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Submission to the:  
Senate Community Affairs  
References Committee inquiry  
into ParentsNext

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## About Anglicare Australia

Anglicare Australia is a unique national network of independent, for purpose community service organisations, all with links to the Anglican Church. With a combined budget of \$1.59 billion, and a workforce of 20,000 staff and 9,000 volunteers, the Anglicare Australia Network contributes to more than 50 service areas across Australia. One in every 20 Australians access Anglicare services each year. Our services are delivered in partnership with people, the communities in which they live, and other like-minded organisations in those areas.

Through our services and advocacy, the Anglicare Australia Network partners with people, families and communities to build resilience, inclusion and justice. Anglicare Australia is charged to influence social and economic policy across Australia, informed by research and the practical experience of the Network.

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## Introduction

Anglicare Australia is pleased to contribute to the committee's inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout.

Australians want our country to support those in need, and believe that no-one deserves to live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Supporting parents on low incomes so that their families prosper and their children have the best possible start in life is critical to achieving this vision for our community.

As an early intervention program that provides personalised support, the ParentsNext program has the potential to assist parents to work towards their education and employment goals, and improve their wellbeing and that of their family. However, implementation of the Targeted Compliance Framework and the associated emphasis on compliance and sanctions has undermined the effectiveness of ParentsNext in the broader rollout. The application of the Targeted Compliance Framework has placed severe stress on ParentsNext participants, put vulnerable families further at risk, and hindered providers from supporting people with the help they need to achieve education and employment goals.

Anglicare Australia recommends that the Targeted Compliance Framework be immediately suspended from ParentsNext, and the program model re-aligned to person-centred, pre-employment support.

## Supporting parenting and participation

The Parenting Payment ensures a safety net for any family should they need it, recognising the value and cost of parenting. While assistance to support parents to move into employment is important, the role of parenting in and of itself must be valued. Employment is only one form of contribution and participation in society, and time spent caring for children, especially in the early years, must be valued.

While parents may be extremely motivated to find work, for those in areas of low employment or with low skills, a job is very difficult to find. Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot has found there is a consistent lack of entry-level jobs for those who need them.<sup>2</sup> It is even more difficult to find family-friendly work that fits with parenting responsibilities and school hours.

In this context, ParentsNext should support parents to build genuine connections that can support them through the sometimes challenging years of parenting, offering pre-employment assistance to develop a pathway for the future, make connections with the community and other services, and increase confidence to pursue work or other participation activities.

Anglicare Australia believes in a partnership rather than a punitive approach to welfare. This is because there is no evidence that increasing the conditionality of welfare is effective in helping people move into sustained employment. In fact there is the reverse – conditionality and sanctions have been shown to create counterproductive compliance, greater hardship and disengagement for recipients.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anglicare Australia (2018) [The Real Story: What Australians Think About Poverty and How We Shape the Debate](#). State of the Family report 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Anglicare Australia (2018) [Jobs Availability Snapshot 2018](#).

<sup>3</sup> University of York (2018) [Final Findings Report](#). Department of Social Policy and Social Work, Welfare Conditionality Project.

## Impact of the Targeted Compliance Framework

The experience of the Anglicare Australia Network is that the Targeted Compliance Framework has had harmful consequences for both the people participating and delivering the ParentsNext program. It is inhibiting participants and providers from working towards genuine pre-employment goals; causing severe stress and hardship for parents and staff; and forcing providers to use resources to manage compliance rather than provide support for parents.

The confusion of learning a new compliance system, continually reporting income (regardless of whether they are receiving employment income or not), attendance at compulsory activities, and the threat of removal of payments has made it very hard for participants to engage positively with ParentsNext following the implementation of the Targeted Compliance Framework. Anglicare Australia Network member and ParentsNext provider the Brotherhood of St Laurence reports that parents who were at first enthusiastic about participating in the program and engaging with early intervention, have lost confidence and become disengaged due to difficulties with reporting and frustration with the compliance system. The process undermines the trusting relationship between the provider and participant, which is crucial to developing positive outcomes. Many participants face additional barriers with the self-reporting system, where English is not their first language or they have low digital literacy. The rigid and limited timeline (by 9pm on the same day) for reporting attendance at compulsory activities places further burden and stress on parents, with failure to report resulting in suspension of payments.

As outlined in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's submission, the Targeted Compliance Framework has proved to be a hindrance to ParentsNext providers working with participants towards their education and employment goals. Staff have become caught up in administering the Framework, ensuring people are compliant, and assisting participants who face frustration, complexities, and errors with the self-reporting compliance system. This is counterproductive to the aims of the program and means staff cannot get on with the real work of supporting people to gain capacity, and achieve education and employment goals.

The burden of meeting these compliance requirements has also harmed the ability of parents to engage with other programs, work or education activities. Participants have reported being incorrectly penalised, and reducing existing study or other commitments in order to balance compliance demands and not lose further payments.<sup>4</sup> Anglicare Australia Network members supporting ParentsNext participants through other programs have seen the harm the compliance regime is causing. For example it is exacerbating the stress on families experiencing or escaping domestic violence; increasing the likelihood of children being removed into the child protection system; and suspension of payments has left families unable to meet basic needs and at serious risk of becoming homeless.

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<sup>4</sup> Henrique-Gomes, L. (2018) [Single parents forced to attend 'story time' or lose Centrelink payments](#). The Guardian, 6 November; Henrique-Gomes, L. (2018) [Happy Christmas from Centrelink – your welfare payments have been stopped](#). The Guardian, 28 December.

Participants are vulnerable to the discretion of their ParentsNext provider in granting appropriate exemptions, such as where a participant is dealing with an experience of domestic violence. However, not all ParentsNext providers have the expertise to respond to these situations. Anglicare Australia Network staff supporting parents participating in ParentsNext report great variation in provider understanding of domestic violence and other issues parents are facing, and staff have had to advocate for appropriate application of government guidelines and understanding of participants' circumstances. Enforcement of the Targeted Compliance Framework gives ParentsNext providers (who may not have expertise in family support) undue power over parents to decide whether people experiencing extreme vulnerability are exempt from mutual obligation requirements.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The application and enforcement of the Targeted Compliance Framework has created severe stress, confusion and hardship for participants in ParentsNext. It has also forced providers to focus resources on assisting parents to meet compliance requirements rather than provide support to meet their education and employment goals. Enforcement of compliance requirements, especially where providers are not experienced with family support, undermines the empowering relationship between participants and providers which is crucial in developing positive change in participants' lives.

The diversity of parents receiving the Parenting Payment must be recognised. Different parents have different strengths and capacities, and face different situations and challenges. Research from the Anglicare Australia network shows that a person-centred approach, which acknowledges and supports individual differences and situational factors, recognising people's agency, strengths and aspirations, is more effective in supporting long-term employment outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Anglicare Australia recommends that the Targeted Compliance Framework be immediately suspended from ParentsNext, and the program model re-focused around a person-centred approach which allows providers to genuinely support at-risk parents to identify and work towards education and employment goals.

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<sup>5</sup> Goodwin-Smith, I. and Hutchinson, C. (2015) [Beyond supply and demand: addressing the complexities of workforce exclusion in Australia](#). Journal of Social Inclusion 6(1).