

Response to Department of Social Services Issues Paper: A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

Introduction

Carers Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government Department of Social Services (the Department) [Issues Paper: A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector](#) (Issues Paper). As a member of the Community Sector Advisory Group (CSAG) we are grateful for the opportunity to consult with the Department on the development of the Issues Paper.

Carers Australia consider the current reviews into the not-for-profit and community sector vital to improving the outcomes and experiences of Australian communities, as well as the sustainability of the sector moving forward.

Overall, Carers Australia is broadly supportive of all five focus areas identified by the Department and explored within the Issues Paper. Within this response we will address each focus area, considering our experiences as a Community Sector Organisation (CSO) and national peak body.

Carers Australia receives grant funding from the Department and from other federal government entities. This grant funding currently represents the bulk of income for our organisation.

Areas of Focus

[Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership](#)

The correct use of the term 'partnership' is integral to a positive and sustainable relationship between government and CSOs that produces the most meaningful outcomes for Australian's. However, the use of the term partnership has not always been correct in the CSO context.

In the experience of Carers Australia, our engagement with the Department and Australian Government is often responsive. For example, when grant or funding opportunities are announced, the scope, terms and conditions of these opportunities have been decided prior to launch. This forces CSOs to restructure or shift their focus from existing programs of work and reconsider how planned advocacy and activities relate with the pre-determined needs and boundaries set by government. As such, we describe this relationship as an unbalanced principal and agent relationship as opposed to working in collaboration or true partnership.

Carers Australia believes a meaningful working partnership would address and correct this relationship and we are supportive of embedding co-design principles in CSO and government relations as an avenue to achieve this.

We encourage the Department and broader Australian Government to recognise and consider the fundamental principles of codesign – equity and reciprocity. Methodologically, co-design is most effective when there is equal responsibility and risk for each participating member. For CSOs who are largely dependent on government funding, there is considerable risk in their engagement with government due to their dependency on funding.

The benefits of co-design should be seen in the greater context of the other measures below which address the other issues identified in the Issues Paper and by the sector. Codesign could also be strengthened by greater cooperation and coordination between Australian government agencies.

Partnership should always be informed by a solid evidence base. Government and CSOs can partner to better measure and understand the needs and unique requirements of the community. Research and data is often available across several government departments whose data holdings are separate or held in different formats. This hinders the collation and meaningful extraction of data.

CSOs also rely on Government to collect and communicate population level data, and this has not been adequately achieved in recent years by government. For example, findings from the 2022 Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Aging and Carers (SDAC) will not be released until two-years after collection, this delay restricts both government and CSOs ability to provide advice and policy recommendations that are timely and applicable to current population needs. Carers Australia currently relies on the findings of the 2018 SDAC to inform our research and advocacy activities, despite the drastic changes in population demographics, economy and social context that have occurred since then.

[Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services](#)

Carers Australia's recent experience suggests available grant funding approaches present two hurdles; current measures for costing do not accurately measure the real cost of delivering services (ACOSS, 2023), and existing grants conditions do not recognise the costs associated with delivery quality.

Carers Australia believes costing measures must be reformed in consultation with CSOs and the sector, to ensure greater alignment between the real cost of delivering services and the availability of funding that recognises this cost. These reforms should include updating costing models and pricing caps on services.

Additionally, the government must recognise that quality services require investment. Often CSOs are restricted by their budgets, resulting in high staff turnover, or limiting their ability to provide continuous access to professional development opportunities. In disincentivising continuous employment and engagement opportunity within the community sector, CSOs face greater restrictions in developing and evolving to better meet the needs of community whilst ensuring organisation operations are sustainable and efficient.

Effective programming and service delivery can only be achieved with strong monitoring and evaluation, which takes time, money and resources. The benefits of strong monitoring and evaluation should also be shared within and across the sector. Carers Australia suggest that a minimum of 10% of grant funding should be earmarked for this purpose and that government can play a large role in collecting, collating and sharing the outcomes of learning across the sector.

What has long been recognised by the community sector is now clear to government – lived-experience and consumer engagement is fundamental to the provision of ethical, appropriate, quality services, support, and advocacy. All individuals who participate in consultation or co-design of services and supports relevant to them, should be adequately recognised and remunerated for their contribution. Carers Australia remunerates all carers who participate in consultation and engagement activities, as we recognise the value of lived experience contributions. If CSOs are expected to provide opportunities for this engagement in the development and execution of grant programs, the costs associated with enabling this engagement must be recognised in costing.

Providing longer grant agreement terms

Carers Australia supports the provision of longer grant agreement terms as a measure to provide CSOs with greater stability and opportunity for development. In the experience of Carers Australia, effective community engagement is heavily reliant on consistent presence and activity and grant agreements terms can account for this by enabling greater flexibility in the lifecycle of the grant. In addition to longer agreement terms, the Department should consider other options to embed greater flexibility such as increased notice periods for reviews and evaluation, extended timelines, and more accessible avenues for reporting on grant activities, and greater flexibility in the way funding is allocated and when it is spent.

Much can be learnt from the recent pandemic, natural disasters, and international conflict, specifically how quickly and drastically change can occur. Grant agreements should account for these evolutions and events, and proactively attempt to limit the burden and negative impact that they have on workplans and requirements of pre-existing agreements.

Longer grant periods may also allow for opportunities for APS staff from the Department to undertake short or medium placements within CSOs to better understand the constraints and complexities we work with, and to see firsthand the benefits we deliver to the community which can be hard to appreciate via written reports alone.

Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of Community Service Organisations

Carers Australia supports the Department recognition of the importance and benefits of diversity in the range of CSOs that receive grant funding to enable greater community engagement. In recognition of this and in taking account of the current issues identified in the lifecycle of funding provision, Carers Australia recommends that the Department prioritise a comprehensive review of how funding flows from government to CSOs, as suggested within the Issues Paper, to better understand the barriers faced by CSOs from a diverse range of circumstances in accessing government funding.

We stress the importance of recognising and supporting CSOs that represent diverse, disadvantaged, and intersectional cohorts to have equitable access to funding opportunities. As the national peak body for unpaid carers, Carers Australia is aware of how restricting under-acknowledgement and a lack of recognition can be. Carers are very often recognised secondary to the person they provide care for, despite the Commonwealth [Carer Recognition Act 2010](#) recognising that “carers should be acknowledged as individuals with their own needs within and beyond the caring role”.

“Most importantly, decision makers do not understand what carers do or need but make decisions on what help they will offer. A carers role changes continuously. In the end, most people like myself give up and don't accept services because it doesn't meet my needs and I still have to contribute financially. I may as well do it myself. As a carer, I am constantly reprimanded for not accepting help during the most difficult times. When I ask for help there is always a catch, so I don't ask anymore.” – 2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey Response (CWS, 2022)

Funding opportunities need to recognise CSOs that represent or provide targeted support for groups such as carers, who face intersectional disadvantage and this recognition must be coupled with equitable access to funding opportunities.

The greater availability of unrestricted core funding, or in our case peak funding, also allows for greater flexibility and sustainability of CSOs to cover basic running costs and provide essential community support. This also allows space for CSOs which do not neatly fall into categories of funding that are envisaged through the current grant process. As a peak advocacy body for carers, we often find we are unable to apply for funding earmarked as service delivery and funding opportunities for advocacy are limited.

Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

Carers Australia support this area of focus, as we recognise that Australia is a large country with a population spread across vast geographical distances, living and working in very different situations and contexts. The needs of urban and rural populations are different. As are the needs of a carers living in different States across our nation.

Conclusion

Carers Australia welcome the Government's efforts to support and strengthen the sustainability of the community sector and recommend that all future measures to enable this involve Community Sector Organisations as equals and partners in success.

We encourage greater consideration of diverse and disadvantaged populations and community groups and support the introduction of equitable and inclusive processes and policies to grant funding agreements, that enable CSOs that represent these groups to access funding and improve the outcomes of Australians.

About Carers Australia

Carers Australia is the national peak body representing the diversity of the 2.65 million Australians who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, chronic condition, mental illness or disorder, drug or alcohol problem, terminal illness, or who are frail aged.

In collaboration with our members, the peak carer organisations in each state and territory, we collectively form the National Carer Network and are an established infrastructure that represent the views of carers at the national level.

Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, where all carers should have the same rights, choices, and opportunities as other Australians to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing and participate in family, social and community life, employment, and education.

This includes carers:

- Who have their own care needs
- Who are in multiple care relationships
- Who have employment and/or education commitments
- Aged under 25 years (young carers)
- Aged over 65 years, including 'grandparent carers'
- From culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI+)
- Who are living in rural and remote Australia, and
- That are no longer in a caring role (former carers).

Carers Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the traditional custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. As an inclusive organisation we celebrate people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies, and abilities.

For information contact:

Policy@carersaustralia.com.au

Unit 2, 11 McKay Lane TURNER ACT 2612

Telephone: 02 6122 9900

Website: www.carersaustralia.com.au