

Uniting Care Australia

**Statement to the Parliamentary Joint Committee of Public Accounts and
Audit**

Inquiry into the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Bill 2013

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On behalf of UnitingCare Australia I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to further share our assessment of the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Bill. We also wish to acknowledge and thank the Department of Finance and Deregulation for the manner in which they have engaged us through this process.

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the UnitingCare network of community and social service providers and is an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia. The UnitingCare network provides services to children, young people and families, indigenous Australians, people living with disabilities, the poor and disadvantaged, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and older people, in urban, rural and remote communities.

We are one of the largest providers of community services in Australia, delivering services to over 2 million people each year, with an annual turnover

of over \$2 billion and we employ 35,000 staff and 24,000 volunteers nationally. Our services support some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our society.

I am here today with my colleague Jim Mein, the Uniting Church's National Coordinator for responses to the Commonwealth's various not-for-profit reform issues.

We have taken a close interest in it, and the preceding Commonwealth Financial Accountability Review, because we believe it is a critical piece of legislative architecture which recognises the importance of collaboration and partnership between Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth entities.

The UnitingCare network has extensive experience in working with Commonwealth agencies to deliver community services. Our relationship with Commonwealth agencies is often viewed as one of "purchaser and provider", which has attached to it a series of reporting, control and compliance obligations which, in our experience, limits or at least restricts our ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances.

This is further exacerbated by the fact that the Government is a monopsony in the area of social and community services. This monopsony means that terms and conditions, including reporting and compliance obligations, contained in funding agreements are often non-negotiable and primarily serve to mitigate risk to the Commonwealth.

This Bill provides an opportunity to address this imbalance and enable a better more collaborative approach to addressing some of the key social challenges facing this country. We are particularly supportive of the Object of the Act, in particular Clause 5(c)(iv) which requires the Commonwealth to work cooperatively with others to achieve common objectives where practicable. This positive duty should be applauded. We are similarly supportive of Clauses 17 and 18.

We do however feel that the Bill could be strengthened if the term **others** in Clauses 5 and 17 were made more overt to identify the type of entities covered.

While we are supportive of this Bill we note that it does not address one of our ongoing concerns relating to the complexity of funding and reporting when delivering holistic people-centred services.

Addressing long-term social problems is inherently risky and complex requiring a mix of policy and funding solutions. These solutions rarely fall neatly into a single portfolio.

For example, we know that long-term unemployment is not simply a lack of access to the job market; it can be linked to learning difficulties, physical and mental health issues, family and relationship problems, lack of public transport, homelessness and many other contributing factors. These contributing factors are often being addressed in a number of other portfolios and jurisdictions which presents us with a number of challenges when delivering holistic services to people.

In our experience, providing a seamless and person-centred service delivers better outcomes for people. However to do this our agencies are required to blend and pool funding from different sources which creates a significant workload for our agencies. The pooling itself is not the issue but rather deconstructing the service support outcomes and financials so as to meet the individual program reporting and acquittal requirements, which can often mean reporting the same information in different formats to several Commonwealth agencies.

While this is a significant issue for the sector we recognise that it is not a simple one to fix. Accordingly we would encourage the Committee to ask the Department how this issue might be addressed within the Bill or in the development of subsequent rules or regulations.

Finally, the pace and manner in which this Bill is implemented will be critical to realising its full potential. As such given the importance of this Bill to our sector we think it is vital that the Government include key stakeholders in the implementation process.

Mr Mein and I are happy to take any questions from the Committee