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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR
THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Government Response to ACT Auditor-General's Report
Referral processes for the support of vulnerable children
(Report No. 7/2019)**

**Presented by
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Introduction

The ACT Government welcomes the ACT Auditor-General's Report: Referral Processes for the Support of Vulnerable Children (Report No. 7 of 2019) (the Report). The Report presents the results of an audit into the referral processes for vulnerable children across a select number of universal early childhood and family services provided by the Community Services Directorate (CSD) and Canberra Health Services (CHS) and their linkages to more targeted services and interventions.

The Report focuses on the Maternal and Child Health (MACH) service, Child and Family Centres and Child Development Service as examples of accessible and universal ACT Government contact points for families with the capacity to identify potentially vulnerable children and their needs for support. It aims to examine the effectiveness of processes in place utilised by these agencies to identify vulnerable children and to enable appropriate support to address their developmental and other needs.

The Report acknowledges the rich evidence of a range of services and supports put in place by the agencies for the children and families to address their specific needs and vulnerabilities. Recommendations are provided on how referral processes could be strengthened by improving administrative and procedural guidance and by improving public reporting and accountability for the delivery of services to vulnerable children and their families.

Universal Early Family Support Services

The Report acknowledges that the MACH service offers one of the best universal contact points for families during pregnancy and birth and that its nurses are significantly experienced in providing health care to mothers and children, including identifying programs and services that may be of benefit to vulnerable children and their families. Further opportunities are identified for engagement with these children and families, through improved coordination with related services to promote the referral of babies born with a registered ACT address to the MACH service and to improve the take-up of free developmental checks offered for children up to the age of four.

Referrals from Universal Early Family Support Services

The Report finds that all the audited services demonstrate linkages and referral pathways to a range of government and community programs and services. The findings indicate that referral processes could be strengthened by more comprehensive administrative and procedural guidance for staff and practitioners with respect to practical guidance on processes for referral to other programs and services.

Monitoring and Reporting

The Report identifies the opportunity to improve public reporting and accountability for the delivery of services to vulnerable children and their families through the development and implementation of a cross-agency performance and accountability framework that includes key strategic indicators of effectiveness in the delivery of outcomes, as well as outcomes monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

The ACT Government recognises the early years of a child's life set the foundation for their future health, development and learning and is committed to providing easily accessible universal support services to families during this important time. It is committed to ensuring vulnerable children and their families receive the supports they need. The insights provided by the Report help to identify current strengths and highlight opportunities for improvement.

The Government draws attention to reforms and reviews which have progressed since the audit began. The MACH service has undertaken significant service review and re-design – including restructuring of the MACH service model to allow for local follow up; a workforce strategy to maintain service capacity; and relocation of clinical services to meet community need. The broader Division of Women, Youth and Children has commenced the Early Family Support Initiative to review and respond to identified gaps in services for families experiencing vulnerabilities. Such measures recognise that universal services cannot compel people to utilise services but can continue to ensure the service is easily accessible, safe, outcome focused and responsive to the client's needs.

Early Support by Design (Early Support) is a human services-wide reform to shift the system from a crisis focused to one that enables early support and well-being. Key components of *Early Support* are intended to enhance system, practice and service responses for vulnerable families – including service responses that work with children in the context of their families, provide holistic responses, and are co-produced in partnership with people with lived experience in order to minimise barriers to access and engagement. At a systems level, such changes are intended to enable more families to have their needs met in the universal and early support continuum, with non-stigmatising and effective referrals where this will best benefit the family.

A key component of the broader Early Support work is the development of a first 1000 days strategy. This will drive a collective and coherent approach that ensures Canberra's children have the best start in life.

The importance of the first 1000 days of life, from conception to the age of two years, is now well understood as critical in establishing strong foundations that have benefits over the life course. Getting it right in this time period, and supporting families and communities to do so, is the surest way of setting children, families and communities up for success and

positive outcomes. The first 1000 days strategy will draw on the extensive evidence base, bring together what the ACT is currently doing to support this stage of life, and identify opportunities to further strengthen these supports.

The Report will assist to continue to focus our effort on these agreed government commitments and reform directions to effect system wide changes that will have further positive influence on the services and referral pathways explored in the audit.

Of the six recommendations, five are agreed and one is agreed-in-principle. Where the Government position is agreed-in-principle, the Government supports the policy intent of the recommendation but recognises that important contextual information and resourcing constraints must necessarily be considered in ensuring responses are effective and targeted for vulnerable children and families.

Government Position on Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Universal First Home Visit

Canberra Health Services should identify opportunities to improve take-up of the universal first 'home' visit offered by the Maternal and Child Health service by:

- a) improving communication and coordination with maternity services and privately practicing midwives in the ACT to promote the referral of babies born with a registered ACT address to the Maternal and Child Health service. This could also be through earlier ante-natal engagement or engagement at the hospital; and
- b) seeking information on, and analysing, reasons for non-take-up in order to identify and remove any potential barriers to accessing the service.

Government Position

Agreed

The Government supports the principle of identifying opportunities to optimise take-up of the universal first visit following birth by the MACH service, noting that ante-natal care at the hospital and in the community are important opportunities to engage with vulnerable families.

Currently all babies should be offered a referral to MACH for a first visit following birth. MACH will continue to communicate with birthing services across the ACT to support this process. MACH will also work with birthing services across the ACT to better understand why families decline a referral for the first visit following birth.

MACH will also monitor why families decline a first visit following birth when contacted by MACH. Reasons given can be analysed to identify any systemic barrier to access.

Any service development that takes place will consider the needs of the vulnerable families and will focus on increasing uptake of services.

The recently agreed development of an ACT specific first 1000 days strategy will have a positive impact on the coordination between all early childhood services due to its integrated and coherent approach to ensuring Canberra's children receive the best start in life.

Recommendation 2

Health and Development Checks

Canberra Health Services should identify opportunities to improve take-up of the health and development checks offered by the Maternal and Child Health service by seeking and analysing reasons for non-take-up in order to identify and remove any potential barriers to accessing the service.

Government Position

Agreed

MACH will continue to attempt to increase uptake by vulnerable families of developmental and health checks. This will be done by working towards targeting resources to areas of identified need. We will also attempt to increase uptake of developmental and health checks by seeking to stay engaged with vulnerable families from universal access at birth.

It is noted that a proportion of children will receive developmental checks from their family GP.

Recommendation 3

Administrative Guidance

Canberra Health Services should develop administrative and procedural guidance for the Maternal and Child Health service for the referral of children and their families to other programs and services, including:

- a) communication protocols with other programs and services, particularly external agencies; and
- b) guidance for follow-up of referrals, including mechanisms to identify the take up rate of referrals and ongoing service response.

Government Position

Agree

MACH will continue to provide clinically appropriate follow up for referral or other recommendations for vulnerable families.

The proposed redesign of the home visiting nursing service for vulnerable families will consider the role of a multidisciplinary team to support this work.

The MACH clinic structure supports nurses seeing clients for follow up as is clinically appropriate. MACH will continue to assess if this clinic structure is assisting in the support of families identified as vulnerable.

In order to support the services, MACH will formalise the process in a publicly available guidance document.

Recommendation 4

Administrative Guidance

As part of its development of an Integrated Management System for the Child Development Service and the Child and Family Centres, the Community Services Directorate should develop administrative and procedural guidance for the referral of children and their families to other programs and services, including:

- a) communication protocols with other programs and services, particularly external agencies; and
- b) guidance for follow-up of referrals, including mechanisms to identify the take up rate of referrals and ongoing service response.

Government Position

Agreed

The Children and Families Branch is currently developing an Integrated Management System (IMS). The IMS is a quality assurance system that embeds policies, procedures and practice guidelines in a compliance and risk management framework. The Children and Families IMS will provide practical day to day guidance for staff in the Child and Family Centres and the Child Development Service.

The four IMS modules being progressed for completion in 2019 are Child Development Service, Intake, Individual Work and Group Work. IMS modules will include communication protocols with other programs and services.

Procedure documents in the IMS will provide guidance for the follow up of referrals for priority families involved in case management with Child and Family Centres or those families identified by Child Development Service staff as having complex support needs.

Recommendation 5

Strengthening Service Planning

In order to improve program management and service delivery, and the collection of data and needs analysis information that informs strategic and systemic planning, the Canberra Health Services and the Community Services Directorate should regularly report on:

- a) identifying gaps in service pathways for clients and how these are being addressed;
- b) unmet need, where there is limited service capacity to provide timely responses to children and their families; and

c) any emerging trends in referral patterns which may indicate changes to need, and/or which could indicate areas where additional early support capacity would be beneficial.

Government Position

Agreed-in-principle

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Child and Family Centres and CHS is a mechanism to enable regular strategic planning between the two agencies. Regular meetings have been scheduled between Senior Executives with program responsibility and local area managers. Forward agendas for these meetings are expected to facilitate reporting on these issues across agencies.

Parameters of this reporting will necessarily be determined by existing data collections and systems, noting that there will be resourcing implications in implementing more robust and integrated data systems which allow both the early identification of service needs and pathways, and their measurement.

Recommendation 6

Cross-Agency Performance and Accountability Framework

In order to improve cross-agency planning and delivery of services to vulnerable children and their families, the Community Services Directorate, as the lead agency for the *Early Support* initiative, should develop and implement a cross-agency performance and accountability framework that identifies:

- a) outcomes sought for vulnerable children and their families, including key strategic indicators of effectiveness in the delivery of the outcomes; and
- b) a mechanism by which:
 - i) agencies' individual contributions to the outcomes that are sought are identified; and
 - ii) agencies' individual contributions are regularly and publicly monitored and reported against.

Government Position

Agreed

Early Support is a ten year, cross-Directorate initiative to shift the ACT's human services system from crisis focused to one that prioritises and enhances wellbeing through early support across Health, Education, Justice and Community Safety, and Community Services (the Human Services Cluster). The overarching goals of *Early Support* are to improve people's long-term life outcomes, enable self-determination, and achieve positive intergenerational change.

Early Support has developed a draft Outcomes Framework to drive collective action across the human services system to support this shift. The draft Framework identifies both longer term outcomes, as well as shorter term measures of success to track system progress toward targeting early support services to children and families who will most benefit from

earlier assistance. Draft Headline Indicators that could be used to track progress have also been identified.

It is expected that the draft Outcomes Framework will be tested with stakeholders throughout 2019-20, including with people with lived experience of the service system, and government and non-government agencies. This testing process will also identify a fit-for-purpose reporting Framework. Following this testing phase, the Outcomes Framework will be incrementally rolled into relevant performance monitoring processes, in order to help monitor progress and drive whole of system accountability to achieving individual and community outcomes, especially for vulnerable families.

In addition, *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028* (the Agreement) incorporates ten Action Plans developed around core and significant focus areas, one of which is *Children and Young People*. This area has a specific commitment to achieving the outcomes of delivering quality services that support positive development, health and wellbeing of children and young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children growing up safely in their families and communities. The Agreement and its Action Plans will continue to be a focus for all ACT Government agencies delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.