



Children's Ground Ltd.

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Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory

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Summary of Submission by Children's Ground Ltd

Children's Ground is a non-profit organisation, founded in 2011, to address systemic disadvantage in Aboriginal communities in Australia, with a special focus on the next generation of children and their education. It was established in response to the perpetual failure of government, despite strong economic growth and countless well-funded initiatives, to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and inequity all too prevalent in these communities. Children's Ground builds upon decades of work and the tireless campaigning of Aboriginal people who have lived this shocking reality; watching their children cycle through the child protection and criminal justice systems, becoming statistics of school failure, poor health, incarceration and early death.

Building on the work and vision of Elders and community leaders, Children's Ground was first designed by Jane Vadeloo and Arrernte leader William Tilmouth after two decades of work. It was then incubated and developed through a thorough three-year incubation period in partnership with the Australian Government's Social Innovation Unit. This process refined the model and capacity to achieve long term systemic change. As such Children's Ground is both an approach, or strategic model, that can be scaled as well as an organisation that delivers the approach. The plan is to evidence this model in three to five communities. If the key outcomes that are expected are indeed achieved the evidence can be used to re-orient existing investment to an affective long term model for change that places Aboriginal people at the heart of the solution.

Children's Ground is designed so that families can realise their aspirations for the next generation of children: to be free from trauma and suffering, enjoy equity and safety; be able to grow into adulthood happy and healthy with agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future. It is a vision where no child becomes yet another child protection or juvenile detention statistic that demands a royal commission.

Children's Ground uses a place-based methodology, developing services in collaboration with local communities. By strengthening communities and looking at the needs of children from pre-birth to 25 years, Children's Ground aims to create generational change, reducing the risk of children falling into the dysfunctional cycle that currently leads to disproportionate rates of welfare interventions and criminal offending.

Children's Ground 8 principles : Start Early; Work with everyone; Deliver the whole; Innovate; Recognise ability; Deliver the best; Child, family and community led; Stay for the long term

Children's Ground takes a new and radical approach to tackle the social, structural and economic inequities, guided by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute report "*Review of the Evidence Base in Relation to Early Childhood Approaches to Support Children in Highly Disadvantaged Communities for the Children's Ground Project*" (October 2011), **annexed** to this submission (Murdoch report).

The Murdoch report identifies that the following factors hinder current efforts to address the social dysfunction associated with disadvantaged communities:

- *they have not been sustained for long enough,*
- *they are not comprehensive enough,*
- *they are not sufficiently well integrated,*
- *they have not involved families and communities in planning, service delivery and evaluation,*
- *they have not been based on a clear understanding of why problems occur and how they can be remedied,*
- *they have been unduly reliant upon services (particularly evidence based programs) as the major tool to achieve change, and*
- *they have failed to address the underlying causes of the problems (p10).*

The Murdoch report proposes the following critical points for a successful approach:

- *Wrap-around, integrated services, which provide responsive and comprehensive support for children and families*
- *Respectful relationships, engaging and empowering individuals and the community collectively*
- *Collaborative partnerships between multi-levels of government and private enterprise*
- *Governance structures that support community involvement and new collaborative partnerships*
- *Sustained effort and commitment. Significant change can only be achieved through long-term resourcing with an ongoing commitment to clearly articulated and shared goals.*
- *Monitoring and evaluation. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation processes need to be built in from the start of the initiative to determine the effectiveness of the program and contribute to the Australian and international evidence base.*
- (p29)

Most importantly, the Murdoch report articulated that it is not helpful to predetermine the type of services that should be provided. The focus must be on a flexible approach that builds partnerships of respect between service providers and families, governments and communities, and allows the nature of the services to be negotiated within these partnerships (p25-26).

Children's Ground strives to embody the approach articulated in the Murdoch report. The following key principles underpin the work of Children's Ground:

- Start early, working with every child and every family across the community, to achieve the critical mass required for sustained community change over a generation.
- Stay for a generation
- Assume and recognise ability rather than see and treat people as incompetent and needing 'help'
- provide opportunity not 'fixing'
- Operate all year round to deliver the whole, because silos don't work
- Expect and deliver the best, combining old and new knowledge in innovative approaches
- Be child-, family- and community-led.

Funding for the Children's Ground platform in its first operational location in Kakadu West Arnhem comes from a mix of non-government, government and philanthropic sources, allowing flexibility and a long term commitment. The foundational partner was the Mirarr people and their organization, Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, based in Jabiru, in Kakadu West Arnhem.

Governance for Children's Ground work is embedded in the Bininj community, with local directors. Bininj people are employed by Children's Ground. Evaluation is ongoing, with our first major analysis providing useful baselines, reflections and learning (see *Progress and Evaluation Report 2016*). However the data collection and measurement process has flexibility to develop according to the requirements of the community. Children's Ground is also guided by a team of external research advisers.

Children's Ground and the Bininj community of Kakadu West Arnhem have developed a service platform that addresses priorities identified by families across five key areas: learning and wellbeing, family health and wellbeing, community development and wellbeing, economic development and wellbeing, and cultural development and wellbeing. Children's Ground is committed to a 25-year process, supporting local families to lead genuine and sustainable change across these key areas.

Learning and wellbeing: Initially focussing on children aged 0-8, with early childhood education, after school and holiday programs and re-engagement support for children not attending school. Learning activities are bi-lingual with a strong focus on cultural activities, promote inter-generational learning where families engage with their children's learning, are developed with families and the community, train and employ local community members, and partner with government and non-government agencies to create integrated networks.

An example of Children's Ground work to address disadvantaged children: Children's Ground worked jointly with the Jabiru Area School to assist a young boy in danger of dropping out of the formal education system. His attendance in learning increased from 1.5% in 2013 to 17% in 2014, 31% in 2015 and 76.5% in the first half of 2016.

Family health and wellbeing: Health education and promotion (integrating with learning and culture); Family health planning and support, including maternal and early childhood health; Nutrition; Social and emotional wellbeing services with a focus on responding to trauma; First Nations health and wellbeing practices; Environmental health; and Consumer control and health literacy.

An example of Children's Ground activities to address disadvantaged youth: The development and delivery of the Yawkyawk Program in 2015 was a Bininj-led response to concerns for at-risk young adolescent women in relation to sexual health, unplanned pregnancy and substance misuse.

Key community development activities:

- » A multigenerational Community Centre
- » Community governance and engagement
- » Morle Boys supporting the role of men in strengthening community wellbeing
- » Celebrations
- » Events that strengthen the social fabric, promoting safety and wellbeing

Economic development and wellbeing: Significant employment of Bininj, establishment of arts enterprise, scoping of other enterprises.

Cultural development and wellbeing: Regular cultural happenings have been restored after long absences such as Bininj Kunborrk, with On-Country learning, mentoring by senior artists, art classes, and after school walks with elders and Traditional Owners.

As detailed in our *Progress and Evaluation Report 2016* (attached), the key outcomes from Children's Ground's first two years working in partnership with children and families in Kakadu West Arnhem include:

- A whole generation of children who were previously not engaged now has access to early years learning
- In 2015, over 80 per cent of children aged 0-8 in the region accessed learning activities.
- Participation rates of 0-5 year olds in early years learning doubled in the region, building foundations for future learning and wellbeing.
- A new local workforce has emerged, engaging people experiencing chronic unemployment in flexible employment (on average 50 local people are employed each month with a retention rate greater than 80 per cent)
- Families are supported to engage with their children in an intergenerational environment
- Cultural life, knowledge and practice is being honoured and supported
- Economic wellbeing has been supported through employment and training, an exciting emerging arts enterprise, and financial management initiatives. (Progress Report p3)

After our first two years of operations, the Bininj people of Kakadu West Arnhem, supported by Children's Ground, have created the foundations for long term change: children, surrounded by family, are now engaged in critical early childhood education, adults are engaging in meaningful employment and a community has mobilised around the future of their children.

Children's Ground was initially formulated as a model after two decades of working with the existing service provision approach in Alice Springs. The Chair of Children's Ground, William Tilmouth, is an Arrernte man. Aboriginal people in town camps and low income areas of Alice Springs are requesting that Children's Ground be established in the Alice Springs region. Discussions with community members, organisational leaders and Government are exploring the feasibility of bringing Children's Ground to Alice Springs.

After two years of working in Kakadu West Arnhem, Bininj people are starting to see the benefits of the Children's Ground approach. William Tilmouth articulates this new beginning: *"Now there is a new reality, supported by Children's Ground but created by the community. They are devising solutions that are practical and pragmatic and that achieve safety, education, good health and employment while protecting our cultures. Let's work with them and empower them to have choice and to feel proud about the decisions they make and the outcomes they achieve"*.

Children's Ground advocates that other communities in the Northern Territory consider this kind of community-led model where existing services have not been leading to positive change for children and families. It does not necessarily mean services would be provided by Children's Ground. What is needed throughout the Northern Territory – and arguably in several other Australian states - is a new approach, characterised by partnerships between communities, families, agencies and governments that put families and communities at the centre of service development, with secure funding that allows an approach that is flexible in response to community needs and recognises that meaningful change takes time.

The Children's Ground *Annual Report 2015*, *Kakadu West Arnhem Community Report April 2016*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute report, *Social Investment Prospectus* and Children's Ground *Progress and Evaluation Report 2016* are **annexed** with links or attachments to this submission. Please also find a letter of support from both Learne Dunne, Principal of Jabiru Area School, and Dr Paul Rivalland from the Jabiru Clinic.

Encl.

Please find below a list of links to supporting documentation for Children's Ground's submission to the *Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory*. These have also been submitted in hardcopy.

These documents can be found on our website at

<http://www.childrensground.org.au/page/18/publications>

- [Annual Report 2015](#)
- [Community Report 2016](#)
- Murdoch Children's Research Institute ["Review of the evidence Base in Relation to Early Childhood Approaches to Support Children in Highly Disadvantaged Communities for the Children's Ground Project"](#).
- [Children's Ground Prospectus](#)

Please also find annexed to this submission our *Progress and Evaluation Report 2016*, which has not yet been publicly released.