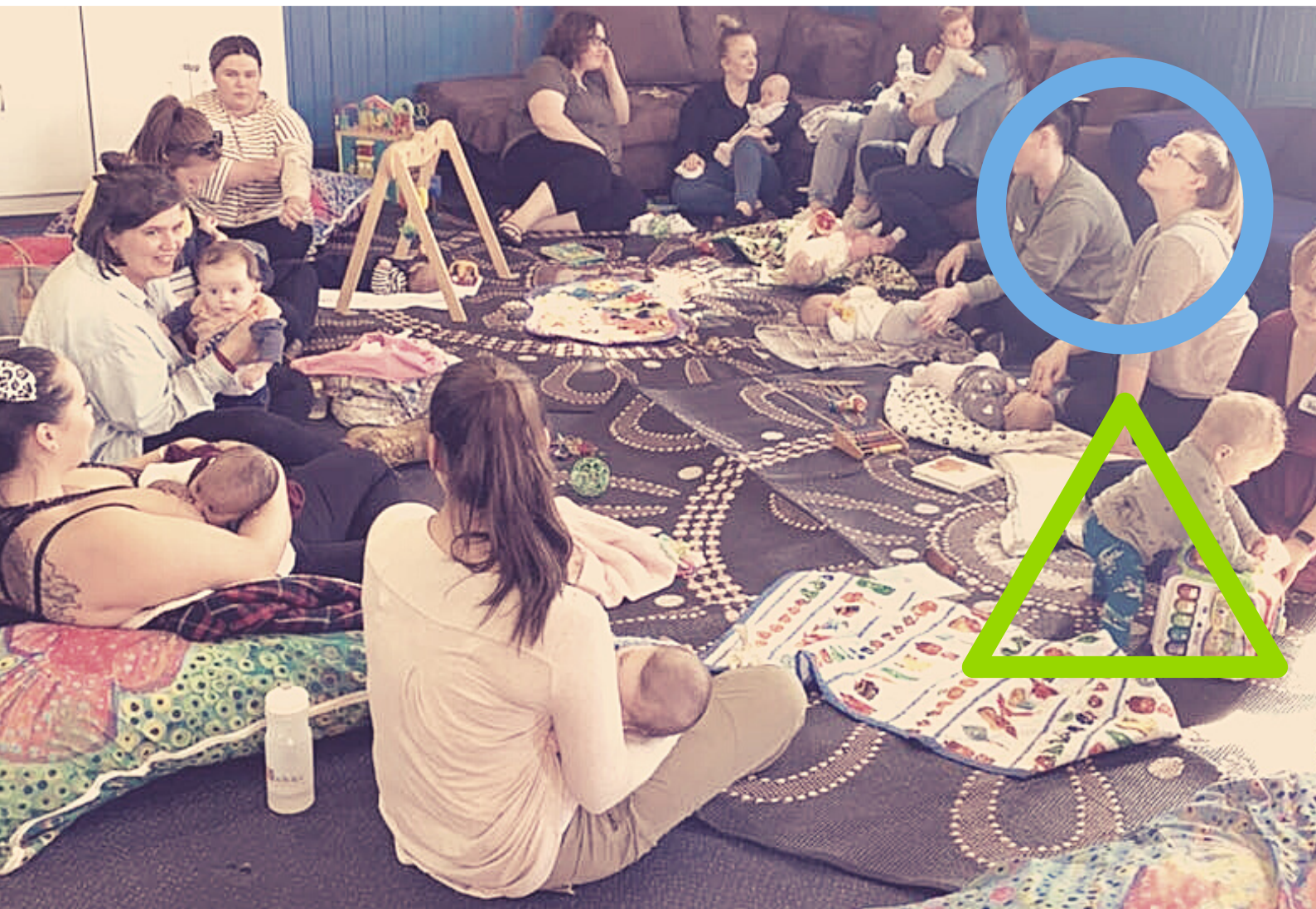
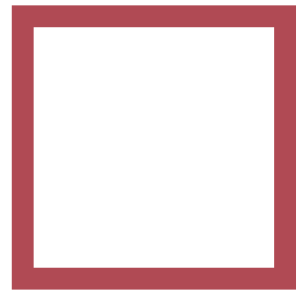


Submission to the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Consultation

March 2021



Executive Summary

Playgroup Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to be a part of this consultation and shares the Tasmanian Government's commitment to a wellbeing agenda for Tasmanian Children and Young People.

This submission draws upon the knowledge and experience of Playgroup Tasmania in delivering programs that support children and their caregivers.

Importantly, this submission tells a story and has been shaped by the voices of over 150 Tasmanian families who have shared with Playgroup Tasmania what is important to them. They have shared their parenting experiences, their hopes and dreams for their children and what they need for their families to live a good life.

As an organisation our primary focus is on supporting connections and play for families with children from pregnancy to age 5. Our submission is organised into four themes, drawing on the family voice and our own expertise. The themes are:

1. Universal services – access and availability of diverse services.
2. Access to information and coordinated communication.
3. Governance and policy environment that enables an integrated system.
4. Celebrating children - National Children's Week

About Playgroup Tasmania

Playgroup Tasmania is a peak body representing volunteer-led and organisational playgroups across Tasmania. For nearly 50 years playgroups have provided children and their families with connection, support and play experiences. Playgroups contribute to a community's resilience by empowering families and leveraging the existing strengths within communities and building social capital through volunteer engagement and capacity building. The playgroup model is a powerful tool to support the restoration and rebuilding of communities across Tasmania as we transition to our next phase of recovery.

“COVID-19 has underlined the importance of staying connected with our family, friends and community, and has shone a light on the challenges of supporting isolated and vulnerable members of our community”

(Premier's Economic & Social Recovery Advisory Council Final Report March 2021)

Our priority for the first 1000 days – All Tasmanian children and their families accessing the right service, at the right time, at the right place.

Playgroup Tasmania welcomes the Tasmanian Government's commitment to prioritise the first 1000s days of a child's life. This commitment needs to be underpinned by a bipartisan agreement to allocate adequate funding and resources to better support the resilience of families with young children.

Playgroup Tasmania urges the Tasmanian Government to implement a coordinated first 1000 days child and family wellbeing playgroup program.

This program should be underpinned by the principle of universal proportionalism, delivering the right level of service, at the right time, in the right place.

Starting the parenting journey is often a time of confusion and uncertainty. Accessing support and services on this journey can be frustrating. A fractured system of parenting support adds to the confusion, including limited new parent groups which do not routinely or systematically transition to other services. Some services are only available to certain families or in certain areas, and there are service delivery gaps including support for disability, perinatal anxiety and depression.

“The early moments of a child's life matter – and their impact can last a lifetime.”

Britto, P.R. (2017) Early Moments Matter for Every Child. New York: United Nations Children's Fund



Our priority for the first 1000 days

Playgroup Tasmania proposes a continuum model of playgroup support delivered across the state, to complement, and work with, existing sector and government programs including the Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS), Working Together (WT,) Launch into Learning (LiL) and Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLC).

The program would focus on geographical areas without CFLC's, prioritising rural/remote locations and communities identified as vulnerable/at risk using AEDC data, and would be tailored and adapted to meet local needs. The program will deliver place-based support connecting families with their local communities, and would involve:

- engaging families during the antenatal period in order to create trusting relationships to support families during one of life's major transitions.
- supporting families to attend new baby/parents groups in their area and then transitioning them to a community playgroup or other appropriate program/service
- delivering targeted interventions to families with additional needs and vulnerabilities including disability and perinatal mental health support. This would involve assisting families at any time on their journey through delivery of evidenced based/informed programs (when required) in the playgroup setting.
- providing universal access to all parents including those who already have children.

Playgroup Tasmania are experts in delivering high impact community playgroup support and facilitated targeted programs, this program will complement these existing services and will:

- Be available to all children and families (i.e. universal access).
- Deliver a state-wide, evidence informed service model, including regional and remote locations, with digital support.
- Support existing Government programs including WT, LiL and CFLCs, by supporting/referring families to transition to these programs when appropriate (as determined by the family).
- Enable a soft entry approach to engaging other relevant community based programs, supporting transitions and referrals in and out of appropriate programs and services.
- Work in partnership with service stakeholders to map services, ensuring any gaps in need are met and avoiding service duplication.
- Strengthen the existing volunteer-led model through training and support to reduce cost, support a peer-to-peer model, and support volunteer mental health.

Playgroups are trusted and valued by families and loved by children. The playgroup model is a proven, cost effective, evidence informed framework.

"I have literally zero mum friends in Tasmania and it is very lonely, I don't know how to make connections."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

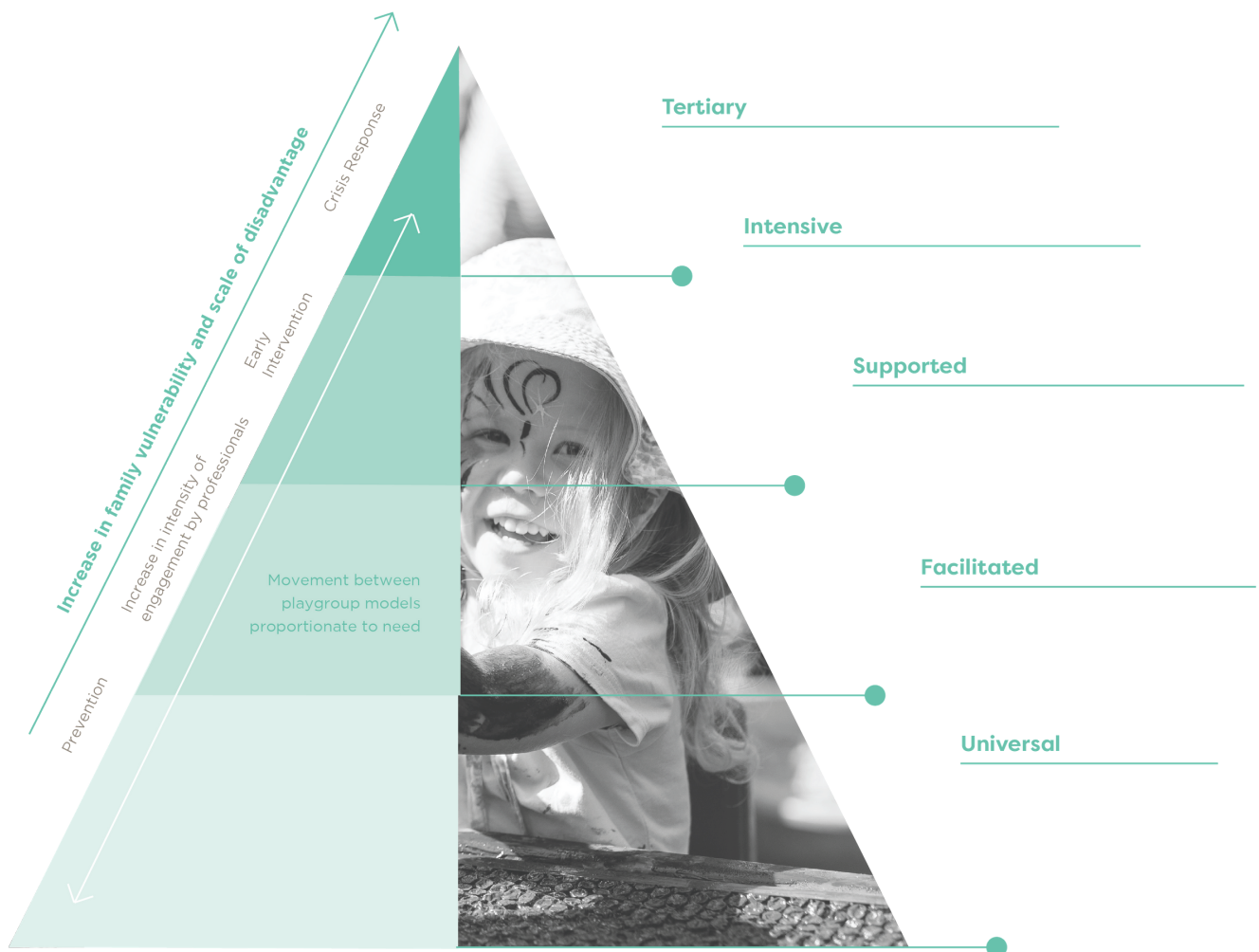
"I wish there were more mother's groups. It was something I was looking forward to, but despite joining Facebook groups and seeing my child health nurse and asking the GP, no one has been able to offer any."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021



1. Universal Services - Access and Availability.

The need to increase access and availability of coordinated child and family wellbeing services in Tasmania is not limited to the first 1000 days. We consistently hear from families that there are not enough services of the right kind to meet the needs of their children and the community. A solution to this is program design and service provision underpinned by proportionate universalism whereby the resourcing and delivery of universal services is at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need. Services are therefore available not only for the most disadvantaged but universally and are able to respond to the level of presenting need. Proportionate universalism ensures that: “Services are universally available to all families, but service providers give ‘proportionally’ more service/s to families that need more support.” (Telethon Kids Institute)



“We need more support for mothers of babies – I know of so many mothers out there, falling apart – they have nothing. There is all this support leading up to the birth – so much help when you are pregnant - and then there is nothing! No help, no support. There are so many women struggling.”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

1. Universal Services - Access and Availability

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government invest in a continuum of universal services.

This includes community playgroups that are open to everyone, as well as targeted interventions like PlayConnect and intensive support playgroups for child safety and therapeutic services.

Community playgroups are a mainstay of the early childhood and family support environment.

Each playgroup is unique and is shaped by the skills, interests and capacity of the local families.

This style of playgroup requires a commitment of time and energy from volunteers. Volunteers are happy to take on this responsibility and enjoy having ownership and a sense of belonging.

However, this model is not without its challenges. Playgroups identify the increasing costs for playgroups (rising venue hire fees especially) as a source of stress and frustration. Individuals can feel reluctant to take on that responsibility and financial stress. Volunteers are feeling the need to increase weekly fees, do extensive fundraising or contribute funds personally to keep the playgroup running. This is a major contributor to volunteer burnout.

“We welcome more and more attention on the early years. Do not forget the parents' role as their children's first teacher - our parents need more support to do this, not this role taken away and given to childcare workers and teachers.”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voice Survey March 2021

Playgroup Tasmania encourages the Tasmanian Government to invest in the future of community playgroups through a small grant program to ensure playgroups can meet their resourcing costs.

We recognise there are high priority populations including out of home care, disability and CALD families, and they will require a higher intensity of support at points in time.

Through ongoing consultation with families, we understand the following barriers exist for those families with children or parents with additional and complex needs. Families report:

- Waitlists for diagnostic services of up to 2 years.
- Limited availability of allied health services to support their child.
- There is limited regional support for families to engage with Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS).
- Difficulties with transport across the state both within larger cities and regional/rural areas. Services may be available, but families are not able to arrange suitable transport at times that work for them.
- Mixed experience accessing CFLC's with children with disability including not feeling welcomed or accepted.
- There are issues with coordination of the individual elements of the supports and services available to families. The consequence of this is that the families most in need of support receive too little, too late.
- Not all families who have children with a disability engage with CHaPS. Families are reporting they do not feel appropriately supported and consequently miss assessment and referrals appointments. Some families also report they have been misinformed by CHaPs staff about their child's development.

1. Universal Services - Access and Availability.

The Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS) model should be strengthened to provide consistent access to service and support across the state.

Families report that support for new parents is available to greater degree in some areas than others. Over 70% of families we spoke with did not attend a new baby/parent group. These families typically indicated that this service was not available in their area or that they didn't know the service was available.

Additionally, families report divergent experiences of engaging with CHaPS. These experiences range from extremely positive with continued engagement through to complete dissatisfaction and disengagement. This may go some way to explain why not all families continue to engage with the service though to the 4-year check. CHaPS already work in place-based settings through their co-location in CFLC's, this could be extended to geographic locations where CFLC's do not exist by working in community settings such as playgroups. This would support the building of trusting relationships with families in an informal and familiar setting.

As Tasmania moves into a post-Covid19 recovery phase, there is a critical need for services that increase community connections and rebuilds trust and reciprocity. Services need to be contemporary and responsive to the needs of modern families.

"I think they are very valuable and helpful to parents. They give a lot of good advice for any problems you might be having. Sometimes the charts and milestone check lists can stress a mother out if baby isn't performing at the same stage as others. Can be very detrimental to her mental health and parenting ability."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

"Love it! So lucky we get to do this for free, always asking for advice or help if we need it."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

"Generally good. Think some of their advice and information is outdated. The breastfeeding advice was very mixed and confusing."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

"Supportive, but mainstream and not always supportive/aware of gentle/natural parenting (bedsharing)."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

"Nurse was brilliant and helpful."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

"Some very good, others left me in tears. Newstead didn't have a consistent nurse for a while, so it was hard to build that relationship, but a few that I saw made me feel like a horrible mother. I dreaded the visits. We have been seeing the one in Kings Meadows now and she has been amazing."

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

1. Universal Services – Access and Availability.

Playgroup Tasmania advocates for programs which offer whole family support and capacity building. Children with a disability exist within a larger family and community network. It is important that the focus of any strategy or intervention is not just on the child's disability, but that the community as a whole makes services, activities and programs more inclusive - allowing children with a disability to participate.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government facilitate the practice of children accessing support and therapy in natural settings, inclusive of playgroup.

It is widely acknowledged that young children and families “get the best outcomes when they receive supports or therapies in their natural setting such as the home or kinder, rather than in a clinical setting.” Early childhood early intervention reset consultation papers | NDIS

It is anticipated that incorporating natural settings practice would encourage a strength based and holistic approach to therapy. Children and families feel comfortable at playgroup and therapists/specialists have an ideal opportunity to work with them in a non-clinical environment.

Playgroup Tasmania and StGiles have recently begun testing this approach in the PlayConnect playgroup setting.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government provide additional resourcing to extend the delivery of evidence based/informed programs based on the needs of children and their families.

Pregnancy and early parenthood are a particularly vulnerable time for most families, with a potential increase in financial, health and housing stress. Families may move in and out of these vulnerabilities. By ensuring that services are both universal access but targeted to their needs allows families to receive the right support, in the right place and at the right time.

There are currently limited programs offering additional support to children and families who have greater need. There is a strong need for access to evidence based/informed programs, such as smalltalk and PlayConnect playgroups, available at scale.

These additional targeted supports would complement existing universal programs and provide support to children and their families when they need it and, importantly, can be delivered utilising the playgroup platform.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government encourage schools to engage with and connect with other community activities in their area.

In smaller communities there are often few readily accessible and free social support options available. Usually, there is one LiL session and a community playgroup session weekly. Providing cross promotion and cross collaboration and working together would ensure that families are provided with a choice of activities. The aim would be avoiding duplication of activities running on the same day.



1. Universal Services – Access and Availability.

Playgroup Tasmania urges the Tasmanian Government to put a greater emphasis on community infrastructure, which is vital to support social connection and engagement, and must have the same the level of priority as sport and recreation infrastructure.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends that the Tasmanian Government works with Local Governments to offer free or low cost venue access to community-based child and family social connection activities.

A barrier to access free play opportunities and social support is access to suitable venues. Babies and toddlers, and their parents, have specific needs in relation to finding a suitable venue for a play activity. It needs to be safe, with heating, and with space to play inside and outside. Ideally, it has a fence with a baby proof gate, somewhere to make tea and coffee and park prams and no dangerous equipment or obstacles left in the room. It also needs to be free or low cost.

Appropriate venues need to be available in ALL communities. Families need access to support that is locally specific and place based. Playgroup Tasmania has identified venues that are suitable including unused childcare settings and local halls which are owned by Local Government. We've received quotes of \$150 for a 2-hour session which is simply not financially viable for any volunteer or facilitated groups. These identified buildings are often left unused, especially in the morning, when Playgroups usually meet. Venues which are currently unsuitable could be adapted through targeted funding similar to what sport and recreation facilities are currently eligible for.



“I think having an organised parent group for those with a new baby is really important especially for those parents who don't have established social groups or a social group with children of the same age. I was really disappointed when I had my son that the Child Health run/organised parent groups had stopped as I had no other social group with kids of similar ages. It was only by coincidence that I found a group set-up by some parents. Having others to talk to who are also going through similar situation is invaluable.”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

2. Access to information and coordinated communication.

The overwhelming message we have from families is that they are confused.

They are confused about how to access programs and services and whether services are compulsory or optional. They do not know where to go to get help if they are struggling, and they do not know what will happen if they do ask for help. They feel they are receiving mixed messages from health care and support services, online parenting groups, and their circle of family and friends.

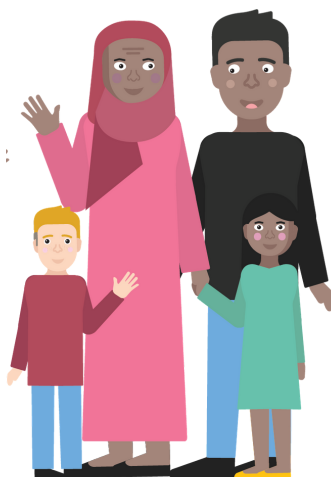
It is widely recognised that mental health issues and feelings of isolation have been exacerbated by COVID-19. We have been consulting broadly with families to better understand their experience of parenting pre and post Covid. We have heard:

- many have experienced some form of negative mental health after having a child including anxiety, depression, or other mental health issue/s
- and that for many, their own mental health problems have a moderate, or greater, impact on their ability to parent their children.

The delivery system for universal child and family wellbeing programs/services in Tasmania is fragmented. Some essential services are delivered Federally such as Centrelink and NDIS, and some delivered by the State such as schools, CFLC's, WT, the Antenatal Service and CHaPS. Several communities receive specific place-based support such as Communities for Children and the Building Blocks program in the North East of Tasmania.

Some families are well connected, with strong relationships with community, good access to digital technology and high levels of capacity and can find the services available in their area. But many families are struggling. Many families report finding it difficult to access information. Existing online information is spread across numerous websites, is difficult to navigate, not engaging or user friendly and frequently out of date.

We commend the Government for their investment in the Strong Families, Safe Kids Advice & Referral Line and the Children, Youth and Family Services Division and their obvious commitment to supporting the most vulnerable families. We would like to see this commitment extend to a single access point for universal family wellbeing information that would replace the current Department of Health Healthy Kids and Pregnancy, Birth and Early Parenting sites.



2. Access to information and coordinated communication.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government invest in a Connected Families Online Service

This would be a fully functional digital platform that enables families to access all the information they need in one place. The Tasmanian Government would implement and host the site, supported by a robust governance model so that all resources including community sector resources are kept up to date and are relevant.

The website would link to external sources of information relevant to pregnancy, birth and parenting such as KidsSafe, The Raising Children Network and the Playgroup Tasmania website. Plain english information for existing State Government Services such as Oral Health, Child Safety, and the Parent Line, and Federal Government Services such as Centrelink and NDIS, with updated local contacts and pathways, would be made available.

Not only would the website be a valuable tool for Tasmanian parents and caregivers it would also be invaluable to service providers. It would be used by service providers to provide wrap around support to their clients, offering extra services and opportunities that are accurate, relevant, and locally specific to them.

For the Connected Families Online Service to be a success it needs to be “one stop shop” to access parenting information, health and parenting support services, disability support and services and community sector activities and events.

The Connected Families Online Service needs to be a contemporary and engaging service. Ideally, in a second phase of rollout, this online platform would be complemented by an App. This App would be linked to the Child Health and Parenting Service. It could be used to book appointments, be linked to the Immunisation Register, connect to the Parent Line, and have links to local services and activities. A similar App is currently in use in Victoria.

“There is no one stop shop in Hobart for parenting advice sadly. We miss out on activities because they aren’t advertised on a broader platform.”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

“I didn’t know where to go to find out about things to do with my daughter. It was hard to find information about what’s on.”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

“I don’t know what the rules are about car seats, and all that kind of thing. How do I find out about that stuff?”

Playgroup Tasmania Family Voices Survey March 2021

3. Governance and policy environment to enable integration.

Playgroup Tasmania aims to support all children and their families. We understand that families with children are interacting with all levels of community and government. This submission aims to provide the voices and lived experiences of Tasmanian families and the issues and concerns that are important to them. Many of these concerns are outside of the remit of Playgroup Tasmania, for example housing and employment. Playgroup Tasmania therefore has a role in advocating on the behalf of families in these associated areas that are critical to the wellbeing of children and families.

To provide a whole of system approach to wellbeing for children and young people there needs to be shared accountability from the very top layers of Government and departmental heads. Children do not exist in isolation. They are part of a larger family unit and a larger community. All Government heads of agency and their departments have a responsibility to ensure that they consider the impact of their policies through this wellbeing lens.

This consultation process has been robust and inclusive. We are well placed to set shared wellbeing vision and goals, and to inform the design of indicators and measures across all Tasmanian State Government Departments. With many national and international examples in action, there is no need to reinvent the wheel when developing an outcomes framework and associated indicators. Playgroup Tasmania would like to see existing frameworks, including the ARACY Nest, and their learnings, considered to provide the basis for measuring our own progress towards the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people. This should be done in partnership with the community sector and, importantly, children and young people. The results of this consultation strategy could provide the basis for this to occur.

Playgroup Tasmania strongly recommends the Tasmanian Government design and implement integrated data sets across the state and across Departments.

All Departments gather data, but it is not consistent information that is able to be cross referenced and analysed. The data collected needs to speak to the vision and goals of the Wellbeing Strategy. It needs to be statistically valid so that it can be used to measure the success and outcomes of the strategy – and, importantly, it needs to be everyone's responsibility. To enable this, outcome indicators need to be embedded into funding contracts with service organisations and consistent tools need to be developed to ensure that data collected can tell an accurate story. Additionally, funding agreements need to be longer term to ensure these outcomes are achievable and can be sustained in the longer term.

Communities Tasmania could be the custodians of the strategy and through robust governance and appropriate resourcing, can be appointed to engage and coordinate Departments to ensure that these wellbeing goals are met.



4. Celebrating Children – National Children’s Week

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government commit to supporting the coordination of Children’s Week activities and events.

Children’s Week in Tasmania provides the ideal opportunity to celebrate children and young people and to increase community awareness of and commitment to the wellbeing of children and young people. Children’s Week is an annual event celebrated in Australia each October. A diverse range of events and activities are organised at National, State and Local levels for children birth to 18 years of age. These activities focus the attention of the wider community on children, their rights and their achievements. Each year Children’s Week is based on a theme in line with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child and celebrates the right of children to enjoy childhood and is a time for children to demonstrate their talents, skills and abilities. Importantly, all events and activities are free of cost to attend or participate in.

In Tasmania, Children’s Week has been historically recognised through Teddy Bear Picnic Events with a change in 2020 to smaller more local activities promoted through an online Children’s Week Activity Guide. Celebrations and activities have needed to be organised at low or no cost due to a lack of funding or financial support. Historically, the Australian Government had provided a small grant (\$5,000 of which was allocated to Tasmania) to support Children’s Week however this ceased in 2019. Other states and territories receive varying amounts of financial support from State government and other funding streams. In 2019, the Tasmanian Government through Communities Tasmania provided Playgroup Tasmania funding to examine future strategies to grow and sustain Children’s Week in Tasmania. This one-off funding also provided showbags to give to families at the Teddy Bears’ Picnics. The showbags contained a fun colouring activity and locally specific parenting information.

Playgroup Tasmania believe that Children’s Week has the potential to grow and to engage the wider community in supporting the wellbeing of children of all ages. The aims of Children’s Week activities and events closely align with the outcomes of the Wellbeing Framework (see below). Children’s Week is a time where children and families gather together and learn more about initiatives in their local community.

We propose a Tasmanian Government funding allocation to Children’s Week.

This funding would provide an opportunity to extend the age range of Children’s Week beyond the traditional birth – 5 years and to offer a more comprehensive range of activities to engage children and families. Importantly there would be expanded opportunities for rural and remote families to be involved through on-line experiences. Playgroup Tasmania is well positioned to continue the carriage of Children’s Week, due to the ground work of relationships and networks that have been developed over many years and is aware that broadening the reach of Children’s Week to include children of all ages is a priority.



4. Celebrating Children – National Children’s Week

National Children's Week alignment with the Wellbeing Domains

Being Loved and Safe	Children’s Week across Australia celebrates the achievements and skills of our children. The celebration in Tasmania allows families, support organisations and Governments to acknowledge that families are strong, children are loved and their communities are wrapped around them, even if things get tough. Children’s Week also demonstrates to children that their communities are safe and engaging places to be.
Participating	Children’s Week is all about participation. Children participate, their carers participate, the organisations that support families participate and Governments all participate in the wellbeing of families and children.
Being healthy	All activities must meet healthy criteria to be a part of Children’s Week. The emphasis is on demonstrating that healthy choices are available for families and children.
Learning	Children’s Week celebrations are opportunities for children to learn about their community, discover their abilities and to interact with others.
Having a positive sense of culture and identity	Children feel a sense of belonging to their community through the continuity of an event just for them every year. Playgroup Tasmania noted greater diversity in participants this year. Grandparents spoke of now bringing their next generation of little ones along.
Having material basics	A free event, with free activities and with a range of ways to access the events makes Children’s Week in Tasmania available to thousands of families without impacting on other material basics. Opportunity to connect with service providers that can assist families with access to material basics (e.g. NILS, Housing Choices)



Conclusion

Playgroup Tasmania consulted with over 150 families. We visited playgroups on King Island, the East Coast, Inner City Hobart and every where in between. We heard real stories about the lived experience of being a caregiver and bringing up children in Tasmania. There was great diversity in the stories and experiences we heard, but there was also some very common themes. This submission reflects the voices of those families, the expertise of our staff and our discussions with the broader community.

The wellbeing of children and their families is at the heart of the work of Playgroup Tasmania, and we thank the Tasmanian Government for the opportunity to contribute to the development of such an important strategy.

Should you wish to discuss our submission further, please contact:

Jacinda Armstrong

CEO Playgroup Tasmania

jacinda.armstrong@playgrouptas.org.au

0432 852 055



