

# Families, Children and Local Government

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Planner-coordinator, catalyst, facilitator, service provider and service funder now characterise Local Government's involvement in children's services and the human services generally.

A 1987 report prepared for the Local Government Ministers, *Community Development, Human Services and Local Government* presents a national overview of the increased role of councils in human services clearly signalling that the debate of the 70s about whether Local Government should be involved has been replaced with questions about the basis of that involvement and implementation issues.

Local Government's national peak body, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) in responding to the developments in human services in 1986 established a working party as a national forum for discussion and further promotion of Local Government's role.

In children's services as with other human services Local Government in recent years has placed more emphasis on its local planning, co-ordinating roles.

In some states this emphasis has arisen from an appreciation that the service providing agency role is too limited and can lead to increased financial commitment with only limited local control. In others there has been greater appreciation of the need to acknowledge council responsibilities as a sphere of government and the importance of identifying it as the locus for local planning. Pressures for needs based planning have therefore struck a particularly receptive note with many councils.

Councils are becoming more aware of the long term repercussions of chasing the specific service funding carrot, both in terms of being left with either unexpected financial responsibilities and/or a service mix that is not necessarily appropriate to local needs.

Many councils have therefore come of age and have moved from agency status on behalf of other spheres of government into the local planning authority.

The fact that the service range for young families can be quite broad and diverse has added weight to the requirement for overall and integrated planning rather than a service by service or functional department approach.

For example, in Victoria the range of services for which Local Government can be responsible for planning, co-ordinating and in many instances providing, is extensive and may include all or some of the following:

- Child Care: full or part-time, occasional and emergency
- Family Day Care
- Out of School Hours Care
- Vacation Care
- Family Support Programs (Commonwealth/State funded)
  - family counselling
  - family aide program
  - financial counselling
- Specialist Services — early intervention programs, disability services

- Kindergartens
- Substitute Care (home or centre based) — short or long term
- Reception Care
- Maternal and Child Health Services
- Pre-school Dental Clinics
- Toy Libraries
- Playgroups
- Neighbourhood Houses/Community Houses
- Family Planning Clinics
- Immunization
- Head Lice Program

However this very complexity, coupled with the planning approach, which has been promoted by Commonwealth and State governments has produced its own tensions.

These tensions have been exacerbated at the Local Government-Commonwealth Government interface because whilst Local Government has moved from a service specific role to a planning one, the Commonwealth has moved to a more limited targeted approach. That is the National Child Care Policy, if indeed there is one, is not about national directions in child care as were enunciated in 1974 in the Social Welfare Commission's *Project Care: Children, Parents, Community* but only about target objectives. The overall vision and direction for the country which should be articulated by the national government has been replaced with a more pragmatic and programmatic view limited to the Commonwealth's own services.

The fact that State and Local Government may have accepted the earlier messages over interlinked needs based planning, intergovernmental co-operation and more flexible funding arrangements, tends in 1988 to be seen as creating obstacles to Commonwealth objectives.

The recently announced National Child Care Strategy specifies a four year plan to develop an additional 30,000 places:

- 20,000 outside school hour places;
- 4,000 family day care places; and
- 2,000 occasional care places

In announcing the places the Federal Government spoke of commitment to a new and extended partnership between Commonwealth and State and Territories and Local Government in the provision of those extra places and its intent to build on the valuable co-operative arrangements established over the 85-88 triennium.

Local Government in welcoming the announcement of extra places has been evaluating its involvement in the last triennium and the ALGA has produced a position paper as a basis for discussion regarding council participation in the National Strategy over the next four years:-

"The Australian Local Government Association submits that the future participation of Local Government in the Children's Services Program must be on a partnership basis with the Commonwealth and States. Local Government does not wish to continue its participation in the program under similar conditions to those of the past five years.

"As a democratically elected sphere of government, similar to the Commonwealth

and States, Local Government is accountable to its local communities and has too often shouldered both the blame and responsibility for inefficient and ineffective national and state policies and programs. It is in the interest of all three spheres of government that they work together to ensure that scarce resources are allocated in a cost effective manner to benefit the families and children of Australia.

"Local Government's position on its future participation in the Children's Services Program is outlined below.

## PROGRAM PLANNING

- Formal and on-going governmental consultation with Local Government in the decision/planning stages to ensure that local needs and priorities are met within the national needs based planning framework and priorities.
- Recognition of local needs based planning in consultation with government planning objectives and funding arrangements.
- Recognition of local land use planning processes and adequate lead time to allow Local Governments sufficient time for local planning and development processes.
- Flexible models for all services but particularly to meet the needs of rural communities.
- Alternative models for occasional care.

## PROGRAM AGREEMENTS

- Agreements to be based on recognition of Local Government as a sphere of government.
- Agreements to give greater autonomy to Local Government under agreed accountability requirements.
- Negotiated agreements to reflect the partnership between Local, State and Commonwealth Governments.
- Capital funding agreements to recognise Local Government's planning and co-ordination role:
  - \* provide for both standard designs and agreed alternative approaches including renovation and construction to Local Government designs;
  - \* allow Local Government to call tenders for construction/renovation or appoint State Department of Housing as an agent to construct centre on council land;
  - \* detailed performance indicators for construction time, quality and payments.
- Recurrent funding agreements:
  - \* to specify agreed indexed levels of funding over term of agreement with provision for parties to alter terms;
  - \* to provide for Local Governments to clearly delegate sponsorship in whole or part to community organisation;
  - \* to provide for performance indicators as the basis for accountability, with removal of individual centre budget scrutiny for Local Government sponsors.

## PROGRAM RESOURCING

- Capital funds at an agreed level to be advanced to Local Governments following the conclusion of construction to enable the service to be developed to an operational stage.
- Service establishment funds at an agreed level to be advanced to Local Governments.
- Guaranteed recurrent funds to be at a level to permit centres to be financially secure and with acceptable fee levels and service quality.
- Broadbanding of centre-based funding (where a number of centres operate within a given Local Government area) to reduce administrative requirements and increase flexibility within centre staffing and programs.
- Indexed operational subsidies for child care, family day care and occasional child care centres.
- Agreed funding of a planning/co-ordinating position at the municipal and/or regional level.
- Security of recurrent funding over three year periods.
- Increased and adequate funding for building maintenance costs.
- Acknowledgement of all costs in providing child care eg. realistic on-costs, hidden administrative costs.
- Adequate funding for child care centres' co-ordinator/director position.
- Improved funds for family day care and out of school hour services.
- Funding of personnel for resourcing special needs services.''

One of the matters referred to in program resourcing is the funding of planning/co-ordinating positions at the municipal and/or regional level.

In both NSW and Victoria Local Governments have sought continuation of existing council positions but on a shared funding basis thus reducing the cost for the Commonwealth per position, whilst allowing new positions to be funded. Victoria proposed new functions for the position of Family and Children Service Officers as follows:

1. **RESOURCING**
  - services
  - processes and mechanisms
2. **PLANNING**
  - rationalisation
  - integration of services
3. **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**
4. **MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**
  - skills development
  - conflict resolution
  - organisation of meetings/seminars
5. **INFORMATION**
  - dissemination
  - input
  - compilation

6. **INSERVICE**
  - planning
  - co-ordination
7. **CO-ORDINATION**
  - of services
  - of issues
  - linking people and programs
  - facilitating agency co-operation
  - of resources
8. **POLICY DEVELOPMENT ON CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY SERVICES**
  - strategies
  - implementation

### 9. ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING STRUCTURES FOR MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAM FUNCTIONING

The Municipal Association of Victoria gained support from the State Minister for Community Services for these positions and a commitment from the State to consider joining the funding partnership in 88-89. A similar situation applied in NSW but unfortunately the Federal Minister for Community Services, Neal Blewett, rejected the offer arguing that the Department's own staff and State Planning Committees could carry out the functions.

Local Government is concerned that its local knowledge and expertise is undervalued and that its viewpoint is so easily rejected whilst at the same time its involvement and financial contribution is sought.

In the area of funding where Councils have attempted to make their situation more secure and predictable, frustration has also been the order of the day.

Discussions have now dragged on for over two years between the Office of Child Care and the MAV to arrive at a negotiated agreement for recurrent funding of child care centres which reflects the partnership relationship between the Commonwealth and councils.

Whilst the Department and the Association and the ALGA wish to resolve the matter the inability to do so does not auger well for developments under the new strategy.

On a more positive role in the intergovernmental area, work that is being undertaken in children's services under the umbrella of the Federally initiated rationalisation exercise may point the way for improved co-operative arrangements between the Commonwealth and Local Governments.

In 1988, the Office of Local Government funded a total of ten rationalisation projects aimed at improving administrative, funding and service provision arrangements between the Commonwealth and Councils.

Three projects are in the area of children's services, viz:

1. Children's services and administrative and policy issues: Local Government and shires associations of NSW and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services;

2. Children's services informations needs project: City of Melbourne;
3. Regional children's needs based planning study: Inner Melbourne Metropolitan Association.

The Melbourne City Council project aims to develop an integrated model for the information needs of children's services including information required for administration, planning, evaluating and funding accountability.

Melbourne City Council in its brief for the projects indicates that it will investigate how Local Government can meet the needs of its expanded role in co-ordination and planning of children's services, how to integrate evaluation with other information systems and with information systems of Local, State and Commonwealth Governments.

The following anticipated advantages have been identified by the council.

*For Services* (whether community or council managed) —

- administrative time saving;
- access to neighbourhood and municipal information which would enhance service and community participation in local planning processes.

*For Local, State and Federal Governments* —

- information pertinent to planning across the whole municipality; i.e. a total picture rather than specific view;
- administrative streamlining of information;
- timely and accurate access to information;
- co-operative approach to information compilation and enhanced information;
- other Local Governments — clear definition of information needs, existing problems constraining comprehensive information and data compilation, etc.

The Office of Child Care together with the Office of Local Government and the ALGA were involved in detailed discussions prior to the project's approval and the Office of Child Care along with representatives of Community Services Victoria, community representatives and the MAV are involved on the Steering Committee.

**This co-operative involvement, together with an evaluation exercise, should help ensure the results can be integrated to all levels and so promote future partnership between the spheres of government in planning and providing children's services.**