



Submission to the inquiry into ParentsNext

The Senate Standing Committee on
Community Affairs

1 February 2019





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Organisational overview and experience delivering ParentsNext

Wesley Mission supports people across NSW through a suite of 68 programs in 144 locations. Our vision is to “Do all the good you can because every life matters” and to realise this we engage 2,155 staff and 3,197 volunteers. The diversity of our programs and geographic coverage is an outworking of our organisational goal to respond to the complex range of needs in local communities. In 2017-18 we supported 25,353 clients each month through:

- **Wesley Families:** Early intervention, family preservation, foster care, ParentsNext, Mums and Kids Matter, and Young Healthy Minds
- **Wesley Training and Jobs:** Training and employment opportunities (including Registered Training Organisation, Disability Employment Services, and Career Pathways)
- **Wesley Mental Health:** Gambling and financial counselling, inpatient and outpatient clinical care, LifeForce suicide prevention networks and training
- **Wesley Housing:** specialist homelessness supports and community housing
- **Wesley Disability Support:** supported accommodation, living skills, respite, and Australian Disability Enterprises
- **Wesley Seniors:** community and residential aged care, and social support.

Wesley Mission was selected to deliver the ParentsNext pilot and commenced the program in Bankstown and Wyong in April 2016. In just over a year and a half, Wesley Mission supported 1,317 parents to grow their self-confidence, engage with their community, enrol in education pathways, and achieve employment goals (measured using the Work Star assessment tool). Since 1 July 2018, Wesley Mission has delivered the expanded ParentsNext program at 29 sites and with a current caseload of 3,466 participants

Response to the Terms of Reference

a. The aims of ParentsNext, and the extent to which those aims are appropriate, having regard to the interests of participating parents, their children, and the community

The objectives of ParentsNext are to:

- Target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency
- Help parents identify their education and employment related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve their goals
- Connect parents to local services that can help them address their barriers to employment

We believe the aims of ParentsNext Program, when delivered according to the ParentsNext Service Guarantee:

- are highly appropriate
- predominantly meet the interests and needs of participating parents
- provide adequate scope to deliver a person/family centred service that is highly individualised
- have regard for the interests of the broader Australian community.

Parents participating in Wesley Mission’s ParentsNext program have achieved demonstrated outcomes against their individual goals, including:

- Participants in Wesley Mission’s Wyong program finished made statistically significant improvements in their job-specific skills, aspiration and motivation, job-search skills, and challenges WorkStar scores.
- Bankstown parents of Wesley Mission’s ParentsNext program consistently improved their social skills WorkStar score from < five to a nine or ten. This usually involved overcoming language, education and confidence challenges; 36% of participants had not completed Year 12, 83% of parents were culturally diverse, and 39% spoke a language other than English (Arabic 31% and Vietnamese 8%).



Clients provided positive feedback to Wesley Mission:

- Paula: “I was referred to ParentsNext by Centrelink, but to be honest I didn’t expect to get much out of the program because of my family situation. Being a single parent and having a child with special needs can make finding employment difficult”. Wesley ParentsNext and Wesley Vocational Institute provided wraparound support for Paula. During Paula’s work experience, her employer was impressed and offered Paula ongoing paid employment.
- A graduate who has five children and now works 30 hours per week said “ParentsNext gave me confidence, it made me realise my strengths instead of my weaknesses. ParentsNext was amazing, it showed me that I wasn’t just a mum, I was capable of so much more”.

When the program is delivered in line with the ParentsNext aims and utilises best practice approaches (strengths-based, culturally competent, and trauma-informed principles), parents are well supported to build their capacity and work towards their goals. Wesley Mission has identified components of the program implementation and Targeted Compliance Framework that could be improved to better support the aims.

b. The design and implementation of Parents Next, including, without limitation:

i. The appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participation

The overall eligibility requirements, when teamed with the ability for providers to grant exemptions, are appropriate for compulsory and voluntary participants in the Intensive Stream of the ParentsNext program. Wesley Mission’s employment consultants find that the majority of referred clients are highly suitable for the program and want to participate once they understand the tailored support available. Indicators of engagement demonstrate that Wesley Mission has achieved excellent engagement rates with 8,865 appointments (1/7/18 – 18/1/19) an attendance rate of 87% and only 7% with an invalid reason for not attending.

Some eligibility components have created limitations for parents:

- Sites have been classified as Intensive Stream or Targeted Stream (some are both) based on population-level data. This means that participants experiencing critically high levels of disadvantage living in a moderate socioeconomic area are not eligible to participate in the Intensive Stream. The Participation Fund, Wage Subsidies, and Relocation Assistance components are only accessible for Intensive Stream participants. Participants with equivalent levels of disadvantage, living in Targeted Stream areas are not eligible to access Participation Fund, Wage Subsidies or Relocation Assistance. This severely restricts access to activities and negatively impacts the timeline for participants achieving education or employment outcomes. An approach taking into account individual disadvantage over population-level data to determine streams would enable a more personalised response. Wesley Mission recommends, that at the very least, Targeted Stream participants have access to some level of funding through a Participation Fund, even if the level falls below \$1200 per participant.
- ii. Volunteer participants have been limited to Intensive Stream locations only. During the pilot, 6.4% of our Wyong site’s caseload were voluntary participants (double the national average of 3.2%). From experience in the pilot program and our observation in this contract, Wesley Mission believes that parents would benefit from the program in all locations and should be able to volunteer.

The protocol for providers’ conduct of Capability Interviews with participants

The protocol for the Capability Interview outlined in the ParentsNext Deed 2018-2021 provides reasonable parameters. Whether the implementation is positive and strengths-based, or negative and punitive, is the responsibility of the provider and reflects each provider’s broader service model and approach. Positive and strengths-based approaches should be rewarded and encouraged, becoming the norm for service delivery in ParentsNext. This can be done through contract renewal and expansion that is based equally on employment, social and mental health outcomes.



iii. The design of participation plans, including the range of economic and social participation requirements

The design of the participation plan provides clarity and process around setting short and longer-term goals. It also prompts activities that are meaningful to the parent and linked to their goals. This allows Wesley Mission's planning approach to be person-centred and to reflect the beliefs and behaviours of parents and children, informed by their experience, context and cultural background.

Goal setting against holistic outcomes allows parents to identify multiple 'personal projects'¹. Personal projects break overarching education and employment outcomes into tangible and attainable tasks. Completing a project means achieving a concrete change for parents². Working on projects helps parents to avoid an emphasis on deficits, and instead focus on growth and positive change³.

The participation plan design has two key shortcomings:

- Due to service gaps, it is more difficult for parents in regional areas to identify suitable compulsory activities, which are directly aligned with short- or long-term goals, particularly when parents don't have reliable access to a transport.
- The Employment Services System (ESS) is complex and time-consuming when it comes to selection, entry and linking of activities. This has a direct negative effect on Activity Linking as far too much time is wasted navigating this complexity, time which could be better spent in support of parents. Wesley Mission staff would value the opportunity to sit with Departmental representatives to work through systems issues and determine solutions.

iv. The selection of ParentsNext providers

Wesley Mission was selected as a ParentsNext provider through the (then) Australian Government's Department of Employment's competitive tendering process in December 2017. Prospective providers nominated and outlined their service model design and approach. This provided scope for providers to adopt differing service models albeit within the same program guidelines.

The tender process was run transparently and the range of providers selected demonstrated a mix between community and employment providers, including culturally diverse and Aboriginal-specific organisations.

The complete Targeted Compliance Framework was not available as part of the Request For Tender documentation at the time. It would have assisted potential providers to have had this document during the selection process.

v. The interaction between ParentsNext, business, education and training providers, and health, community and social services

Working closely with business, education and training, and health, community and social services, is critical for supporting parents to achieve their goals through ParentsNext. For example:

- Wesley Mission developed a unique training model in response to feedback that traditional full-time study felt unattainable. Wesley Mission now runs Certificate III and IV courses during school terms, one day a week, within school hours at the Young Parents' Hub. 25 parents completed a certificate in 2017, and 22 have gone on to study another qualification. 78% of parents achieved completion (the state training average is 42%). Local employers participate as guest speakers, and interviews are arranged at the end of the course. Eight parents secured employment through this approach during the first round. Wesley Mission continued this approach during 2018. At the end of the most recent course (Certificate III Community Services), 88% of parents decided to complete a Certificate IV, 22% secured permanent employment at Australian Unity and

¹ Little, B. R. (1983). Personal projects: A rationale and method for investigation. *Environment and behaviour*, 15(3), 273-309

² Goodyear, Dr M., Hayes, Dr L., Parenting Research Centre. Wesley Mission Brighter Futures Practice Framework. Melbourne, Australia, 2018

³ Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (2009). Capacity-building family-systems intervention practices. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 12(2), 119-143



Woolworths, and 66% had job interviews at Australian Unity, Ability Options, ParentsNext, and Central Coast Disability Services. The Young Parents' Hub is a shared tenancy with DALE Young Parents School, ET Australia, NSW Foodbank and a crèche. This creates a welcoming soft-entry point and encourages cross-sector partnerships, many of which operate part-time from the hub. Wesley Mission works closely with DALE Young Parents School to support parents who were early school leavers to access driving lessons, job readiness programs, parenting supports, and child development needs.

It is critical for ParentsNext providers to proactively engage key stakeholders to create education and employment opportunities in partnership with participants and in line with their goals. Undertaking this collaboration is up to the individual providers and their distinct approach. Wesley Mission has been able to utilise our extensive partnership and referral network for the benefit of participating parents.

During the rollout, Wesley Mission found there to be a low level of awareness and understanding of the ParentsNext program in business, education and training, and health, community and social services sectors. A higher level of marketing and promotions from the Department of Jobs and Small Business would see greater recognition, more cross-referrals, and improved program engagement. Wesley Mission has found that once the ParentsNext program is introduced and explained, other sectors are very quick to see the benefits especially where programs have compatible and cross-over goals and readily become involved. ParentsNext would benefit greatly from a dedicated resource in each region, with the sole responsibility to explain to industry representatives, parents' groups and community service providers the value of the program.

vi. The effectiveness of communication between:

A. Participants

Communication gaps identified when parents are first referred to ParentsNext from Centrelink include:

- Parents are first identified for the program by Centrelink either during a face-to-face appointment or through a call centre. Parents often communicated to our employment consultants that they did not feel like they had a good understanding of the program at this referral point. Particularly for people who were first identified as eligible on the phone, their understanding of the program is minimal (which can increase apprehension and engagement barriers).
- Whilst parents technically have a choice of ParentsNext provider, the availability of the soonest timeslot seems more influential than the choice of provider. At the time of the referral few parents have had the opportunity to research their options.
- Where a parent is not satisfied with the service they receive from their provider they may contact the Department of Jobs and Small Business National Customer Service Line. All providers are required to provide this information to parents. Parents may not elect this option for a variety of reasons and some rely on their current provider to advocate for a transfer on their behalf.

Once a parent is referred to Wesley Mission, we facilitate effective communication through:

- Contacting the parent prior to their initial appointment to explain the program, benefits, and confirm the location.
- Connecting parents with an employment consultant who will be their key support person and provide continuity of care. This is critical for participants with a history of trauma or abuse.
- Providing parents with the work mobile number of their employment consultant, to facilitate practical and direct communication via phone or message.
- Operating a 1300-number and email address to provide centralised support between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.



- Accessing interpreters and translated resources for culturally diverse parents. We developed Vietnamese⁴ and Arabic⁵ sections of our ParentsNext website with tailored video content, reflecting the demographics of the culturally diverse regions where we work. 727 unique visitors viewed these pages in 2018.

B. Department of Jobs and Small Business

Wesley Mission has experienced a good level of communication with the Department. We have contact with the Department's designated contract managers at national, state, and local levels. The Department has conducted site visits, met local staff, sought feedback, offered additional assistance, reviewed training opportunities, and been flexible and responsive.

C. Centrelink

When ParentsNext was first rolled out, Centrelink had a specific ParentsNext team and centralised email address for quick enquiries. This resource facilitated quick communication and ensured a high level of program-specific expertise. The team has since ceased. Our team have found that the quality, accuracy and timeliness of response from local branches varies. Our team members actively source and liaise with representatives at local Centrelink sites to build relationship, knowledge and facilitate referrals. We continue to observe that the quality of the information received or understood by parents varies greatly. It seems that more referrals come from the national customer service centre, rather than from local branches. We have no way of influencing the quality of information nor the level of understanding parents take from this interaction.

Wesley Mission recommends that Centrelink reconvenes its ParentsNext team and centralised email address. Further to this, agreed service contracts between Centrelink and ParentsNext providers would encourage less variation between regions.

D. ParentsNext providers

The Department helped providers establish Communities of Practice forums in each region, providing regular opportunities for ParentsNext providers to connect and share ideas. This could be furthered through an electronic communication platform that allows local ParentsNext providers to share information, resources, and opportunities.

vii. The measures, if any, in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims or survivors of family violence

The design of the ParentsNext program includes measures to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable parents and children, such as:

- Exemptions for parents who are impacted by family violence.
- A person-centred framework that allows parents to identify and work on their holistic goals.

The implementation of the program in alignment with best practice for people who are experiencing disadvantage or risk is the responsibility of the provider. Wesley Mission takes this responsibility seriously and implements a range of measures to avoid causing risk or harm, for example:

- Employing highly qualified staff. All employment consultants hold a bachelor's degree or higher in social work or similar.
- Facilitating annual training plans to address knowledge gaps or in response to emerging community issues. For example, by the end of March 2019 our entire team of employment consultants will have completed the 2-day Identify and Respond to Children at Risk of Significant Harm. Wesley Mission expects that all ParentsNext staff should bring skills or experience in the following areas or otherwise receive training as part of an ongoing training plan: Trauma-Informed Care; Responding to Domestic Violence; Child Protection/Responding to Children at Risk of Harm; Mental Health First Aid; Drug and Alcohol Awareness and Motivational Interviewing.

⁴ <https://www.wesleymission.org.au/find-a-service/families-and-children/programs-for-parents/wesley-parentsnext-vietnamese/>

⁵ <https://www.wesleymission.org.au/find-a-service/families-and-children/programs-for-parents/wesley-parentsnext-arabic/>



- Utilising trauma informed principles. For example, we allocate employment consultants to participants as a key support worker. This reduces the need for parents to re-tell their story and promotes safety, stability, and empowerment. Parents are not required to disclose information unless they choose to do so.
- Linking parents who have disclosed domestic violence into specialist support programs (including those with exemptions).

Wesley Mission works with a significant number of parents who have experienced complex trauma. This heightens the level of anxiety that parents feel when responding to mandatory participation requirements. Wesley Mission staff have noted the following:

- In the time-period between being referred to ParentsNext and their first (face to face) appointment, confused or angry participants have called our 1300 line to debate their requirement to participate.
- Participants have expressed anger when payments have been suspended due to non-attendance at appointments or failing to record attendance at agreed activities. This can be further escalated in regions with poor and unreliable mobile coverage as the notification of payment suspension is sent automatically.
- Participants have displayed aggression to staff when we have inadvertently contributed to the cause of the payment suspension.

Working with highly disadvantaged parents with trauma and mental health issues within a mandatory participation creates ongoing Work Health and Safety issues for employment consultants. This is particularly relevant for working in regional sites, where staff may know participants. Wesley Mission recommends that serious consideration be given to trauma, mental health and other social issues when determining mandatory requirements for attendance. Wesley Mission has achieved excellent results within a strengths-based framework, that works with parents with multiple and complex issues and this has proven more effective than a punitive response.

viii. The appropriateness of the aspects of the program specifically aimed at communities with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island populations, and the appropriateness of the broader program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations outside of target communities

The program design provides a framework to deliver tailored services to parents. Providers are required to develop and implement their own cultural competency framework to ensure the service is appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. To do this, Wesley Mission:

- Utilises a cultural competence framework where parents are positioned as the cultural teacher who educate staff about the family's values and beliefs⁶. During the initial appointment our staff explore identity, cultural values, and connections with Aboriginal organisations. 100% of the ParentsNext team will complete cultural competence training in 2019 to update their skills.
- Partners with local Aboriginal elders, organisations, and groups to access cultural support.

ix. The effectiveness of the program in supporting the long-term wellbeing of parents and children and the longer-term skills and earning capacity of parents

The primary indicator that the ParentsNext program will support the long-term wellbeing of parents and children and their ability to secure meaningful and stable employment is the focus on holistic capacity building. Through this approach parents are given the support to set and work towards short and long-term goals across a range of domains. The Work Star assessment tool⁷ includes seven protective factors related to employability and employment (job skills and experience; aspiration and motivation; job-search skills; stability; basic skills; workplace and social skills; and health and wellbeing), and reflects the five-stage Journey of Change. In practice, Wesley Mission's employment consultants utilise this framework to support parents:

- Address any challenges that would impede long-term workforce participation

⁶ Baum, A. C., and Swick, K. J. (2007), Dispositions Toward Families and Family Involvement: Supporting Preservice Teacher Development. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(6), 579-584

⁷ <http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/using-the-star/see-the-stars/work-star/>



- Attain the skills, education and experience required for employment opportunities that match their goals and local labour market opportunities.

The effectiveness of the program would best be measured through the capture of holistic outcomes as well as the Key Performance Indicators, both during participation and post-exit. All providers utilise the Department's database to input data. Wesley Mission recommends that:

- The database fields ensure that capacity improvements are adequately captured, and there is room to include individual client stories
- Parental input is required from all providers, and monitored as part of the reporting process
- A mechanism for post-exit surveys is created to measure longer-term impact over a set number of years.

x. Best practice pre-employment program for parents

The ParentsNext design aligns with the Australian Government's Social Inclusion Principles for Australia⁸, and the holistic focus is supported by a 2018 study from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research⁹ which found that one of the most effective strategies for supporting people from disengaged backgrounds in learning was to "address the overall barriers and challenges experienced by students, which might include home life and socio-economic concerns as well as learning issues". The implementation of the ParentsNext program in line with best practice approaches (such as strengths-based, culturally competent, and trauma-informed principles) is conditional on the commitment, quality and expertise of each provider and their staff. To ensure that ParentsNext is implemented in line with best practice principles, providers should be accountable to the Department for the approaches they are using (for example, escalating numbers of demerits, unfavourable parental feedback, or lack of holistic outcomes) through data monitoring and regular reporting.

c. The appropriateness of the application of the Targeted Compliance Framework to ParentsNext and the impact of the Targeted Compliance Framework on participants

The Targeted Compliance Framework can create unnecessary distress and challenges for parents who are actively participating in ParentsNext. Wesley Mission has identified the most prominent issue for our parents is the automated parenting payment suspensions when participants do not mark their attendance at an activity. Parents are notified via an automated text message and prompted to contact their ParentsNext provider for next steps. This occurs even if the parent has attended but has simply forgotten to mark this online. The likelihood of this occurring increases for parents who have multiple layers of vulnerability and social and economic complexity to their lives. Whilst the provider has discretion to remove this demerit and the payment suspension once the participant has provided a valid reason, this system:

- Causes undue stress on parents (particularly when the text message is received or noticed after hours, on weekends, or close to the day their Parenting payment is due)
- Unrealistically relies on participants having smart phone access with available data and credit. In many cases parents are unaware they have not received their parenting payment until the point of sale (often for vital supplies such as food, nappies, fuel etc)
- Creates an administration burden on the provider. Each full-time employment consultant is responsible for up to 130 parents at any one time and contacts regarding payment suspensions are additional to the normal work schedule.

In the previous contract the Wesley Mission model of service delivery attracted high levels of trust, respect, engagement and participation in the program. Employment consultants continue to build strong partnerships with parents and to keep in regular contact to ensure parents stay on track, and where needed to make changes to the

⁸ Social Inclusion Principles for Australia, Australian Government, 2010, http://meetingpoint.org.au/assets/mp_s12_sipfa.pdf

⁹ Lamb, S, Maire, Q, Walstab, A, Newman, G, Doecke, E & Davies, M 2018, *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners*, NCVET, Adelaide, https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/2096175/Improving-participation-and-success-in-VET-for-disadvantaged-learners.pdf



Participation Plan and the Activities as goals and priorities change, or as opportunities, challenges or crises arise. Positive and strengths-based approaches should be rewarded becoming the norm for service delivery in ParentsNext. This can be done through contract renewal and expansion that is based equally on education, employment, social and mental health outcomes.

1. Managing compliance of Compulsory Participants (Deed 24.6 (c) (vii))

Briefly discuss your experience in managing the compliance of ParentsNext Compulsory Participants.

The cases where Wesley Mission has used the compliance framework has been directly related to parents who have not attended Initial appointments and our repeated and varied efforts to contact them have not been successful.

Our aim is to establish and maintain strong relationships with parents. The success of our model means that we have very rarer recourse to the compliance framework in relation to parents not participating in Activities. We work extensively on communication with parents and other relationship strategies. We work closely with the local service providers and respond to comments about ParentsNext parents who appear not to be engaging in activities. Where parents are reticent to participate we look more intensively into the barriers they are facing, and work with local service agencies on supports to address these barriers. We also work to support parents to identify and build on strengths and interests. We allow respectful amounts of time for decision making. We actively increase our own knowledge base of the services available in the community and how best to access these.

In a system supporting vulnerable people, compliance measures, if harshly applied can cause more harm than good. Providers should be responsible for monitoring staff activities to ensure the framework is not being inappropriately used, or that parents are not being punished for provider administrative errors (for example, not removing activities from participation plans during school holidays, or not having staff available to address suspensions in a timely manner). Reports to the Department should reflect this so that it can monitor and manage that each provider's approach is in line with the aims and intent of ParentsNext as a pre-employment program.

d. The oversight of ParentsNext, including:

i. The oversight of determinations of non-compliance

ii. The fairness and efficiency of any complaint handling processes, including protocols around changing providers

Wesley Mission has not encountered issues with non-compliance determinations. The complaint handling processes that we have experienced have appeared fair and efficient.