



First Steps Count – Child and Community Centre in Taree, NSW

What is the First Steps Count - Child and Community Centre?

The proposed First Steps Count – Child and Community Centre addresses the Mid-North Coast Regional Plan to mitigate the current high risk for children and young people in the area. It will target high-risk children and young people, with a particular focus on Aboriginal children and their families.

The Taree community strongly supports the establishment of an integrated child and youth wellbeing Centre in the region to provide early childhood development and intervention services.

The service model is unique, characterised by:

- Alignment with the government’s service system reform agenda
- Demonstration of public/private partnerships
- Community ownership and operation
- Co-design and co-delivery of effective, culturally responsive and respectful programs
- Formal partnership with the University of Wollongong Early Start project
- Integrated outcomes measurement based on the Nest National Action Agenda and potential for a major research project with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- Incorporation by Pidcock – Architecture & Sustainability of the Living Building Challenge (environmental and financial sustainability, cultural mentoring, bush tucker and vegetable production etc).

Development costs have been considerably reduced by:

- Community and philanthropic donations to the building fund
- The proposed site being granted by the Greater Taree City Council
- \$18,000 donated for the development of an architect designed Master Plan for the building (completed).
- \$49,125.00 donated by VFFF for Design and Development Application (approved April 2015).

The proposed site for the Centre is ideally located adjacent to the public school and early childhood centre and between two estates housing many Aboriginal families. It will offer an accessible, one-stop-shop for parents and children. The Centre’s services will range from antenatal care to services for children to 12 years, which research has found to be an optimal method of delivery to support early childhood intervention and development.

What funding is required?

Further contributions totalling **\$2,471,025** are required **for construction**.

Landscaping, fitout and fees are estimated at \$890,898.00

This is little more than half the total cost of the project, which is \$4,361,923.00. Generous philanthropic and community donations totalling \$1,766,025 are outlined below, including a further \$1m from the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation contingent on government contributions.

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| Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation | \$49,125 |
| Local community | \$30,000 |
| In-kind contributions from local councils, community services and individuals | \$686,900 |
| A further 1 million dollars has been offered by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, <i>subject to a government contribution</i> | \$1,000,000 |
| Subtotal | \$1,766,025 |



Further funding will be sourced for a Centre Co-ordinator and to support an ARACY action research project with the Centre that will look at the impact of the proposed stacked intervention model and the Centre's program delivery (funding level to be assessed).

Why is intervention in early childhood so important?

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) – a key organisation working to improve child and youth wellbeing in Australia – outlines the social and economic benefits of effective prevention and early intervention in their discussion paper *Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention*.

Improving the population-level wellbeing of children, young people and families requires flexible, responsive systems that are equipped to deliver preventive interventions and respond effectively early to emerging issues and challenges. Further, it is more cost effective to invest in early intervention to mitigate risks and emerging issues, rather than responding to crisis, toxic stress and trauma. The latter is both more challenging and more expensive to resolve. Australian Government sources concur, noting that each \$1 spent on early childhood services generates a downstream social and economic return of at least \$7.

Long term social and economic benefits include improved school performance, reduced welfare expenditure, higher employment and skill levels in mothers and reduced notification of child abuse and neglect.

Why is the need in Taree so great?

The role of disadvantage, poverty and inequality as contributors to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes is well established. The more risk factors present and the longer they persist, the greater the subsequent developmental impact. Early intervention to mitigate these risks is necessary, especially in geographical areas in critical need of support programs and initiatives to ensure the safety of children and youth.

Taree, in regional NSW, has been identified as an area of persistent locational disadvantage ranking in the most disadvantaged postcodes in Tony Vinson's (Dropping off the Edge) 2015 and 2007 studies, and in others as early as 2004 and 1999. ABS Census data identifies Taree in the top 10% of disadvantaged suburbs nationally with:

- Over 11% unemployment (Australia's current unemployment rate is 6.2% – ABS data, Sept 2015)
- The lowest proportion of people aged 15+ in the labour force at 45.54% (the highest in NSW)
- Well-below average median incomes
- A high percentage of families living in state-run housing estates.

It has higher than average:

- Family break-down statistics (14.5%) with 20% of children in out-of-home care (Manning Gardens precinct)
- Aboriginal residents (6.9% compared with the national average 2.3%)
- Year 10 or lower education standards (50% of young people) with only 26.54% completing Year 12 (the third lowest in NSW).

The 2012 Australian Early Development Index results reveal that the 29.3 per cent of Taree's children are vulnerable across one more early childhood development domains, compared to the NSW average of 19.9 per cent. Further, families and children tend to be physically and socially isolated due to their limited access to transport (via private vehicle or public transport) as a result of their limited means. There is also little access to online services due to lack of computers, internet and technical skills.



In combination, these factors lead to economic and social stress, adding to health concerns and the risk of harm to children.

What will the partnership with ARACY bring to the Child and Community Centre?

From day one of its operations, the Centre aims to partner in a major research action project with ARACY, pending government/philanthropic funding of the project.

Turning the evidence on 'what works' for child and youth wellbeing into practical, preventative action to benefit all young Australians, ARACY facilitates a number of high level research trials, community projects and advocacy initiatives. ARACY's success stories include:

- The development of *The Nest* national action agenda, a framework to improve child and youth wellbeing
- right@home: a Sustained Nurse Home Visiting trial in Victoria and Tasmania
- The Common Approach – a framework for universal service providers to identify children who may be at risk and connect them to the support they need.

A common thread in the success of these projects is the organisation's commitment to putting evidence into practice, to guide investment into early childhood development and intervention.

The First Steps Count – Child and Community Centre project presents a unique opportunity to trial all of ARACY's proven early childhood development and intervention approaches as a stacked intervention in one geographical area of critical need. If this stacked intervention approach is successful in one of the most challenging areas of regional Australia, the Centre could be used as a national exemplar model that will be scalable and transportable to other locations.

Further, as the Centre is in its early stages of system and program design, it provides opportunity to implement the recommendations of ARACY's discussion paper *Better Systems, Better Chances* for optimal system design and service provision. The Centre's system, focussing on the wellbeing of children and the common needs of families, will be integrated, agile and responsive. It will be underpinned by robust accountability and governance mechanisms, enabling adaptation and problem-solving. The Centre aims to:

- Prevent problems before they occur
- Respond early to issues that have long-term consequences
- Build capacity and focusing on the life course of children and families
- Measure effectiveness, focusing on outcomes and delivering evidence-based interventions that work.

From its inception, the Centre will apply an evidence-based new approach to early childhood development and intervention. It will employ an integrated, multidisciplinary service approach, mirroring the successful Doveton College model. The College provides high-quality learning and support for children and parents as well as services for residents with mental health and domestic violence issues. It has achieved success in improving outcomes for young people in a similarly disadvantaged suburb of regional Victoria.

What other support will ensure sustainability, long term cost benefits and economic growth?

The Centre's focus on improved education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people is directly aligned with the NSW Government's *Connected Communities* initiative that encourages fostering ties with Aboriginal communities.



As well as the partnership with ARACY, the Centre will also join the Early Start Engagement Centre network under the University of Wollongong's Early Start Project, a \$44 million research project seeking to improve processes for dealing with social disadvantage.

A key enabling factor for success will be the Centre's capacity to build on the strength of existing services and community ties. The Centre will also build on community engagement strategies that are already working and will service clients from adjacent early childhood services including from the adjoining Snugglepott Day Care Centre, which experiences a full attendance rate of the 102 enrolled children per week. 60% of these children are Aboriginal.

The Centre will also benefit from its close co-operation with, and involvement with the local community, local services and Aboriginal residents in the design and delivery of its programs. These close community connections will aid the Centre's development of effective, flexible and responsive programs.

The Centre will deliver costs benefits over the long term and help stimulate economic growth. Its facilities will attract new services to the region and enable existing service providers to extend their reach, delivering an improved return for government expenditure. In addition, the Centre will boost the local economy and reduce unemployment through the creation of:

- 50 jobs during building construction; and
- 36 ongoing staff for centre operations.

It will generate its own income of \$385,000 per annum (projected combined revenue from events and room rental) to aid its own economic sustainability. The Centre also hopes to extend its services via outreach and digital technology to expand into the wider Mid North Coast region, delivering further financial benefits to the community and aiding its sustainability.

Further information

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