

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Response to Committee request

The Committee requested that the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc provide an alternative model to the Committee. Please find below our response which is a collaboration between the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc and the Council of Single Mothers and their Children.

We welcome the opportunity to present an alternative model to the current ParentsNext program, a program that has suspended a third of participants' income support, their only means of economic survival. Suspension lasts an average of five days with women forced to re-engage and in the manner as stated by the provider or risk further suspensions or having their payments ceased. The statistics are from July 2018 to March 2021. It remains a matter of deep concern and to this end, we endorse the expertise and sentiments of the Australian Human Rights Commission. The Commission is clear that making minimum, essential levels of social security conditional on participation in the ParentsNext program is contrary to Australia's human rights obligations. Furthermore, as the Australian Government is working towards increasing gender equity, this program is inconsistent with gender financial security or gender equity principles.

It is disappointing that the program has continued despite two prior inquiries which recommended immediate changes, legislation from Senator Dobson in 2021, and other research that occurred before the Workforce Inquiry such as ['The Choice: Violence or Poverty'](#) (2022) with the recommendation: The Australian Government should abolish the ParentsNext scheme with immediate effect and investigate replacing it with a proven effective voluntary scheme for preparing young parents for employment.

Voluntary Community Hubs and Online Assistance model

- Incorporates the engagement and the wisdom of participants. During the consultations, we did not receive feedback from *any* participants that suggested that the current program was preferable to this proposed model.
- Despite engagement and consultation with current and recent participants in developing the attached model, we do not consider this model to have been co-designed and further consultation and enhancement must occur.
- We respect the current expertise from existing specialist teenage services such as Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens and believe that their approach offers learnings and/ or expansion where the services are not availed.
 - [SEPT Program - Brave Foundation](#)
 - [Brave Foundation - Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood](#)
 - <https://karitane.com.au/talking-realities> (NSW)
 - www.smpcp.org.au/index.php/our-work/acheivements/talking-realities (Southern Melbourne)
 - <https://cdn.wchn.sa.gov.au/downloads/WCHN/metro-youth-health/Metropolitan-Youth-Health-Talking-Realities-Brochure.pdf> Terese Edwards gave evidence to the Committee regarding a South Australian service. It was this program which is free from compulsion.

- Due to the high amount of endorsement and lament from women who would not be eligible due to being current Workforce Australia participants, rather than ParentsNext, this model has merit as an alternative to the current Workforce Australia model and we suggest a trial with independent evaluations. This could be initiated as we enter the next phase of the Workforce Inquiry.

We welcome further engagement on the presented model which is consistent with human rights and gender equity principles and obligations.

In closing and to prevent further harm, especially during a cost-of-living crisis when personal resources, capacity, and emotions are already stretched, the Committee recommends that the Government cease the Targeted Compliance Framework for ParentsNext participants and abolish compulsory attendance and that this occurs before the long school holidays. Suspension of compulsion has taken place at various points throughout the pandemic and therefore such a response can be enacted with haste and ease.

Voluntary Community Hubs and Online Assistance

Future planning - a strength-based model for pre-employment services.

Abolish ParentsNext Replace with Community Hubs and Online Services. Connection & Empowerment

- Provide information sessions & private meetings with an 'Adviser'.
- Informal and safe places to gather.
- A place for attendees to meet for voluntary peer-to-peer support and connections.
- Extension of existing community services such as community centres, local schools, playgroups etc.
- Hubs share information on local services, events, and or activities.
- Guest speakers from other services, eg community legal services or the NDIS
- Access to the internet.
- Acknowledge recovery, counselling, mental health, and well-being are part of future planning.

Future Planning Community Hubs

Education Support

- The Adviser will have knowledge or seek out specialist supports that can provide advice on gaining or furthering education.
- Work with local secondary or community schools. Assist with the enrolment process and coordinate childcare.
- Career & enrolment advice for TAFE, VET etc.
- Up to date information on current and projected skills shortages and where secure future positions may be available.

Work Ready & Employment

- Enable voluntary work.
- Provide information on interview techniques, assist with CV & applications.
- Provide financial assistance for work-ready skills and items to gain study or work.
- Implement the ParentsNext incentive model. Incentives paid to attendees, not the provider.

Online

- Access to an Adviser similar to the 'mentor' at the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS program).
- Develop an interactive online map that is updated by the 'Future Planning - Community Hubs' so that women who prefer to access and navigate the information can do so in their own time. Making it accessible to Australians and residents, by ensuring digital literacy and access to devices and internet.

Advisors

- Advisors have mentoring experience with diverse backgrounds reflective of the community where the hub is situated.
- Connected within their local community and skills with working with a diverse range of entities.
- Trauma-informed and have undergone the DV alert training, can provide warm referrals to specialist FDV services as requested by attendees.
- Competent in working within small groups and individuals as the support will be personalised and individualised.
- Connected with local businesses - promote flexibility to enable full-time mothering (often solo) whilst responding to local business needs.
- Direct line of access to Services Australia to assist with individual needs.

The Service

- The Future Planning - Community Hubs are not financially incentivised and/ or penalised on rigid KPIs.
- Advisors will not have to manage referrals or exiting processes, a complex demit point dashboard, assessing family and domestic for exemptions, or other personal circumstances, as attendance is voluntary.
- The Future Planning - Community Hubs will be evaluated for service enhancement and service continuation against established and clear purposes, aims, and objectives.

Incompletion of Qualifications

Single mothers have incomplete qualifications due to family and domestic violence, periods of additional and substantive parenting needs, inflexible field placements, pandemic lockdowns, and inadequate resources. Common responses are:

- The youngest child turned 8 years and they lost access to the Parenting Payment and thus cannot afford to finish.
- Parenting demands and insufficient resources prohibit full-time field placements.
- The ongoing effect or spike in post-separation family and domestic violence.

Enhanced Policy

The Government uses the social security database to identify and connect with women who have not completed their qualifications.

- Establish a connection service to broker a return to such institutions and/ or an online alternative. Currently, this task is too difficult due to the different & ridged rules of various institutions but with Government oversight, it could be achieved.
- To work with the university, TAFE, and VET system to enable placement sharing or part-time placements.
- To institute a placement payment with the savings from this changed model.

Policy solutions to compliment the 5-year National Skills Agreement, effective 2024.

