact amplify work led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. We have found that our commitment to the pillar of First Nations First has been central to galvanising and aligning work across families, communities, government partners and the service sector. This has increased social cohesion and allowed us to move into the middle space where community-led shared decision-making can happen.¹

¹ Logan Together, “Creating social cohesion through shared decision-making: Logan Together Insights Paper June 2023” (2023). Available at:

https://www.logantgether.org.au/files/ugd/7db6a6_e4fcbae9817347178d8b233b41a00619.pdf

Similarly, a specific reference to the importance of 'place' as part of the guiding principles for the Strategy would reinforce the critical role of place in seeing children and families thrive throughout Australia.

At Logan Together, the focus on place-based also ensures that we are not only considering the systems that children and their families use, but the places and spaces that they engage with in the community. Guiding principle 4 could be strengthened by adding 'environments' to the ensure supports, *environments*, and services are inclusive for all people. We acknowledge that 'place' is included in this principle but suggest prioritising environment in an overarching way. This could ensure that universal design is considered in reimagining the places and spaces that children and families engage with in their communities.

How important are each of the priority focus areas?

The draft Strategy includes the following priority focus areas:

- Value the Early Years
- Empower parents, families and caregivers
- Support and work with communities
- Strengthen accountability and coordination

The priority focus areas identified in the draft Strategy align with Logan Together's Collective Plan and Roadmap. Importantly, the priority focus areas:

- Centre, embed and elevate the voices of children and families
- Promote consistent and coherent action to raise the importance of the early years and recognise the important role of the Australian Government in building public awareness nationally
- Understand and act-on the critical role of brain development for families and the early childhood workforce
- Support and strengthen work that is happening across governments and sectors to address critical early childhood system workforce needs, and understand the fundamental role that a high quality and highly respected workforce has in realising the Vision of the draft Strategy
- Encourage efforts to realise shared decision-making and put families and communities at the centre of what is needed for their children
- Explicitly commit to a holistic and coordinated approach to systems-change, where early childhood is understood as a system as opposed to a collection of disconnected areas of responsibility divided by jurisdiction and policy domains

However, to better realise the draft Strategy's recognition of the role of families and communities, the priority focus areas should include a commitment to co-designing and collaborating with families and communities. This is an important step beyond consultation, towards shared decision-making with people and organisations directly impacted by policies, programs and decisions made about them and their communities.

Other areas of focus that could be bolstered include highlighting the importance of workforce development in the Priority focus areas. We support the clear need to understand and support ongoing efforts to build

and retain a high-quality ECEC workforce. However, we also note that the early childhood system workforce extends beyond ECEC, and that there are many other areas of need within the system (for example, in Logan this includes access to GPs and paediatricians, allied health professionals, midwives, child health nurses, community connectors and others that support families and children in the early years). The Strategy should reflect this holistic, systems-approach and understanding of the early childhood system and the workforce challenges faced by the system (not just ECECs).

There is also an opportunity to embed the importance of culture in the work done with parents, caregivers, families, and communities. For example, Priority focus area 2 notes the need for services to be culturally safe and responsive. In Logan, we see the critical importance of community hubs and community connectors that provide familiar, welcoming places and guidance through complex systems in ways that are deeply shaped by cultural context and expertise. Being culturally responsive and safe is a need that exists across the early childhood system, and not only at the point of service design and delivery.

Priority focus area 3 explicitly recognises the importance of collaboration, co-design and shared decision-making, and importantly recognises that to do this work well will include encouraging greater culture and capacity within Australian Government agencies for shared decision-making. This is an exciting commitment from the Australian Government. However, we also believe there is an opportunity to extend this way of working to other priority focus areas outlined in the draft Strategy (for example – in understanding what is needed by families and parents and caregivers to value the early years (Priority focus area 1) and empower parents and caregivers (Priority focus area 2)). This Priority focus area could be further bolstered by explicitly recognising the need for community leadership, and what it takes to walk alongside community.

We also welcome Priority focus area 4 and its explicit commitment to integration, collaboration and coordination in a way that sees the early childhood system operate as a system. It is also great to see this commitment underpinned by efforts to align, share and explore early childhood data, research and evaluation. This is a commitment and approach embedded in our way of working. For example, our work to reimagine Logan's early childhood system also cuts across policy domains and jurisdictions and points of support and intervention. This means we are currently deepening our understanding and focus of work happening to support the needs of families and children:

- with diverse needs and disability
- who are working with child safety to ensure protective factors are increased and risk factors mitigated or removed
- within the youth justice system, including understanding of the value of prevention and early intervention as a critical part of the continuum of effort to see that children, families and communities feel safe and connected