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Budget Policy Division
Department of the Treasury
Langton Crescent
PARKES ACT 2600

UnitingCare Australia – 2018-19 Pre-Budget Submission

UnitingCare Australia is pleased to provide this submission to inform development of the 2018-19 Federal Budget.

Evidence shows that inequality is widening in Australia and the benefits of growth are not being used to create additional opportunity for the most marginalised¹. Redressing this situation should begin with a commitment to justice and full participation by all people in Australia, across all domains of life, recognising those who are most disadvantaged and marginalised, as well as the unique place of our First Peoples².

In its Budget 2017-18, the Australian Government states its aim is to ensure that “all Australians have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of our prosperous economy”³. UnitingCare Australia supports the Government’s intention to achieve this aim through a focus on:

- more, and better paying, jobs
- guaranteeing essential government services, and
- tackling cost of living pressures.

Toward these ends, we provide the following recommendations to Government in its development of the 2018-19 Federal Budget:

1. A tax and transfer system that values people to ensure they have adequate resources to live a decent life

UnitingCare Australia advocates comprehensive reform of Australia’s tax and transfer system to ensure that it is fair and enables a decent quality of life for all people in Australia. Acknowledging the extent to which inequality harms growth, we advocate reform that corrects inequities in the distribution of taxes and subsidies to make the economy fairer and wealth creation more equitable for all.

¹ OECD Economic Survey March 2017 <http://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/Australia-2017-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

² UnitingCare Australia Strategic Priorities 2017-2020

³ Australian Government, Budget 2017-18 <http://www.budget.gov.au/2017-18/content/bp1/download/bp1.pdf>

Our view is that realising effective tax reform needs to begin with consideration of how much tax is required to fund the services and supports needed to build a fair and decent society, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged.

Our economy must be built around the health and well-being needs of individuals and families. It should provide the mechanisms to deliver the necessary supports and services through all stages of life that will enable them to enjoy a good quality of life.

We recommend:

- The establishment of an independent commission to develop evidence-based benchmarks to ensure that income support payments are adequate for people to live a decent life.
- The establishment of a new national accord between government, civil society and business that outlines the responsibilities of each sector in building a fair, flourishing and just society.

2. Aged care services that are accessible for all, including those with special needs

We believe Australia should have an aged care system that ensures all older people are able to access the services of their choice that best meet their needs, goals and aspirations and enhance their quality of life. We believe that the aged care system must complement the health system, with a focus in both systems on preventive public health measures, reablement when it is needed, and access to services that maximise independent living and avoid unnecessary admissions to residential care.

There needs to be clear policy signals from the Australian Government about how they will support the sector to create a sustainable and high quality system that meets the requirements of an ageing population. This includes a commitment to ongoing, adequate funding for services to provide a reasonable standard of care for anyone in need of it.

We recommend:

- That Government lead a genuinely bipartisan approach to developing a vision for Australia that recognises the whole structure of our society is changing. For Australia to continue to thrive economically and culturally, we need a vision that builds on the social value of our older people and creates opportunities at the community level. The vision must address issues such as:
 - lifetime work, financial and housing security
 - the critical roles that informal carers and volunteers play in our community
 - concepts of retirement and superannuation investment
 - economic and built structures to support communities of the future.
- That Government fund the establishment of a Public/Community Sector partnership to ‘try, test and learn’ from alternative models of health/aged and end of life care/disability delivery to remote communities and marginalised individuals.
- Adequate funding to meet the demand for services, targeted to reducing the long waiting lists of individuals assessed for a high level service, and more generally adequate funding for services at an appropriate level to meet the expected standard of quality care for anyone identified as in need of those services.

3. Combatting elder abuse and promoting positive ageing

UnitingCare Australia advocates the need for a nationally-led, coordinated response to combatting elder abuse, consistent with the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission and aged care sector organisations⁴.

Specifically, we support the need for Government to resource the development and implementation of a national strategy to combat elder abuse that consolidates the work already commenced at a state and territory level. The strategy should facilitate clear definitions regarding elder abuse, improved data collection, measurement of trends, as well as effective prevention and response strategies and are evidence-based.

Our view is that the strategy should also focus on the prevention of elder abuse through promotion of 'positive ageing' in communities, and that Government has a key role to play in this context. We raise concerns regarding research and evidence that highlights the extent to which pervasive misconceptions, negative attitudes and assumptions about older people have created barriers to the development of good public policy on ageing and health⁵. Consequently, we advocate that the Federal Government takes a leading role in changing public discourse around population ageing, to enable recognition and utilisation of the capabilities present in our older people.

We recommend:

- That Government invest in the development and implementation of a national strategy to combat elder abuse, per the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission.
- That Government fund the establishment of a Public/Community Sector partnership to develop and implement a community advocacy strategy on 'quality ageing' to combat issues such as elder abuse.

4. Outcome measurement of services to ensure they are of high quality and, above all, safe.

We endorse the Australian Government's approach of *Commissioning for Better Outcomes* in community services, to enable more meaningful measurement and analysis of policy and program outcomes based on a client/consumer focus.

We advocate Government resourcing of comprehensive outcomes measurement across the range of community sector policies and programs to enable:

- Process evaluation, to assess the effectiveness of how programs are being implemented and their operational efficiency;
- Client outcome monitoring and evaluation (as opposed to focussing on *outputs*), to examine the extent to which the stated policy and program objectives are realised and have delivered improved quality of life for clients.

⁴ Australian Law Reform Commission. June 2017. *Elder Abuse – A National Plan to Combat Elder Abuse*. Available at: https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/publications/fr131_03.a_national_plan_to_combat_elder_abuse.pdf

⁵ World Health Organisation. 2016. *Valuing older people: time for a global campaign to combat ageism*. Available at: <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/94/10/16-184960/en/>

We advocate the need for continued partnership between Government agencies, service providers and other sector stakeholders to ensure that indicators of quality services for clients are identified, measured and monitored to ensure that services, supports and resourcing are sufficient to meet even the most complex client needs.

We recommend:

- That Government establish partnerships with relevant sector stakeholders to comprehensively measure community sector outcomes, to measure clients' interactions with the community services and support systems, and the cost/benefit ratio of services and supports being delivered.
- Support increased access by appropriate stakeholders to data captured through the Department of Social Service's Data Exchange, to allow for stronger outcomes measurement across a range of service areas, and to encourage greater consistency in data collection and analysis, toward the sharing of best practice.

5. A national plan to reduce homelessness and address housing accessibility

UnitingCare Australia advocates national collaboration to reduce the increasing incidence of homelessness, and to increase housing accessibility and affordability in Australia.

We advocate that the Federal Government takes a lead role in the development of a national roadmap that articulates responsibilities at all levels and provides for accountability and transparency in meeting the targets that it sets. This national plan must be developed in a collaborative manner through engagement and consultation with the community and sector stakeholders.

In addition to the obvious health and wellbeing benefits that secure, adequate housing confers on families and individuals, research shows that there is an economic benefit to Government investment that provides last resort housing to homeless people: for every \$1 invested in last resort beds, \$2.70 worth of benefits are generated for the community (over 20 years)⁶. This saving is delivered through reduced call on acute healthcare and emergency relief services that occurs when individuals have access to stable accommodation that enables reconnection with employment, education and social networks.

The Federal Government must take a leading role in coordinating action to address homelessness, consistent with the *Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare*⁷.

We recommend:

- The Federal Government invest in the development and delivery of a national plan to address homelessness that consolidates state and territory planning already undertaken and creates a consistent approach for measuring demand and supply of housing and homelessness services.

⁶ Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute. 2017. *The Case for Investing in Last Resort Housing*. Available at: http://d2hqr0jocqnenz.cloudfront.net/cdn/farfuture/GnZJcuel-3XLfNbj9BBjaMfGMyxFvS7UylgclBe7VU/mtime:1489622590/sites/default/files/docs/MSSI-IssuesPaper-10_Last-Resort-Housing_2017_0.pdf

⁷ Australian Government Department of Social Services. 2017. *Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare*. Available at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/review-of-australias-welfare-system/australian-priority-investment-approach-to-welfare>

6. Supporting people into sustained, meaningful employment

UnitingCare Australia endorses continued investment by Government in policies, programs and strategies to ensure that people have pathways into sustained employment.

To effectively identify successful employment strategies, we advocate development and implementation of comprehensive outcomes measurement and evaluation systems across the range of employment-related initiatives delivered by Government agencies – including those currently delivered by the Department of Employment (such as *Launch into Work*) and the Department of Social Services (such as *Try, Test and Learn*). Such systems will provide a clearer insight into the extent to which individuals engage with employment services, the welfare system and other supports, and enable Government to identify opportunities for policy and program reform to deliver better outcomes.

Where on-going unemployment creates a high level of on-going financial stress for families, or hinders the ability of parents to meet the developmental needs of children in the early years, or during pregnancy (see below), the Government should provide a job guarantee program to complement investment in early years interventions.

We recommend:

- A resource commitment across relevant Government agencies (Department of Employment, Department of Social Services) to invest in comprehensive outcomes measurement of employment programs and services to identify how job seekers interact with the broader welfare system, and what mechanisms are most effective in delivering sustainable employment outcomes.
- Funding of an outcomes measurement trial as a substantive component of a Department of Employment *Launch into Work* project, to measure job seeker progression and program effectiveness, linking this to the Government's *Investment Approach to Welfare*.

7. Early investment in children

Consistent with the economic model adopted by Government through its *Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare*, UnitingCare Australia advocates strong investment in prevention services and supports to ensure that children can grow and thrive in safe and supportive families and communities.

This includes providing supports for children (such as quality early childhood education and care services), as well as for their parents, families and carers (such as positive parenting, family skills programs and, where necessary, trauma informed care).

Such investment provides the most effective means to break cycles of poverty and address the complexity of issues that lead to children being removed from their families and placed into out-of-home care. Given the extremely high and rising rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child removal, priority should be given to providing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that will ensure the healthy development of their children from conception onwards.

We recommend:

- Government investment in launching an intensive early-years development program, to support the healthy development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from conception onwards, and learning, social and emotional development of children. The program could entail provision of pre-pregnancy health, nutrition and family planning services, and include access to therapeutic early childhood education and care that focuses on social or language development, addresses trauma, provides intensive supported playgroups, and programs for parents and children such as home visits that engage families in familiar environments.
- To complement the above approach, Government investment in the piloting of a jobs guarantee scheme alongside the early-years development program (above), to address unemployment
- Increased investment from Government to facilitate universal access to quality and affordable early childhood education and care for all Australian children, but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as amongst the most disadvantaged.

UnitingCare Australia also advocates the specific need for immediate action at a national level to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home-care.

We support the recommendation of the *Family Matters 2017* report for the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Strategy that includes generational targets to eliminate over-representation and further⁸.

Further to this, we recommend:

- Resourcing for establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, with oversight to monitor and advocate on national, state and territory issues impacting the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and the laws, policies and programs that impact on them.

8. Accessible, quality services for all people with disability including those not eligible under the NDIS

In support of the provision of quality services for people with a disability, UnitingCare Australia supports the following recommendations from the recent report compiled by the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee through its Inquiry into the Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities.

Recommendation 2

4.49 The committee recommends that the government takes to the Disability Reform Council for consideration a proposal to establish an Office of Disability Strategy under the oversight of the Disability Reform Council, as a coordination agency for the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and for the revised National Disability Strategy after 2020.

⁸ SNAICC. 2017. *Family Matters Report 2017*. Available at: <http://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Family-Matters-Report-2017.pdf>

Recommendation 4

4.51 The committee recommends that specific measurable goals for implementation of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 are created, that these are routinely monitored, and data is collected and reported biannually to the Disability Reform Council, the Office of Disability Strategy (if created) and presented to parliament.

Recommendation 5

4.52 The committee recommends the development of best practice guidelines for detailed consultation with people with disability and their advocates under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020.

We recommend:

- Funding to support implementation of the above recommendations.
- Regarding the continued roll-out of the NDIS, we forward the need for greater investment by government in the following specific areas:
 - Sufficient resourcing to reduce the currently excessive period of time taken to review individual plans through ensuring to mitigate disruption and lag.
 - Investment to ensure that systems are efficient and that excessive delays currently occurring with the processing of payment to service providers are eliminated.

Conclusion

The 2018-19 Budget provides an opportunity to rebalance the economy, prioritising the strengthening of our social infrastructure and investment in people as the means to deliver the greatest return on investment of Government resources.

We would be pleased to provide further commentary on the recommendations made in this submission.

Yours faithfully



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UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the UnitingCare Network, one of the largest providers of community services in Australia. With over 1,600 sites, the network employs 40,000 staff and is supported by the work of over 30,000 volunteers. We provide services to children, young people and families, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, the poor and disadvantaged, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and older Australians in urban, rural and remote communities.

UnitingCare Australia works with and on behalf of the UnitingCare Network to advocate for policies and programs that will improve people's quality of life. UnitingCare Australia is committed to speaking with and on behalf of those who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.