

Wellbeing strategies for children and young people

Lessons for development and implementation



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We acknowledge and celebrate Australia’s First Peoples.

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Executive Summary

Children and young people have needs distinct from those of adults. The first five years of a child's life are the most critical years for brain development, with brain connections developing faster than during any other life stage.¹ Extensive evidence shows that the brain isn't fully developed until around the age of 25.² And yet, consideration of how to nurture the needs of children and young people in those critical years is often absent from policy processes designed to improve the wellbeing of the population.

Wellbeing approaches to policy making are at various stages of development across Australia. This includes the national-level Measuring What Matters framework, the ACT wellbeing framework, and the NSW Performance and Wellbeing budgeting framework. To further strengthen these approaches and support government decision-making, the wellbeing of population groups that have unique and diverse needs – such as children and young people – should be carefully considered.

Child and youth wellbeing strategies are one mechanism that can help ensure that programs and policies impacting children and young people meet their needs. These strategies serve as decision-making guides, with successful strategies ensuring children and young people have the opportunity to participate in their design. The recently released Australian Government Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (Early Years Strategy) provides an excellent start in putting the wellbeing needs of children in their early years at the heart of children's and family programs. But we are lacking a mechanism to ensure all children and young people, including those in their middle years and young adults, are having their wellbeing needs met.

To better understand how child and youth wellbeing strategies could support improved government decision-making, this paper analyses four jurisdictions that have implemented them: Tasmania, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. Through analysing

publicly available documents and conducting interviews with key policymakers and child and youth advocates in each jurisdiction, we sought to better understand the benefits, key learnings, policy impact, and processes that enabled each child and youth wellbeing strategy to achieve impact.

Our analysis revealed three key ways child and youth wellbeing strategies have improved government ways of working in these jurisdictions:

1. Breaking down silos and enhancing collaboration
2. Elevating the importance of child and youth wellbeing
3. Creating culture change and improving the way policy is developed

There were clear examples of strategies impacting policy and programs. For example, the Ka Ora, Ka Oka Healthy School Lunches Programme was a key program influenced by New Zealand's child and youth wellbeing framework and the broader wellbeing budget, and has improved the wellbeing of children and young people across a number of domains. Similarly, the Kids Care Clinics program, currently being implemented in Tasmania and developed as part of Tasmania's child and youth wellbeing strategy, has the potential to improve the health and wellbeing outcomes of young children identified as vulnerable.

By drawing on the learnings from these jurisdictions, Australian governments can strengthen the way policy is developed to more effectively improve the wellbeing of children and young people. A wellbeing strategy on its own is not enough to instigate change – it needs to be developed and implemented in the right way.

We propose three broad ways Australian governments could enhance child and youth wellbeing through policy:

1. The Commonwealth should enhance the Measuring What Matters framework's ability to promote child and youth wellbeing by adding a future generations focus and integrating it with the national Early Years Strategy.
2. The Australian Government should strengthen the Early Years Strategy by placing it under the responsibility of a single cabinet-level minister, publicising key targets, providing

adequate resourcing for new programs and policies under the strategy, and integrating the work of state and territory governments under the strategy.

3. Australian governments should develop wellbeing strategies that span the whole of childhood and youth. Importantly, these strategies should meaningfully and appropriately include children and young people in their design through consultation or co-design, and ensure strong governance and accountability mechanisms.

Why we need child and youth wellbeing strategies

The concept of taking a wellbeing approach to government has been gaining ground in Australia and internationally, with two-thirds of OECD countries now with an advanced wellbeing framework.³ This momentum can be seen through the introduction of Measuring What Matters - Australia's national wellbeing framework. In addition, more than half of Australian states and territories are adopting wellbeing frameworks and wellbeing tools to inform policy.

A wellbeing approach helps the government ensure that every person has the ability to achieve a good quality of life now and into the future. This approach involves systems change within government that goes beyond simply advocating for specific policies or additional funding for particular departments or programs. Importantly, the approach is defined by four key elements that outline the way governments should work to ensure the wellbeing of people and the natural environment is considered in everything that it does. These elements are:

- Holistic thinking and breaking down silos between wellbeing 'domains'.
- Taking a long-term view including consideration of future generations.
- Placing emphasis on prevention and looking upstream to tackle the root causes of problems.
- Involving the people most likely to be affected by decisions in the design of policies.

Measuring What Matters and other wellbeing frameworks developed by states and territories are a good start in Australia's move towards a wellbeing approach to policy.

However, more needs to be done to ensure the wellbeing needs of population groups with specific and diverse needs are met, including children and young people. For example, only three of the 50 indicators in the Measuring What Matters Framework include children and young people under the age of 25, and these indicators are restricted to the Prosperous dimension, focussing on education only.

When we do examine existing data on child and youth wellbeing (ages 0-25), we find that Australia has a long way to go in improving outcomes: almost half of Year 4 students report being bullied at least monthly⁴; over one-quarter of children aged 5-14 are considered overweight or obese⁵; one in six children aged 0-14 live in relative poverty⁶; 14% of young people aged 4-17 have a diagnosed mental disorder⁷; and two-thirds of young people report that climate change is having a negative impact on their mental health⁸.

The dimensions of wellbeing identified as important for children and young people differ from those of adults.⁹ Children and young people are often exposed to a diverse range of policy interventions and programs across areas like child and family health, early learning and education, and child protection. Responsibility for these policies and programs usually sit across multiple departments and different levels of government, creating siloes. This fragmentation has been identified as a key barrier in achieving child and youth justice and wellbeing reform in Australia.¹⁰ Therefore, to ensure the wellbeing needs of children and young people are met, wellbeing policy approaches need to take a specific focus on this group.

What is child and youth wellbeing?

We define **child and youth wellbeing** as multidimensional, child-centred, and context-specific. Child and youth wellbeing is shaped and influenced by a complex system of relationships and environments, starting from the individual and factors such as family, friends, and school, to macro-level factors such as local governments, political systems, economic systems, and social norms.¹¹ The Nest framework, developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), is the most prominent definition of multidimensional child and youth wellbeing in Australia. Developed in consultation with children and young people in 2012, the framework highlights six key dimensions children and young people need in order to thrive.¹² These dimensions are: being valued, loved, and safe; having material basics; being healthy; learning; participating; and having a positive sense of identity and culture.¹³ An additional domain of 'environments and sustainable futures' was recently incorporated into the framework as part of the Future Healthy Countdown 2030.¹⁴

One way of ensuring a greater focus on the wellbeing of children and young people is through the development and implementation of child and youth wellbeing strategies.

Wellbeing strategies (or frameworks) are decision-making guides. They can include goals or wellbeing domains that should or must be considered in decision-making, and can also include ways of working or decision-making tools. Some strategies are made up of many components, often including measurements, while others are essentially a guide for decision-makers regarding what they need to consider when making policy.¹⁵

The Australian Government Early Years Strategy released in 2024¹⁶ provides a good starting point to ensure that Commonwealth Government policies, programs and services are better connected for children and families in their early years. However, there is room for improvement. Deeper involvement of state and territory governments would help in supporting a more integrated approach to the wellbeing of children in their early years across the country. Furthermore, stronger accountability measures would help ensure that ministers are held accountable for the success of the strategy. Importantly, the Early Years Strategy incorporates key outcome areas, developed based on consultation with parents, practitioners, and young children themselves (via activities such as community painting/artwork and

semi-structured discussions)¹⁷, which can help ensure that programs and services are targeting the right things. However, an absence of a strategy for those in middle childhood, late adolescence and young adulthood means that there is no process in place to ensure that the wellbeing needs are being met for many children and young people. Additionally, adopting a life course approach ensures that any gains made in the early years continue to provide children and young people the opportunity to flourish. It also helps ensure that we can more easily link improvements to policy in the early years to better outcomes throughout later childhood and youth.

Child and youth wellbeing strategies can also help to achieve the broader aims of population-level wellbeing frameworks noted above. They do this by:

- Adopting a **long-term lens** by ensuring children and young people have good health and wellbeing, and an expanded set of opportunities.
- Helping achieve systems-change by **breaking down silos and fostering collaboration** between different policy departments.
- Supporting a **more preventative and upstream approach** to policymaking by intervening early to improve outcomes over the life course. For example, tackling root causes of child

poverty has long-term social and economic consequences including improved health and educational outcomes.

- **Including children and young people in their design** - a key element of wellbeing approaches.

In addition to these broader benefits, child and youth wellbeing strategies have the important advantage of ensuring that the wellbeing of children and young people, which is distinct to that of adults, is the primary consideration when developing policies that affect them. However, it is important to note that a wellbeing strategy needs to be developed and implemented in the right way in order to achieve systemic change. This paper provides guidance on how governments can do this to ensure long-term impacts.

Now is an opportune time to consider how policy can better support the wellbeing of children and young people. The Australian Government Early Years Strategy and state and territory initiatives such as the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy¹⁸, the WA Wellbeing Monitoring Framework¹⁹ and the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024²⁰ are key examples of Australian governments embarking on a journey to ensure that the wellbeing of children and young people is the primary consideration when developing policy that specifically affects them. These initiatives can be supported by whole-of-government wellbeing policy approaches, such as the Measuring What Matters framework, which provide a more overarching and holistic lens to policy development. This momentum should be harnessed more broadly across Australian governments.

Key components of child and youth wellbeing strategies in Wales, Scotland, New Zealand and Tasmania

We examined four child and youth wellbeing strategies, developed and implemented by governments in Wales (2021), Scotland (2006), New Zealand (2019), and Tasmania (2021), to better understand how the strategies support the development and implementation of policy that impact children and young people.²¹ We also examined how child and youth wellbeing strategies interact with broader whole-of-population wellbeing frameworks. The age range in scope of each of the child and youth wellbeing strategies was unspecified for some strategies. The New Zealand and Tasmanian frameworks defined children and young people as under the age of 25.

Publicly available documents were analysed alongside interviews (conducted between July and October 2023) with key policymakers and child and youth advocates in each jurisdiction to better understand:

- the core components of each wellbeing strategy,
- the benefits of the strategies,
- the extent to which policy impact and systems-level change has been achieved, and
- the mechanisms through which this has been attained.

A description of each of the strategies and the key components they comprise are provided in Appendix 1.

These child and youth wellbeing strategies comprise similar components such as wellbeing domains and decision-making principles (see Table 1). The Australian Government Early Years Strategy incorporates a number of these components, including wellbeing domains (or outcome areas), a consultation process, measurement dashboard, and principles for decision-making.

Wellbeing domains, an overall vision and measurement dashboards

One common component that is core to all strategies is a **set of wellbeing domains**, which are distinct for each strategy. Identifying a set of wellbeing domains is crucial for any child and youth wellbeing strategy, as it articulates how wellbeing is defined which in turn helps to identify key outcome measures to track success. Scotland, New Zealand, and Tasmania have a set of wellbeing dimensions that convey what children and young people need to live a good life.

For example, SHANARRI is a core component of the Scottish strategy; it stands for safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included, while Tasmania's set of wellbeing dimensions is based on ARACY's Nest framework: valued, loved, and safe; have material basics; are healthy; are learning; are participating; and have a positive sense of identity and culture.²² Wales' NEST framework includes four themes that describe "how support for mental health and wellbeing should feel". The themes are: nurturing, empowering, safe, and trusted.

In New Zealand and Tasmania, the wellbeing domains were complemented by an **overall vision**, which is an aspiration statement highlighting the ambitions for child and youth wellbeing in each jurisdiction. New Zealand's vision is that "New Zealand is the best place in the world for children and young people", while Tasmania's is "children and young people in Tasmania have what they need to grow and thrive".

Most strategies also developed a **measurement dashboard** to sit alongside the wellbeing domains. These usually contain a number of indicators to assess progress on each wellbeing domain. New Zealand and Tasmania have both developed a

measurement dashboard (using existing data) to reflect progress under each wellbeing dimension.

Consultation or co-production with children and young people

Almost all strategies identified the wellbeing domains through consultation or **co-production with children and young people**. New Zealand undertook consultation with more than 6,000 children and young people to understand their perspectives on what makes a good life through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and postcards to the Prime Minister.²³ Importantly, they over-sampled groups that are often hard to reach in surveys, such as Indigenous young people. Tasmania's wellbeing dimensions were based on ARACY's Nest framework, which was also developed through consultation with children and young people on what wellbeing means to them.

The Tasmanian government conducted their own additional consultation with over 3,500 children and young people, parents/carers, practitioners, and advocates to inform the development of their Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Approaches to consultation included postcards to the Premier, creative responses, surveys, focus groups and interviews. Feedback from these consultations resulted in modification of ARACY's Nest framework and its descriptors to ensure it was appropriate for use in the Tasmanian context.²⁴ In Wales, co-production is a central feature of their NEST framework, with a stakeholder group of children and young people established to help develop the framework.

A robust consultation process genuinely consults with children and young people, and the publication of a consultation report helps ensure that the consultation is, and is perceived to be, genuine. New Zealand and Tasmania are two jurisdictions that have done this well. Notably, the Australian Government Early Years Strategy published a detailed consultation document.²⁵

Principles for decision-making

Principles for decision-making are another core component as they can support policymakers by identifying key considerations when developing policy. A set of principles for decision-making was present in all the child and youth wellbeing strategies examined. These principles vary markedly by their purpose and level of detail. For example, Tasmania has a comprehensive list of ten principles to guide decision-making. Examples include "provide children and young people with opportunities to explore topics that interest them in a manner that supports learning and reduces anxiety" and "provide opportunity for, and support, children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect them".

The principles within Scotland and New Zealand's strategies are somewhat broader. For example, some of New Zealand's nine principles include "change requires action by all of us", and "early support is needed", while examples from Scotland include "valuing difference and ensuring everyone is treated fairly" and "working together with families to enable a rights respecting, strengths based, inclusive approach". Wales' NEST framework contains core principles that are tailored toward mental health support services, including "trusted adults" and "easy access to expertise". The NEST framework is also underpinned by Wales' Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 and its five ways of working: long-term, integration, involvement, collaboration, and prevention.

Governance and accountability mechanisms

Accountability and governance mechanisms were incorporated into a majority of strategies, helping to identify individuals and bodies in government who are ultimately responsible for successful implementation of the strategies, and ensure the longevity of the strategies.

Three out of the four strategies are underpinned by a **governance structure** to ensure accountability within government and to the general public. New Zealand's governance structure identifies a minister responsible for implementation of the strategy (Minister for Child Poverty Reduction in New Zealand), while Tasmania's strategy is accountable to the Tasmanian Premier.

Children's Commissioners also play an important role through their statutory responsibility, such as in Tasmania. Some strategies also identify the key bodies responsible for implementation. For example, Tasmania identifies a cross-agency working group and a steering committee composed of Heads of Agencies. In some strategies, legislation helped to strengthen the governance structure and accountability mechanisms. This was the case for Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child through the Children and Young People

(Scotland) Act 2014, and for New Zealand through the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 and the Children's Amendment Act 2018.

Reporting mechanisms were also used as a way to ensure accountability and effective implementation. Many of these jurisdictions use an annual report to provide updates on progress. For example, Tasmania has commenced producing annual reports which highlight ways in which the Tasmanian government is continuing to consult with children and young people, describe programs and policies that have been developed which align with the strategy, outline government reform undertaken to prioritise child and youth wellbeing, and report on wellbeing indicators²⁶. Similar annual reports in New Zealand focus on reporting progress based on the wellbeing indicators. Reporting on the Welsh NEST framework is done through existing bodies known as Regional Partnership Boards.

Policy impact and lessons learned

With the vast majority of strategies still in their infancy, there has been limited time for jurisdictions to measure the impact of their strategies. This has also been exacerbated by the fact that many were developed just prior to the pandemic which shifted the focus of many governments to managing its immediate effects.²⁷ However, despite this, some government officials and advocates were able to identify policies that were unlikely to have been implemented in the absence of the strategy.

Policy impact

New Zealand and Tasmania have identified how new and existing programs align with Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy document²⁸ and New Zealand's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Programme of Action.²⁹

New Zealand

Between 2018 and 2022, eight of the nine child poverty measures showed statistically significant decreases in New Zealand. This equated to 45,600 fewer children living in poverty, a decrease from 16.5% to 12%³⁰. This achievement was likely strongly influenced through a combination of the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018, child poverty reduction being a key priority in its Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, and the focus on child poverty in the New Zealand Wellbeing Budget.

Impact of the New Zealand Child and Youth Strategy can also be observed through the Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy School Lunches Programme, which has provided healthy lunches to around 220,000 students throughout New Zealand every school day.³¹ It was based on New Zealand's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy through its alignment with many outcomes of the strategy. An evaluation of the program demonstrated significant improvements in a

large number of wellbeing areas, including health-related quality of life, physical functioning, emotional functioning, school functioning, social functioning, and mental wellbeing.³²

Policy impact in New Zealand was supported by the inclusion of policy priorities within the strategy. These were most recently focused on reducing child poverty, enhancing child and whanau wellbeing in the first 1000 days, addressing racism, discrimination and stigma, and enhancing the mental wellbeing of children and young people.³³ The decision to focus on a smaller number of policy areas came out of a strategy review conducted by the New Zealand government to help unite the sector on shared goals to enable more effective change.

Tasmania

A government official in Tasmania highlighted that initial feedback from participants in programs instigated from the strategy suggests that it has made a difference in people's lives.

“We have a teenage pregnancy support project which is supporting young parents as they go through their journey of parenthood. And that's supported some of them to go back to university, or to finish their schooling, while they're still looking after their newborn bub.”

Kids Care Clinics is one illustration of the Child and Youth Wellbeing strategy impacting policy and programs. The initiative is a state-wide community paediatrics service that seeks to provide children identified as vulnerable with holistic care through a range of assessments and support in one location by a consistent paediatric and allied health team. By opening the clinics in neighbourhood hubs such as child and family learning centres and outreach health service sites, families are more easily able to access the service.³⁴

Lessons learned

Some government officials and advocates identified that mandating regular reporting of funded programs (both internal and external to government) was highly effective in embedding wellbeing into policymaking. This includes reports on how a proposed program is expected to impact on wellbeing domains, as well as provide regular progress updates. Doing so helps to ensure that all areas of wellbeing are carefully considered when developing programs, and that policymakers continue to assess and re-assess whether and how the program is impacting on all areas of wellbeing. One government official noted that it is important that reporting is done regularly, but not so frequently as to create an administrative burden and become a tick-box exercise.

Another government official highlighted how important it is to provide a mechanism that compels agencies and organisations to do this reporting, rather than it being non-compulsory:

“One of the lessons learned, or one of the things I’m grappling with, is that there isn’t a mechanism yet...that compels wider stakeholders to do that. At the moment we’re just relying on partners being interested.”

One advocate identified that their strategy has failed to achieve impact in the jurisdiction, largely due to it having a stronger focus on tools for practitioners rather than creating culture and systems-level change:

“It’s referred to [in policy documents], but it’s quite superficial. I’m not sure if it ever got that well embedded in the [jurisdiction] government.”

This is a common challenge for wellbeing strategies and frameworks more broadly,³⁵ and it emphasises that a strategy on its own is not sufficient to create change. This speaks to the importance of ensuring that governments take steps to effectively embed child and youth wellbeing strategies into their processes, and that these strategies are resourced in a way that allows for more substantive, meaningful impacts.

Changing the way governments work

Policymakers and advocates provided a range of examples illustrating how child and youth wellbeing strategies have helped change the way governments work.

Breaking down silos and enhancing collaboration

Breaking down silos was seen as a major goal of child and youth wellbeing strategies, with one government official stating:

“If you want a strategy that looks holistically at wellbeing, the whole point is that you lift up above the level of individual agency siloes.”

It was also overwhelmingly reported that the strategies have helped to **enhance collaboration**:

“I think [this strategy] has made a difference in getting those links made up at a policy level. It has changed. That culture that used to see the world very much in silos that didn’t meet.”

This enhanced collaboration was achieved primarily through the strategies being accompanied by the **establishment of new cross-departmental and cross-sectoral bodies** across government and the community sector at both the services and policy level. For example, the governance arrangements for Wales’ NEST framework include a steering group made up of individuals representing various sectors across Wales to ensure effective implementation of the framework. In Tasmania, a cross-agency working group and steering committee were formed to support its child and youth wellbeing strategy. It was emphasised by a number of government officials and advocates that these new

bodies would not have existed in the absence of a strategy:

“We have cross agency government working groups that come together quite regularly now. Bringing them all together to talk about a common goal, is unique.”

“There wasn’t really a mechanism before for bringing together the heads of children’s services, heads of education, public health and social care. So, that’s made a really big difference.”

It was noted by one government official that the process of establishing these cross-sectoral bodies has not only been beneficial in enhancing collaboration, but also for **developing trust amongst key actors**:

“But it’s creating those personal links as well that need to happen. And also, a shared history of, well, when we’ve done this partnership approach, it’s worked. Or, this is what we’ve learned from it. It’s about building that, isn’t it? And then building that trust.”

Wellbeing strategies were also found to **unify existing cross-sectoral bodies** by creating a **common language on child and youth wellbeing** and helped to bring people and agencies together around a shared purpose:

“We need to be all talking the same language when we’re talking about wellbeing. If we’re going to measure it, we need to make sure that we’re measuring what everybody thinks wellbeing is, and not different versions of it.”

“I think there’s a shared language, shared understanding that’s starting to be created.”

Elevating the importance of child and youth wellbeing

A number of participants noted that their strategy helped to **elevate the importance of child and youth wellbeing**. For example, one advocate noted that in discussing their strategy at an existing cross-sectoral body meeting resulted in the longest conversation this group had ever had about children – particularly notable given the relative invisibility of children and young people in policymaking.³⁶ This highlights the value of the strategy in enabling deeper conversations about child and youth wellbeing. Another government official noted that:

“Where the strategy had really added value was in elevating the importance of child wellbeing. It provided...a very clear articulation of something that was really important to this government and what they really wanted to focus on.”

Creating culture change and improving the way policy is developed

There was also evidence of the strategies **creating culture change**, with this shift having the potential to continue to have impact beyond the strategy itself:

“And so, the hope would be that even if there’s a change of government and they [discontinue this strategy]... You’ve instilled the key

principles enough that those ways of working will remain, and those partnerships and those links remain.”

Finally, the strategies were reported to influence policymakers to become **more outcomes-focussed, to think more holistically, and to take a more preventative approach** to policymaking. There was also clear evidence of the strategies influencing the attitudes of policymakers.

“When we’re talking to our colleagues we’re talking holistically about the child.”

“If we want to have a successful mental health service, we have to have a successful [strategy] being delivered so that we can be feeding into children’s lives at the right point, and helping them at the point that they need it. Not just when they become so unwell that they need specialist intervention.”

One government official highlighted that in the absence of a strategy, certain agencies would have remained more output-focussed, rather than outcomes-focussed

“They might be more service focused on what they have delivered or how many people have gone through the doors. As opposed to...how has this actually improved the life of this child? And which domain of their wellbeing have we seen the most improvement?”

Enablers for effective and impactful child and youth wellbeing strategies

Policymakers and advocates outlined a number of processes and structures that should be embedded into child and youth wellbeing strategies to ensure meaningful impact and longevity.

Collaboration through consultation and co-design

Three of the four strategies examined incorporated a consultation and/or co-design process in their development, with some also incorporating ongoing consultation post-development.³⁷

Government officials and advocates overwhelmingly emphasised the importance and value of consultation and co-design processes. These reported benefits were wide-ranging. They highlighted the importance of simply **identifying what is important to children and young people** for inclusion in the strategy. For example, while Tasmania's strategy was based on an existing wellbeing framework (ARACY's Nest), a consultation process helped ensure that the strategy aligned with Tasmanian children and young people's perspectives on wellbeing. Strong feedback from this process found that the environment was not adequately represented in the Nest framework, which resulted in the environment being incorporated and emphasised as sub-domains into all of the existing Nest dimensions.

However, the benefits of consultation and co-design go well beyond the identification of wellbeing domains. Those interviewed noted that the process **helped achieve greater buy-in** across different sectors and departments.

As noted by one government official:

“When I’m introducing [the strategy] to new sectors, it really helps to be able to say ‘this has been co-produced’...It’s that hearts and minds thing. It does help to win people over as it isn’t just a civil servant that has created this. Actually, it’s come from real people with lived experience. I think that really helps.”

Not only did consultation help achieve greater buy-in from across the sector, but it also helped to **engage children and young people in policymaking**. One government official noted that the children and young people involved in the consultation process were actively assessing whether the issues they themselves had raised have been addressed:

“For those that participated through their school or were part of a focus group, it is great for them to see if we have any actions that address the things that they brought up as a concern.”

Importantly, the consultation process also helped to **de-politicise the strategy** to help ensure longevity, especially in the case of changing governments.

“The other thing that I do think helps with [longevity], is that it was co-produced. And because a lot of time and effort and resource was put into the evidence collection, and really working with practitioners and families and young people, ultimately, if the government wants to get rid of it, they can. But it makes it a bit harder because people are invested in it. Questions will be asked.”

Through engagement with NGOs and the community sector, the consultation process had the benefit of the **government forming stronger relationships** with these organisations:

“There is quite a number of different organisations, as well as government organisations [involved in the development of the strategy]. And we have key advocacy groups for youth, the Children’s Commissioner, and other key partners that are fully invested as well.”

Engagement across different sectors and departments was identified as helpful in securing greater buy-in from agencies and organisations. Being more deeply embedded within the sector can help to ensure longevity, especially in the face of changing governments.

“So, if services were saying, well, this is a real barrier, we need something to address that barrier so that we can get the people through the door. For them to see that people were listening to them and putting money and projects in place that would help them. I think that was really important.”

A strong commitment to governance and resourcing

A strong commitment to governance and resourcing was also described as crucial in ensuring a strategy that supports government decision-making.

Governance and accountability

Governance structures came in many forms, such as:

- ministers or commissioners having overall responsibility, and
- public bodies or cross-agency working groups collaborating to ensure effective implementation.

Several government officials and advocates emphasised the importance of having a single individual, ideally a senior minister, responsible for the strategy. In particular, one policymaker expressed **the importance of having a single minister for children and young people** who has foremost responsibility for the strategy, with other ministers having partial responsibility through mechanisms such as cross-agency working groups:

“I think [having a minister responsible for children and young people] is really key. If what you want is a strategy that looks holistically at wellbeing, the whole point is that you kind of lift up above the level of individual agency siloes... I would really struggle to see... how it would work if you didn’t have somebody whose whole focus was on that across government space.”

Cross-agency working groups were established in a number of strategies and demonstrated to be an effective way of bringing key parties together.

“So, we have a national steering group that [the team] established to hold [the team] to account a little bit, really, and to make sure that we go in the right direction.”

“Agencies across government were involved and are still involved. There have been various structures that have been set up, because, really, where the strategy adds the most value is in the space where agencies need to come together. So, when the strategy was originally put in place, there was this cross-government engagement process. And then, once the strategy had been developed, there was a process to identify all the things that were happening across government that contributed to all the outcomes.”

Accountability measures came in the form of requirements for the government to report regularly on achieved outcomes, sometimes alongside targets and metrics. The importance of accountability mechanisms was emphasised by one advocate, expressing:

“What we now want and need is that accountability side of it. And I think...to be fair to government, there is a bedding in time that they’ve had to have. It’s been disrupted, it’s been too long...But there is a bit of that before they need to start cracking the whip a bit and saying, actually, no, we have to be seeing this now delivered on the ground.”

It should be noted that the accountability mechanisms utilised were specifically about building accountability within government and to the general public. To our best knowledge, no strategy developed processes to ensure accountability to children and young people.

Legislation underpinning the strategies, such as the Children’s Amendment Act 2018 in New Zealand, was identified as helpful in ensuring longevity. One government official highlighted the value of legislation in ensuring greater accountability:

“[Legislation] creates a really strong sense of accountability...[The legislation] is quite flexible. It doesn’t say anything about the content of the strategy. It says what the strategy needs to do. It’s flexible enough to be used by all political parties”

Finally, **bi-partisan support** was acknowledged as valuable in de-politicising the strategy and ensuring that it was sustained beyond political cycles:

“The legislation would’ve been passed without bipartisan support because the government had enough votes to push it through. But I think the fact that there was that bipartisan support de-politicised it.”

Resourcing and funding

Appropriate funding of the policy team

responsible for the development and implementation of the strategy was equally essential. Professional development for the team may also be helpful in ensuring sufficient capability and knowledge to develop and implement child and youth wellbeing strategies. **Adequate funding to ensure programs can be developed and adapted** was found to be crucial to success. For example, the Tasmanian Government provided \$100 million over four years to fund initiatives to improve the outcomes of children and young people, based on its child and youth wellbeing strategy.³⁸

“We’re a fairly small team. And that would be another lesson, is that, depending on what you want to happen in the central function, you need to make sure that it’s resourced to do so”

“There was a fund for children and young people which delivers infrastructure projects, as well as activities in local communities for children and young people. Applications were based on the need as expressed by children and young people in the community. Children and communities can see that they have a new park or activities after school because of this fund for children and young people.”

Being embedded within a broader wellbeing approach

Jurisdictions that had **implemented child and youth wellbeing strategies alongside a broader population-level wellbeing framework** generally had more substantive evidence of improved outcomes for children and young people. For instance, in Wales, NEST is helping to facilitate greater collaboration and connection amongst the service sector to improve the wellbeing outcomes of children and young people. At

the same time, the wellbeing of children and young people is also being enhanced through the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The Act has a strong emphasis on implementing policy interventions early in life due to the evidence base around the significance of early experiences on later outcomes.³⁹ As an example, tackling adverse childhood experiences has been identified as a policy priority in the Act.⁴⁰

Similarly in New Zealand, improving child and youth wellbeing was identified as a core component of New Zealand's wellbeing budget.⁴¹ This has led to broad policy changes such as the Families Package which sought to improve financial security for low- and middle-income families with children. This policy has reduced child poverty and improved economic wellbeing outcomes on a number of measures. This has sat alongside

more targeted interventions identified through the child and youth wellbeing strategy, such as the Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy School Lunches Programme.

Child and youth wellbeing strategies being developed alongside population-level frameworks ensure wellbeing is more comprehensively considered when developing policies and programs. As emphasised by one advocate:

“I think having a national set of milestones or goals which we can all pull together, I do genuinely think that that is the right thing to do, and I think that’s a really good thing...But when it comes to the detail of what’s happening in children’s lives in the here and now, it’s important to link those up together.”

A pathway to effective wellbeing policies for children and young people

Australia has already started the journey in taking a wellbeing approach to decision-making through a number of initiatives. At a population level, the Australian Government's Measuring What Matters framework provides a valuable opportunity for wellbeing to be embedded in decision-making across all government departments.

Child and youth wellbeing outcomes (and indeed, wellbeing outcomes for all people in Australia) could be further enhanced by embedding wellbeing in policy processes and decision-making across government. We propose three broad ways Australian governments could enhance child and youth wellbeing through policy:

Enhance Measuring What Matters: Add a future generations focus and integrate with the Early Years Strategy

Enhancing the scope of Measuring What Matters to have a future generations focus, like that of the *Well-being of Future Generations Act* in Wales, would support the Australian government in taking a longer-term approach to policymaking. Furthermore, **it would be advantageous for the Measuring What Matters framework and the Early Years Strategy (and child and youth wellbeing strategies more broadly) to be more closely integrated.** This could include headline indicators from the Early Years Strategy being featured in the Measuring What Matters framework. The Australian Government should also consider better integrating the Early Years Strategy within other frameworks, such as Closing the Gap.

Additionally, if we are to make movements in the right direction regarding child and youth wellbeing, it must be a national priority.

Including child and youth wellbeing and safety as a priority for National Cabinet is one way of achieving this.

Strengthen the Early Years Strategy

The Australian Government Early Years Strategy incorporates key elements of an impactful child and youth wellbeing strategy, including an overall vision, wellbeing domains, a wide consultative process, principles for decision-making, a measurement dashboard, and governance structure.

Based on our findings, we recommend four ways of strengthening the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy:

- 1. The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy should have a single cabinet-level minister responsible for implementation.**
- 2. The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy should publicise key targets to ensure the government is kept accountable for progress.** This should incorporate some indicators within the Measuring What Matters dashboard to give the targets greater prominence. It should be noted that the Early Years Strategy is currently in the process of developing an outcomes framework and action plan, which will shed more light on this.
- 3. The Commonwealth should guarantee adequate resourcing for new programs and policies within its Early Years Strategy.** This would help support the goals of the strategy and is essential in improving outcomes.
- 4. The Commonwealth and state and territory governments should better integrate their work under the Early Years Strategy.** This is essential as programs and policies tailored to the early years are often administered by state and territory governments.

Develop wellbeing strategies that span the whole of childhood and youth in partnership with children and young people

Our research has highlighted that child and youth wellbeing strategies can change the way governments work, and can help influence policy. The development and implementation of the Australian Government Early Years Strategy is a good start to ensuring that the wellbeing needs of young children are met. However, there is an absence of similar strategies for children in their middle years, late adolescence and young adulthood. We recommend that **governments in Australia develop wellbeing strategies that span the whole of childhood and youth**. Importantly, **Australian governments need to meaningfully and appropriately⁴² include children and young people in the design of these strategies**

through consultation or co-design, and ensure strong governance and accountability mechanisms.

Governments in Australia should carefully consider how policy processes can be improved to ensure children and young people are supported to thrive. Child and youth wellbeing strategies have immense potential to help Australian governments ensure the wellbeing needs of groups with unique and diverse needs, such as children and young people, are met. When utilised alongside population-level wellbeing frameworks they have the potential to further improve government decision-making processes and outcomes for all individuals. Making these changes to the way policy is developed and implemented will help improve the wellbeing of people and the planet.

Appendix 1

NYTH/NEST framework (Wales)

The NYTH/NEST framework⁴³ was developed to ensure a whole system approach to supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Developed in 2019, NEST stands for Nurturing, Empowering, Safe, and Trusted which are the four themes that comprise the framework.⁴⁴ It is used as a planning tool for the Welsh government, as well as local authorities, health boards, and the voluntary sector to achieve partnership working for mental health and wellbeing support for babies, children, young people and their families. Co-design is at the heart of the framework. Children and young people co-produced the framework which takes a children's rights based approach, drawing attention to article 12 of the United Nation's Convention of the Rights of the Child; "babies, children and young people have a right to have their opinion heard and acted upon".⁴⁵ Sitting above the NYTH/NEST framework and underpinning all Welsh Government work is the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* which is a whole-of-government framework to ensure the well-being of current and future generations is a primary consideration when developing policy.⁴⁶ The Welsh Government has also embedded wellbeing into decision-making through a number of other strategies and frameworks, such as the Curriculum for Wales⁴⁷ and the framework on embedding a 'whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being'.⁴⁸

Getting it right for every child (Scotland)

"Getting it Right for Every Child" or GIRFEC aims to ensure that "every child and young person in Scotland can reach their full potential".⁴⁹ GIRFEC was established in 2006 and is most recognisable by practitioners and policymakers throughout the country by the eight wellbeing indicators (known by the

acronym SHANNARI), which also form the basis of a resource for practitioners known as the 'SHANNARI wheel'. A strong focus of GIRFEC is supporting practitioners, which it also does through the National Practice Model⁵⁰, its emphasis on having a clear point of contact (or 'named person') for children in the child protection system, and identifying a 'lead practitioner' for families of children and young people who require extra support. Despite GIRFEC focussing on all areas of policy related to children and young people, it should be noted that the lens through which it is applied has an emphasis on the child protection space. There has been some controversy around GIRFEC through its named person scheme.⁵¹ Alongside GIRFEC sit a number of other strategies and frameworks which seek to better integrate wellbeing into decision-making such as the population-level National Performance Framework⁵², the Curriculum for Excellence within the education space⁵³, and The Promise which vows that those with experience in the care system will ensure that "Scotland's children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected"⁵⁴. Ending child poverty has been recently announced as a key priority for the Scottish government.⁵⁵

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (New Zealand)

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy was established in 2019 and has the ambitious goal that "New Zealand, Aotearoa, is the best place in the world for children and young people". The strategy was heavily based on consultation with children and young people on what makes a good life.⁵⁶ As well as comprising wellbeing dimensions, indicators, and principles to decision-making, the strategy also includes policy priorities. Currently, these are to reduce child poverty, enhance wellbeing in the first 1,000 days, expand community-led approaches to child

and youth wellbeing, address racism, discrimination, and stigma, and support the mental wellbeing of children and young people.⁵⁷

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy sits alongside the *Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018* which requires the government to set three and ten-year targets for reducing child poverty, regularly report on relevant indicators, and provide a report at each Wellbeing Budget on how the Budget will reduce child poverty. These initiatives are also complemented by the whole-of-population Living Standards Framework⁵⁸, and the Maori wellbeing framework 'He Ara Waiora'.⁵⁹

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (Tasmania)

Tasmania has been the leading jurisdiction in Australia to incorporate a child and youth wellbeing strategy within government. Established in 2021, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy builds off the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework, which draws on ARACY's Nest framework.⁶⁰ The Tasmanian government and their non-government partners conducted consultations with children and young people to make inform the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Feedback resulted in adaptations to the Nest framework and its descriptors to ensure suitability to the Tasmanian context. Consultation methods included postcards to the Premier, creative responses, surveys, focus groups and interviews.⁶¹ The strategy identifies a number of policy priorities, with the first four-year action plan having a "focus on the first 1,000 days".⁶² The Tasmanian government is also currently developing a whole-of-population wellbeing framework.

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