

23 August 2017

Emeritus Professor John Halsey  
Chair, Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education  
Australian Government  
Department of Education and Training  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Professor Halsey

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments within the Australian Government's *Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education*.

This response is prepared on behalf of Contact Inc. (Contact) a leading Australian organisation for isolated children, families and communities launched in 1979 as the follow-on initiative from the International Year of the Child. The organisation has a history of successful assistance, lobbying and representation for this group with over 38 years' experience of working in rural and remote areas, serving the community by working directly with parents, carers and agencies that work in or are related to children and families in regional rural and remote Australia.

We respect the Australian Government's regional, rural and remote education review terms of reference focusing upon the key challenges and barriers that impact on students' learning outcomes, including transitions toward, and success regarding, further study, training and employment. Contact applauds the Australian Government's commitment to improve the education and preparation of country youth to develop into their best selves and fully participate in the 21st Century economy.

At the recent Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) Conference in Alice Springs, Contact and ICPA representatives raised the critical importance of Early Childhood Education within the review considerations, although not specifically identified within the review terms of reference. Following feedback that Early Childhood Education could be considered with the review's undertakings, Contact's response as a result focuses solely upon Early Childhood Education and we would be pleased to elaborate, as required, on any of the comments presented.

We look forward to the potential of early childhood educational approaches being reflected within the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education findings with recognition of the importance of access to early childhood education as a critical foundation for improving educational outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia and working with the Department of Education and Training in the implementation of the resulting rural and remote education strategies.

Yours sincerely



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## Section 1 Early Childhood Education - a foundation for later social and academic success

Research findings unequivocally recognize that the early years of a child's life and the important role that Early Childhood Education (ECE) services play in the wellbeing and development of children and young people and as a foundation for later social and academic success. Research also shows that experiences in the early years have a significant impact on children's cognitive, social, emotional and academic development. Access to quality early childhood education helps children is better prepared for the transition to formal school settings by laying down a solid foundation for children's learning.

All children benefit from quality early education experiences, but these experiences are especially beneficial for children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The impact of isolation can affect a child's development from an early age. Families who are faced with the challenge of social, emotional, cultural, economic or geographical isolation can experience great difficulty in accessing early childhood education services for their children.

It is acknowledged that disadvantage and developmental vulnerability for isolated children can be experienced in both urban and rural settings alike however access to relevant ECE services are not always readily available in rural and remote Australia.

The case for the role of early childhood education is compelling in relation to the geographic isolation experienced by some families and communities.

“ *The disadvantage experienced by students in rural and remote communities begins in early childhood.*

*Rural and Remote Education: Blueprint for Action*  
Department of Education and Communities (2013)

The Australian Institute of Family Studies 2013 report - *The tyrannies of distance and disadvantage* presented the first systematic national detail on differences in the family lives of children and children's development outcomes across two dimensions – the level of disadvantage in their local area, and the distance of their local area from a major city. According to this data, Australian children in regional areas experience a 'tyranny of distance' from major cities, with somewhat poorer learning outcomes resulting for children living in these areas.

One in four children in remote and very remote areas may not be accessing early childhood education in the year before school and national data from the AEDI show that when starting school, about one in three children in remote and very remote communities are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared with one in five children from metropolitan areas.

Evidence is clear that from a fiscal cost-benefit perspective, high quality early childhood education is one of the smartest investments Australia can make. Mounting evidence suggests that investments in early education should be considered an economic development strategy.

Early knowledge and skill accumulation have a self-productive aspect, as Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman says, “*early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success*”.

Businesses, philanthropists and governments are now looking at the benefit of investing in early childhood education especially for those children from disadvantaged communities, in particular those living in remote communities. Evidence also shows that children (particularly those suffering disadvantage and low income) who have access to high quality early education are more likely to continue in their schooling; improve their lifelong outcomes across a range of areas including increased levels of educational attainment, employment, mental and physical health; and reduced levels of incarceration, teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency.

### **Factors that make it more difficult for families in regional and remote areas to ensure their children participate meaningfully in Early Childhood Education**

Research findings unequivocally recognise that the early years of a child’s life and the important role that Early Childhood Education (ECE) services play in the wellbeing and development of children and young people is a foundation for later social and academic success. However access to relevant ECE services is not always readily available in rural and remote Australia.

Quality early childhood education is a key foundational platform to improve the educational outcomes to prepare country children to develop into their best selves and fully participate in the 21st Century economy. There is however challenges involved in enabling access to early childhood education within these contexts.

Families in rural and remote areas experience life in a diversity of ways such as living in small and regional centres, rural and remote areas with dispersed populations and Aboriginal communities. Current rural economic instability and social circumstances make the delivery and maintenance of early childhood education, child, community and social services, much more difficult and tenuous, but at the same time more essential.

Factors that make it more difficult for families in regional and remote areas to ensure their children participate meaningfully in early childhood education include:

- Access - availability of early childhood educational programs;
- Affordability - the higher cost of service delivery in regional and remote areas critically need to be acknowledged and accommodated in any future planning for the provision of quality, affordable early childhood education services;
- Families’ realities, cultural backgrounds, work, training and income patterns, distance, road and weather conditions all affect families’ ability to utilise available early childhood services in rural and remote contexts.

The delivery of effective and responsive early childhood education to meet rural and remote families’ needs will not, in Contact’s opinion, always be effective nor sustainable ways within existing models of Early Childhood Education due to factors such as:

- Widely spread and sparse populations;
- Limitations imposed by small population density and geographic factors;
- Costs of early childhood education provision in rural and remote contexts than urban centres, due to distances, population size and spread;

- The complexity of communities;
- Diversity of populations, local work and training patterns and issues,
- Transport and access to transport options;
- Costs of fuel when either families or ECE services travel large distances;
- Inflexibility of program funding guidelines;
- Recruitment and retention of skilled early childhood education staffing;
- Management committees that have not been sufficiently resourced to achieve governance responsibilities;
- Ineffective co-ordination and planning by service providers and agencies; and
- Limitations of regional data, social indicators and funding.

As a result, traditional models of Early Childhood Education may not be always appropriate, feasible or viable in many rural and remote locations due to these factors.

Underpinning Contact's approaches in rural and remote contexts is a proactive recognition that a one size fits all approach to the delivery of services for children and families is not appropriate and that quality early education service delivery, like quality evaluation and outcomes and processes require grounding in the local context, values and needs of the community.

A committed effort of Local Government, State and Australian Government working together with the communities to develop ways of providing accessible early child education for rural and remote families will be paramount to enable sustainable and viable operations.

## Section 2 Engaging with Aboriginal children, families and communities

Contact acknowledges within many Indigenous contexts that there is a need to fill the balance to truly break the cycle of disadvantage caused by intergenerational welfare dependency, compounded by failure to educate future generations.

Access to quality early childhood education is critical to ‘closing the gap’ in Indigenous disadvantage and increasing future school readiness.

Strong Indigenous representation is critical to the success of efforts aimed at making serious gains in this area, coupled with further support provided to Indigenous run and controlled ECE services and implementing policies and strategies to develop career and training pathways and support in these services.

Equally important is a need to develop a systematic and sustained approach to improve cultural accessibility of mainstream services through cultural competency training, development of resources and ongoing professional support.

Influencing change in rural and remote and Indigenous settings is complex and time consuming when done effectively.

When working within the community, Contact is committed to ensuring that its approaches are aligned in best practice in Indigenous service delivery and to this end, is continually assessing relevant early childhood and community development literature to guide the organisation’s processes and principles in working within the community.

Relevant information sources that have guided Contact approaches in providing and developing early childhood educational programs in rural and remote Indigenous context include:

### **The National Indigenous Reform - Closing the Gap**

This Reform identified six principles and encourages that these be applied in strategies aligned with the Closing the Gap targets namely:

- Aboriginal communities are provided with ongoing options to participate in program design and delivery;
- That resulting strategies be adequately resourced and sustainable;
- Resulting strategies/service provision be physically and culturally accessible;
- Service providers work collaboratively across government; and
- Strategies/programs are regularly monitored and evaluated.

**Listen to the Children - The Australian Child Rights Taskforce** identified service delivery within Aboriginal communities that:

- Aboriginal self-determination, be realised in part through consultation and participation in the design, development and delivery of services; and
- Respect for the unique collective and individual cultural rights of Aboriginal children is achieved through the provision of culturally appropriate programs and services.

Further literature reviews such as:

**Institute of Family Studies - Safe and Supportive Families and Communities for Children**

A paper review of the research on building safe and supportive families and communities for Indigenous communities. Lahouar states within this body of work that for services in these context to be successful it is necessary to allow longer timeframes to:

- Build trust, and relationships and then to identify needs;
- Develop useful engagement strategies;
- Utilise holistic approaches; and
- Critically asking what Indigenous families they would like.

**Improved Outcomes for ATSI Children and Families in Early Childhood Education Services – Learning from Good Practice (SNAICC)**

Issues discussed relating to cultural sensitivity, community ownership and the value of holistic service principles.

■ **Prime Minister and Cabinet - Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC)**

SCfC aims to give Indigenous children and young people the best possible start in life through safer families and communities, nurturing educational environments, positive participation opportunities and cultural events so that children and young people grow up strong, healthy and confident.

■ **Department of Social Services Communities for Children**

Communities for Children work to give all children the best start in life by focusing on prevention and early intervention approaches in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia.

■ **Australian Institute of Family Studies – Knowledge Circle  
The Australian Model of the First 1000 Days**

An Indigenous-led initiative seeking to provide a coordinated, comprehensive intervention to address needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from (pre) conception to two years of age and their families to achieve health outcomes for their children by strengthening their extended family and community to realise the potential of all children. It also supports service providers to act on evidence and build service and regional level capacities to respond.

<https://www2.aifs.gov.au/cfca/knowledgecircle/discussions/children-and-young-people/australian-model-first-1000-days>

■ **Australian Institute of Family Studies Child Family Community Australia  
‘Effective regional, rural and remote family and relationships service delivery’**

Strong and healthy relationships play a vital role in building the ongoing health and wellbeing of individuals, families and the broader community. With increasing pressure on the traditional social support mechanisms of extended family, friends and neighbours, particularly in non-urban regions, there is a growing need for professional family and relationship services. However, there is limited robust evidence about what makes these services effective, especially when delivered in rural, regional or remote settings. This paper briefly reviews recent demographic, social and economic trends in rural, regional and remote Australia in order to provide the contextual background to service delivery in the region. A number of enablers and limiting factors for effective rural service delivery are outlined. These factors are based on a review of the limited evidence base on family and relationships service delivery and the broader literature on service delivery to rural settings. Considerable emphasis is given to workforce issues as a way of addressing service sustainability.

<https://www.ifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/effective-regional-rural-and-remote-family-and-relationship>

All of these documents and principles reinforce the importance of integrating community development approaches into any establishment and early childhood education service delivery to ensure successful and sustainable outcomes are achieved.

**Case Study Contact Children’s Mobile - delivering effective quality Early Childhood Educational programs in remote Aboriginal communities**

Contact is aware this submission is a left field approach to achieving the review’s terms of reference. Given the evidence documented above, we believe to ensure equal educational opportunities specifically for Aboriginal children there must be opportunities for Aboriginal children to participate in early education, which involves their families and the community.

There are still many remote areas in Australia where childhood educational opportunities are not available. In response, between 2010-2013 philanthropic funding from the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and The Yulgilbar Foundation enabled the development of the Contact Children’s Mobile (CCM) to service the Northern Territory Barkly and Central Desert regions of Ti Tree and Utopia Homelands. Post philanthropy, the Australian Government’s Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet provided funding (2014-2017) that has enabled the CCM to continue service delivery solely within the Utopia Homelands.

An Evaluation Report, funded by the Federal Government, and conducted by the Menzies School of Health Research measured the initial set-up processes of this Central Australian-based Contact Children’s Mobile, the Mobile’s success in meeting its desired outcomes and the extent to which this service model could be adopted in other remote and indigenous contexts.

The Menzies report highlighted the effectiveness of the CCM and its contributions to the early childhood education and educational landscape in the Barkly and Central Desert regions; provided evidence of the Mobile’s innovation in reducing social exclusion and supporting highly vulnerable Aboriginal families and identifies the potential of the Mobile service to bring about fundamental and lasting improvements to the lives and opportunities for the children and families in these regions, including employment opportunities for parents in their community.



In 2017, CCM is operating in seven Utopia Homelands remote Aboriginal communities, and these communities are now more children aware and there is demonstrated evidence that children are active participants within the early childhood education learning programs with families engaged with their children's learning and education.

From inception, Contact's primary focus was to develop a trusting relationship by engaging in positive ongoing discussion with potential stakeholders including Elders, family and community members, service providers and Government representatives. The CCM is providing holistic programs, which focus on children; are respectful of communities; and inclusive of families' other caregivers; is seeking to overcome isolation and increase the social cohesion of communities and encourage employment opportunities. Service delivery is underpinned by recognition that quality service delivery is grounded in local context, values and the needs of the communities.

A collaborative approach to service delivery to reduce service duplication, the more efficient use of resources and the promotion of shared goals is achieved through respectful ongoing engagement and consultation with Aboriginal children, families and community and their participation in the design, development and delivery of the Mobile service.

Commencing with child-focused programs, once established, CCM has slowly introduced additional complementary programs such as health, family or other community requested services based on identified family need.

It is Contact's vision that community members may be supported to obtain Children's Services qualifications in the future, to further enrich the programs and provide employment for local community members to support services offered by the Contact Children's Mobile.

Contact Children's Mobile (CCM) continues to successfully achieve all contracted tasks, supporting Homelands families in giving children a good start in life by working respectfully in partnership with Utopia Homelands families, community members and its services to further build strong reciprocal relationships to ensure service delivery is community inspired and driven. Success stories relate to when on community, increased child and family participation within CCM holistic early childhood educational learning programs; family and community members demonstrating increasing confidence and sharing understandings relating to their child's development and how the play-based early learning educational programs are progressively supporting their child's school readiness skills; and individual families discussing child related concerns and aspirations to further continue activities when CCM is not on community.

These achievements are complemented by community members working or volunteering within the CCM programs or expressing interest in obtaining an OCHRE Card so they may be employed in the future; through the range of engagement actions enacted to respond to child and family unmet needs; Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation guiding CCM to further explore unmet child and family needs within the Homelands and CCM working in a complementary capacity with a range of Utopia Homelands child and family related agencies including the Homelands Schools to further reinforce, support and respond to child and family requirements.



## **Contact Children's Mobile delivering quality early childhood educational approaches working towards 'Closing the Gap' in Indigenous disadvantage in a remote context and increasing future school readiness**

### **20 demonstrated measures of Contact Children's Mobile success**

1. Acknowledgment that CCM is an important resource within the Barkly and Central Desert regions - providing a strong sense of community, capacity building, ownership and valuing of the Mobile and its contributions to their community(s).
2. Continued strong relationships in the communities in which service delivery is offered with regular early childhood education child, family and community programs provided at seven remote Homelands sites; with consistent participation of children and caregivers - mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles grandparents and Elders within these activities.
3. Active and eager participation of children at the nominated CCM venues with each early childhood educational learning sessions conducted on average for three or more hours.
4. A continuing progressive increase of children engaging in the early childhood educational programs delivered with 75 children attending the CCM sessions from January to June 2017, compared to 48 children engaged in the early learning educational activities July to 31 December 2016 and 34 children in the period up to January to 30 June 2016.
5. CCM early childhood practices reflect both the Australian Government's early childhood National Quality Framework (NQF) - Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS).
6. Children's learning is a process of explorations that children engage in from birth as they expand their intellectual, physical, social, emotional and creative capacities. As a result, CCM provides throughout intentional exploratory play-based activities that allow the children to seek understanding of their world, themselves and their communities. Equally, as reflected in the NQS, each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests provide the foundation for all child related CCM programs delivered.
7. The majority of children attending the CCM are a young cohort, aged birth to four years and all CCM activities are planned to open up their innate desire to seek more complex understandings of their environments and building positive child developmental across all domains.
8. When on community, there is evidence of an increase in family engagement in the early educational programs with 69 Indigenous parents now engaging in their child's education delivered through the CCM sessions. This result demonstrates a progressive increase of parent numbers in CCM activities with their children as 65 families were engaged up until December 2016 and 62 families in prior period ending 30 June 2016.
9. Families are seeking ideas to continue early learning activities back at camp, as they want their child to be successful when formal school time approaches. CCM activities focus upon developing children's positive strong sense of self, enabling them to try new experiences with confidence and transferring easier concepts into more complex play ideas.

10. Evidence suggests that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and to experience ongoing academic and social success. Children entering formal school in 2018 accessed focused school-ready CCM activities, complemented by community members taking roles to ensure school-ready activities are completed throughout the sessions.
11. In the life of a child and their families, starting school is a significant event and the strong relationships and information sharing between families that attend the CCM and the Utopia Homelands schools have helped to support Utopia Homelands children's successful transition to school. CCM designs intentional experiences to help these children gain the desired skills. Staff evaluate each learning sessions to ensure intentional teaching activities are based on the child's abilities and interests to achieve maximum learning outcomes. Children transitioning to school in 2018 are naturally maturing into their role as a leader of the others and enjoy being chosen to lead play actions. CCM reports provide evidence of school-ready skills being displayed by children moving onto transition next year. More complex elements are accommodated within transition of children's activities with time spent with relevant children's parents explaining how activities are building school readiness skills and ways to build upon these with their children when CCM is not on community.
12. Strong respectful reciprocal relationships between CCM and Utopia Homelands families have resulted in everyone working collaboratively to achieve positive outcomes for the children and their successful transition into school. Success for children comes when the early learning service provider and families have positive relationships. CCM has achieved ongoing success by communication, consultation and collaborations with families, building and supporting their understandings related to early childhood developmental outcomes and school readiness, engaging them within the programs, complemented by a range of other engagement actions.
13. Families and community members are identifying their skilling requirements and aspirations to undertake study, expressing requests to know more about their child's development and to support their effective transition into school settings.
14. Parents volunteer willingly and partake in activities alongside the children and interpret when CCM are delivering new concepts. Parents are encouraged to have input and make active contributions sharing information related to their child's learning and development priorities. Regular attendees are very familiar with activities, commenting when children are doing a little more each time as they participate within a particular activity and encouraging a little extension each time for their children within activities.

Other measures of progress are families seeking guidance for early educational learning activity ideas to continue at home; a parent travelling to other CCM venues so their child can access more programs each week; a new mother is a keen participator as this is her and her children's first experience in an early learning environment and is repeating activities back at her camp emulating CCM actions with her interactions with the child; CCM sit together with parents at the end of each session to reflect on the learning that occurred, explaining how through certain activities, skills for later learning are practiced with parents progressively becoming more competent/confident in expressing what learning has occurred for the children.

15. Promoting employment opportunities have led to community members employed or volunteering within CCM activities and employed community members display competencies, contributing to the programs offered, working to routines of the session and assisting in the successful delivery of the sessions. Seven Indigenous people have been employed (Soapy Bore, Atheley and Rocket Range) to work within CCM service delivery, an increase of two people in comparison to last year's results. In addition, two other Indigenous people have completed relevant documentation however to date, both have not formally commenced employment duties. CCM has actively collaborated with Arlparra School, CALYSUS and My Pathways to encourage and support the potential of Indigenous community employment opportunities and to encourage individuals within their ongoing employment actions.
16. All community members that attend the CMM programs volunteer in one way or another in the activities with the children assisting, as an example, with packing up and translations. Consistently some Indigenous people (11) have volunteered within the CCM early childhood learning sessions assisting with translations, preparing the children's healthy snacks and further encouraging children's engagement within the activities delivered.
17. Strong relationships established at all levels prior to service delivery commencing and these relationships continue to be built upon.
18. CCM continues to provide regular early childhood holistic and community engagement programs across contracted Homelands sites and commenced exploring unmet needs in new Homelands communities. During school holidays, middle childhood needs identified as an increasing service delivery gap in defined Homelands resulting in CCM undertaking scoping actions to address.
19. CCM continues to work in a united approach with Indigenous community members and relevant local agencies. As an ongoing practice, prior to service delivery, CCM seek out Elders within the Homelands to respectfully obtain permission to be on their community and guidance relating to expected practices and requirements.
20. CCM also works closely with relevant agencies to define unmet child/family requirements. Regular interactions with Arlparra School discussing children's needs and transition to school actions; complementary service delivery with service providers such as Primary Health Network nutritionist and Arid Edge in community gardens area promoting healthy foods/nutrition; combining with others to deliver Clean Up Australia days in two Homelands sites; working with Trachoma Health to share trachoma messages and inviting a respected Elder to interpret trachoma messages; combining with Arlparra School, CALYSUS and My Pathways to build skills/opportunities for Indigenous peoples' employment; community members with Batchelor offering to record traditional early years song in community language; joining Urapuntja Aboriginal Health Clinic at their women's shed providing children's programs whilst health teams worked with women.

All actions of the examples presented have enhanced program options for Utopia Homelands children and families that CCM serves.