

**Families Australia: submission to the the Department of Social Services on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-20: Recommendations for the Third Action Plan 2015-18 (April 2015)**

***Aim***

This paper contains recommendations by Families Australia and the Steering Group of the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children (the 'NGO Coalition') to assist discussions about the development of the Third Action Plan (2015-18) under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-20 (the 'National Framework'). The NGO Coalition comprises 156 non-government organisations which provide services to children and families across Australia, as well as key researchers in child protection and children's wellbeing. It is coordinated by Families Australia.

***Background***

In 2009, the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and the NGO Coalition, endorsed and began working together to implement the National Framework. The National Framework is Australia's first-ever plan of action to address child abuse and neglect.

The aim of the National Framework is to achieve 'a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia over time'. This unprecedented level of collaboration recognised that protecting children is everyone's responsibility and that the rates of reported child neglect and abuse in Australia were increasing at an alarming rate.

Since its inception, the National Framework has been guided by a public health model that promotes the safety and wellbeing of children. Under this model, priority is placed on having universal supports available for all families (for example, health and education). More intensive (secondary) prevention interventions are provided to those families that need additional assistance with a focus on early intervention. Tertiary child protection services are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families and governments.

An important aspect of the National Framework is its tripartite nature with policy development and program implementation being undertaken through the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children. This approach has provided a mechanism for the development of national responses and is a significant achievement of the National Framework to date. It also comes with unique challenges, bringing to light the differences between service systems and priorities across jurisdictions and non-government organisations.

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 (the National Plan) is a complementary strategy to the National Framework. The National Plan aims to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children. In June 2014, the Prime Minister released the Second Action Plan *Moving Ahead 2013-16* of the National Plan.

### ***The Third Action Plan 2015-18: key recommendations***

A separate discussion paper for the Third Action Plan consultations produced by the Australian Government Department of Social Services entitled 'Developing the Third Action Plan, Driving change: engaging the community' (March 2015) sets out the problem of child abuse and neglect in detail. It also lists the key achievements of the first two Action Plans, including: adoption of the National Standards of Out-of-Home Care; appointment of the first National Children's Commissioner; the Building Capacity Building Bridges program; the National Research Agenda and funding; the Common Approach to Assessment Referral and Support (CAARS); the Child Aware Approaches Conferences and grant round; and the Child Aware Local Initiative.

As that paper points out, despite some progress under the National Framework to date, there remain significant challenges to achieving the systemic reforms necessary to realise nation-wide change. The Third Action Plan represents an opportunity to re-position the National Framework towards a prevention and early intervention approach and to continue to build upon the collaborative efforts of government and the non-government sectors.

Below are comments developed by Families Australia and the NGO Coalition Steering Group. They are provided to facilitate discussion of options and priorities for the Third Action Plan. They are arranged in two categories: *general* – largely observations based on past experience and the current environment; and *specific* – focussed on potential key initiatives for the Third Action Plan.

The test for any initiative to be included in the Third Action Plan is whether it will contribute to 'a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia over time'. Most involved in child and family welfare, education and health services could identify a host of problems with current systems and responses. However, to effect substantial change we are challenged to think boldly and big. The Third Action Plan should involve measures that we are confident will shift performances and outcomes for children in a significant way.

#### **(a) General comments**

- The National Framework is a landmark national policy initiative which requires continued political, financial and other support by all Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, as well as the NGO and research sectors. It is more than about child safety; it is also about improving children's wellbeing.
- It is important that the national character of the initiative be emphasised as more than the inputs of any particular level of government and any particular set of non-government players. In short, the National Framework is a shared cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral responsibility.

- The Third Action Plan must contain initiatives that have a high likelihood of reducing child abuse and neglect and enhance children's wellbeing at the earliest possible time.
- Rather than contain numerous activities, the Third Action Plan should concentrate on major key initiatives that are likely to drive substantial and sustained change and which will also engender community support.
- It is important that the National Framework work toward the prevention of child abuse and neglect by emphasising initiatives that prevent abuse and neglect from occurring in the first instance and responding early when problems do arise. Can we, for example, aspire as a nation to increase financial resourcing for early intervention and prevention measures by, say, 50 per cent in the coming five years?
- Specifically, it is fundamentally important that the Third Action Plan address the main precursors of child abuse and neglect, namely, alcohol and other drug abuse, mental illness, and domestic/family violence. These need to be addressed by holistic, rather than siloed approaches.
- It is also important to maintain focus on the needs of children, young people, carers and families who face current challenges, such as in relation to out-of-home care. Thus, any increased expenditures on early intervention should not result in short-term reductions to tertiary services, such as programs to support children/young people in out-of-home care.
- It is imperative that the Third Action Plan engages and inspires the broader Australian community more than in the past to prevent child abuse and neglect and to improve children's wellbeing.
- The public health model remains an important guiding model for the National Framework, with its emphasis on putting priority on primary supports to promote child safety and wellbeing.
- The Third Action Plan should adopt a holistic approach that recognises the interrelated nature of problems such as homelessness, alcohol and other drug abuse, mental health crises, and family violence.
- The collaborative tripartite approach adopted by the National Framework is innovative and must be maintained and enhanced. It is also important that governance and accountability links between the National Framework and COAG remain strong.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities need special emphasis in the National Framework given the large disparities of outcomes compared with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- The Third Action Plan should also accord new attention on the needs of groups that may experience particular vulnerability, such as children with disabilities, and children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- There are opportunities for the Third Action Plan to become a key implementing vehicle for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse which is due to report in 2017.
- It is also important to forge mutually-reinforcing links between the National Framework and the National Plan of Action to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children.

### **(b) Specific suggestions**

The following suggestions are arranged under the five proposed National Priorities contained in the Third Action Plan discussion paper. They are provided to assist participants in the forthcoming consultations consider what might be possible and achievable for incorporation in the Third Action Plan. Under each of the five priorities, we have suggested 'Signature recommendations' which we consider are important in advancing the fundamental goals of the National Framework.

In sum, we suggest 'Signature recommendations' about: more effective parenting to prevent abuse and neglect; building a child-aware nation; engaging local communities and strengthening workforce capabilities; encouraging child and family services to work more closely together; further strengthening the knowledge base; and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through greater focus on their early years.

#### **1. Strengthening universal and early intervention supports for at risk children, young people and families**

##### Signature recommendation/s:

- *More effective parenting to prevent abuse and neglect.* Explore and implement evidence-based, and culturally-sensitive effective parenting programmes which are progressively rolled out across targeted communities and which are subject to a rigorous and sustained evaluation of impact.
- *Home visiting programs.* Explore and implement ways to assist parents, particularly of new-born babies and infants (up to the age of three years) through home visiting programs. A range of models operate in various jurisdictions in Australia and in other countries, but are not available in all locations in Australia. Feedback from service delivery experts strongly suggests that the development of supportive relationships between new parents who require assistance and qualified support workers (such as nurses, child and maternal health workers, or peers) within the home setting can help to terms of identifying needs, effectively targeting services and reducing isolation. This type of service should be offered to those most in need of assistance, and augment universal health and other services.

##### Other initiatives:

- Implement a national suite of community-based programs operating at local levels to build the capacity of fathers to understand the impact of their behaviours on family members and children and to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and other family members.
- Develop national standards on: (i) working with children checks; and (ii) child safe organisations.
- Ensure that new Commonwealth childcare provisions prioritise and support families deemed to be at risk in terms of child abuse and neglect.
- Develop and implement a primary prevention child sexual abuse framework and resources.

## **2. Empowering communities to keep children and young people safe and well**

### Signature recommendation/s:

- *Building a child-aware nation.* Implement a prevention-focussed national communication campaign to increase community awareness and action to improve child safety and wellbeing. This might take the theme of 'valuing children'. This could form part of the first-ever National Plan for Children and Young People which can be developed in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- *Engaging local communities and strengthening workforce capabilities.* Based on the Child Aware Local Initiative trial, scale-up the initiative to other communities, and support the annual Child Aware Approaches Conference to showcase innovative child and adult-related service practices.

### Other initiatives:

- Identify best practice collaborative impact models to improve outcomes for vulnerable families.
- Support potential employers and schools to assist at risk early school leavers by developing a national good practice guide to community mentoring.

## **3. Driving innovation, improvements and intersections across services and systems, including data sharing**

### Signature recommendation/s:

- *Encouraging child and family services to work more closely together.* Strengthen linkages between services such as maternal and child health, early childhood learning and childcare and youth through co-location and children and families place-based approaches, for example, foyer and outreach models.

### Other initiatives:

- Maximise intersections with relevant law/justice systems such as family law, juvenile justice and justice reinvestment. Specifically, strengthen education about child abuse and neglect amongst family law professionals.
- Develop joint service national practice standards to inform family violence, child protection and police responses.
- Fully implement the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care.
- Develop and implement a continuum of services for children and families that is trauma-informed, for example, in the fields of relationships, in-home support and mental health.
- Develop more detailed understandings about the impacts and consequences for children in the early stages of family separation.
- Implement findings from ACIL ALLEN Consulting (2013) *Professional Foster Care: Barriers, Opportunities & Options*.
- Monitor and implement innovative strategies to increase placement stability for children and young people in out of home care.

- Improve permanent outcomes (such as family restoration/reunification, and open adoption) for children and young people in out-of-home care where it is in their best interest.
- Strengthen transition planning with young people in out-of-home care, including targeting life skills training and providing support to 25 years of age to improve outcomes for those leaving out-of-home care. Also, consider the introduction of a case-managed service/resource entitlement system for care leavers commensurate with their time in care that provides them with priority access to supports such as specialist health and ancillary services, education and housing.

#### **4. *Sharing information and undertaking research and data to build the evidence base***

##### Signature recommendation/s:

- *Further strengthening knowledge.* Further implement the National Research Agenda through funding new research on emerging issues – prevention of cumulative harm, neglect, enhancing the effectiveness of child protection responses to those experiencing family violence, continuum of care from entry to transition out of care.

##### Other initiatives:

- Enhance data sharing options to support early responses for at risk children and families, for example, service mapping.
- Develop national standards to ensure implementation of cross-border and national information sharing.
- Agree on common data definitions and on the national collection of child abuse data.

#### **5. *Improving Indigenous child safety and wellbeing***

##### Signature recommendation/s:

- *Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early years.* Building on the Communities for Children program concept, establish comprehensive wrap-around early childhood services support. A whole-of-government approach, this would provide a one-stop-shop to ensure that children in disadvantaged families and communities receive the culturally strong, trusted, and quality services they need in the first three years of life.

##### Other initiatives:

- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families to stay together.
- Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children in decision making for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children.
- Develop, implement and evaluate trauma and healing informed approaches.
- Create effective systems drivers and oversight mechanisms to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.