

From Crisis Response to Prevention

***Proposals to Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments
for the second three-year action plan (2012-2015) under
the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children
2009-2020***

**Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and
Wellbeing of Australia's Children**

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Purpose	4
Background.....	4
The National Framework	4
The NGO Coalition	4
First three-year action plan in review	5
Second three-year action plan	5
1. Following-through on the first action plan.....	6
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.....	7
Financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers	9
Transitioning from care	9
Early childhood services	10
Workforce.....	11
Common approach to assessment, referral and support (CAARS).....	11
Responding to childhood trauma, including sexual abuse.....	12
National Children’s Commissioner.....	12
Information sharing	13
2. Enhancing coordination, partnership and building local solutions.....	13
Strengthening whole-of-government approaches	13
Supporting innovative practice	14
Placed-based funding in high needs areas	15
3. Addressing special areas of need.....	16
Supporting families at critical life stages.....	16
Children with disability.....	16
Children affected by carers with mental health and substance abuse issues	17
Children and families of offenders	17
Young people in the juvenile justice system	17
Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees	18
4. Strengthening results-orientation	19
Public awareness	19
Targets	20
Data and performance	20
Research.....	20
Conclusions and the way ahead	22
Attachment A: NGO Coalition.....	23
Attachment B: Summary of NGO Coalition recommendations.....	26
Attachment C: Financial and non-financial supports for carers	34
Attachment D: Placed-based funding in high-needs areas.....	35
References	38

Executive summary

This paper contains recommendations to all Australian Governments—State and Territory, as well as Commonwealth—by the 110-member Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s Children for the second three-year action plan (2012-2015) of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020.

Child abuse and neglect continues to be one of Australia’s most serious, urgent and deeply compelling challenges. The latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *Child protection Australia 2010-11*, showed that rates of child maltreatment remain stubbornly high. The continuing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in terms of child abuse substantiations and in out-of-home care compared with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remains a cause of grave concern.

The fundamental challenge for the National Framework is to make a paradigm shift in the ways that Australian society values, nurtures and protects children. Still greater effort is urgently required by all parties—Governments, the NGO sector and the community at large—to ‘join-up’ their respective efforts and to make a sustained and substantial improvement in the situation for vulnerable children and young people.

The recommendations presented in this paper aim to respond to these challenges. They are set out in four domains: following-through on activities started in the first action plan; enhancing coordination, partnership and building local solutions from a life span perspective; tackling special areas of need; and strengthening results-orientation.

The **central strategic message** is that, as a national policy based on a public health model, the National Framework now needs to give greater differential emphasis to prevention, aimed at tackling the underlying causes and precedents of child abuse and neglect, and to responding early to the needs of ‘at risk’ or vulnerable families and children. However, this should not be at the expense of much needed acute or tertiary services or important universal supports.

A **central proposal** is for a significant refocusing of existing investments towards targeted *local or place-based funding responses* aimed at bringing together the efforts of all Governments and NGOs to meet the specific requirements of high-needs families and children, including in responding to mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, disability and other predisposing economic and social factors. In these locations, crisis services should be co-ordinated with programs to support families and linked with practice knowledge related to children in danger or those being restored to their parent’s care where abuse and neglect had occurred. Such integrated services could respond to situations out of reach of early intervention programs, such babies abused early in their lives, children whose parents avoid services until there is a crisis, and those affected by substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness.

Overall, the next action plan needs to produce clear signs of improvement in the situation for children and young people who are either at risk of, experiencing or have experienced, abuse and neglect. It also needs to embrace a whole-of-life approach; intergenerational transmission will continue without interventions to interrupt the cycle.

It will be important to build on the knowledge and goodwill that has been generated so far and continue to strengthen partnerships and linkages between and across Government and NGO sectors.

Purpose

This paper is presented to Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments by the 110-member Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children ('NGO Coalition') to assist in formulating the second three-year action plan (2012-2015) under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 ('National Framework'). It has been prepared on the basis of consultations open to all NGO Coalition members.

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Background

The National Framework

In April 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Framework. In September 2009, the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference (CDSMC) announced the National Framework Implementation Plan for the first three years of the National Framework, 2009–2012.

The National Framework is significant in three major respects: it is the first time that a Commonwealth Government has explicitly stated its intention to play a major leadership role on national child protection matters; secondly, State and Territory Governments have agreed to work in concert with the Commonwealth and the NGO sector to develop a better planned and coordinated national system; and, thirdly, the NGO sector has been acknowledged as a major partner by Governments in the development of policy and the oversight of National Framework implementation.

The National Framework is based on a 'public health' model, under which: '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. Just as a health system is more than hospitals so a system for the protection of children is more than a statutory child protection service.' (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). A public health approach emphasises health promotion and disease prevention with increasingly targeted interventions based on recognised risk and protective factors and requires an understanding of the magnitude of the problem to inform prevention planning and measures the effectiveness of prevention efforts (Baum, 1998; Garrison, 2005).

At the broadest level, the stated outcome of the National Framework is: 'Australia's children and young people are safe and well'. It sets the following target: 'A substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia over time.' (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). In setting this target, the document acknowledges the problems of measuring a reduction in child abuse and neglect due to the lack of robust data.

The NGO Coalition

The NGO Coalition was established in November 2007. It has played a leading role in advocating for, negotiating, and now, helping to implement, the National Framework. As at February 2012, the NGO Coalition comprised 110 non-government community organisations which provide services to children, young people and families on the ground across Australia, as well as many key advocates and researchers in the areas of child protection and children's wellbeing. The larger or peak organisations in the NGO Coalition, in turn, represent many hundreds of not-for-profit community and welfare organisations around Australia.

Attachment A contains a list of the NGO Coalition’s membership and the NGO Coalition’s aims for the first three-year action plan of the National Framework.

First three-year action plan in review

The first three years of the National Framework has been a period during which broad-based support for the National Framework was generated, important knowledge was consolidated, and areas of innovative practice were developed.

- **Building support.** A critical factor has been strong ongoing support by political, bureaucratic and community leaders in the Governmental and the NGO sectors. The leadership and continued support of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers and their Governments and Departments is highly valued. In particular, at the Commonwealth level, the leadership of the Hon. Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and the Hon. Julie Collins MP, Minister for Community Services, is acknowledged.
- **Consolidating and updating knowledge.** There has been a consolidation and updating of knowledge about child safety and wellbeing. For example, the Commonwealth Government commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales to prepare a report into support for out-of-home carers. The National Research Agenda 2011–14 has been announced. An online resource for carers has been launched. Another important initial National Framework project has been to develop and implement nationally consistent approaches to supporting young people leaving out-of-home care. An important step was the release of a Commonwealth Government-funded report on consultations with young people with a care experience, to identify key priorities and practical solutions to better assist them to transition from care and to gain independence.
- **Practice innovation.** A major National Priority Project under the National Framework has been to develop a common approach to assessment, referral and support (CAARS).

Throughout this period, NGOs have continued to develop programs and contribute to the development of knowledge about practice. NGOs have worked in partnership with Government programs and on committees dedicated to bringing improvements to this national problem.

Second three-year action plan

Child abuse and neglect remains one of Australia’s most serious problems. The latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *Child protection Australia 2010-11*, demonstrates that rates of child maltreatment remain unacceptably and stubbornly high (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). In that regard, the NGO Coalition notes with grave concern the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in terms of child abuse substantiations and in out-of-home care compared with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The National Framework has a vital role to play in making a paradigm shift in the way that Australian society values, nurtures and protects all its children. This is a collective challenge, requiring the continued, combined efforts of Government, NGO and academic sectors in joint analysis and planning.

Underpinning that goal, the essential framing question for the second three-year action plan is: **What now needs to be done at the whole-of-nation level to produce a substantial and sustained reduction in rates of child abuse and neglect and to lift children’s wellbeing at the earliest possible time?**

The NGO Coalition continues to believe that it is vitally important that National Framework action plan activities drive substantial, observable and measurable improvements at the earliest possible time in the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. As a national policy based on a public

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health model, the National Framework now needs to give differential emphasis to prevention interventions aimed at tackling the underlying causes and precedents of child abuse and neglect and to responding early to the needs of 'at risk' or vulnerable families and children and maintain responsiveness to the impacts of childhood trauma throughout the lifecycle. However, this should not be at the expense of much needed acute or tertiary services or important universal supports.

Maintaining adequate **funding** for the National Framework is essential to sustain the momentum already generated and to resource new, priority activities. There are also ways to increase impacts at relatively low cost by leveraging off existing policy and program platforms, for example, by extending social marketing campaigns to include 'protecting children' messages (mentioned further below). A significant increase in the amount of State and Territory Government funding for joint National Priority Projects is crucial in ensuring the success of the national approach. Similarly, the promotion of child safety and wellbeing on the basis of a close partnership between Government and NGO sectors remains a vitally important feature of the National Framework.

We recommend:

- **Funding at least to the level in the first three-year action plan, and desirably higher, in order to sustain momentum, achieve gains and signal a continued determination to improve outcomes for children and young people.**

While there is a case for greater concentration of effort in fewer areas in the next three-year action plan, it will also be important for planning to take into account those areas that were deferred or given a lesser priority in the first action plan, such as disability and mental health. Other areas that require more attention and resourcing in the next action plan are those of responding to child sexual abuse and exploitation and trauma-specific services for those impacted by trauma at all stages of the life cycle. Work is required in the next action plan across the following four domains:

1. Following-through on activities started in the first action plan.
2. Enhancing coordination, partnership and building local solutions from a life span perspective.
3. Tackling special areas of need.
4. Strengthening results-orientation.

The remainder of this report is structured according to these four domains.

Given the national nature of the challenge, and COAG's leadership role on this matter, the NGO Coalition's 87 recommendations are made to *all* Australian Governments. Where the recommendation has specific relevance to the Commonwealth Government, it is marked by an asterisk. Attachment B contains a consolidated list of the NGO Coalition's recommendations.

1. Following-through on the first action plan

The second three-year action plan should take forward the following key areas of work commenced in the first action plan:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.
2. Financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers.
3. Transitioning from care.
4. Early childhood services.
5. Workforce.
6. Common approach to assessment, referral and support (CAARS).
7. Responding to childhood trauma, including sexual abuse.
8. National Children's Commissioner.
9. Information sharing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities

A top priority for the next action plan needs to be the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities. Comprehensive, evidence-informed, bold and urgent attention is required. The formation of policy directions needs to incorporate the views of a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties gathered through consultation processes that are highly inclusive and respectful of culture. To help bring together a comprehensive picture, a national-level examination should be undertaken to explore, in concert with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, approaches that are effective, or show promise, in meeting the wellbeing and safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities with a view to additionally funding and scaling-up such approaches.

In addition to such a review, work needs to continue in a range of other specific areas to support improvements to the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities. Several specific proposals are set out below. These are based on key principles that: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should have control over decisions regarding their children, families and communities; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should have access to culturally safe support and assistance at key points of vulnerability; coordinated, whole-of-government and NGO approaches at Commonwealth, State/Territory levels are required; flexibility is needed in Government funding to achieve appropriate local responses controlled by local communities; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should make the first decision on what should happen for vulnerable children; children and young people's voices need to be supported and recognised in all debates about child protection and what is best for children; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be supported further to educate their family's children and young people about sexualised behaviour and the sexual abuse of children and protecting themselves against risks.

We recommend:

- A comprehensive national-level examination to explore, in concert with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, approaches that are effective, or show promise, in meeting the wellbeing and safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities with a view to additionally funding and scaling-up such approaches. The review, which could be the first high-level task of the newly-appointed National Children's Commissioner (with funding provided from that Office), should gather evidence from the widest possible range of interested parties using culturally-appropriate methods.
- A major child abuse prevention initiative with funding to develop, promote and deliver culturally-based protective behaviours programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and community leaders across Australia. This initiative should provide long-term funding for protective behaviours programs that address sexualised behaviour in children and provide children and young people with the tools, language and strategies to safely speak up when they are at risk. Funding should support evidence-informed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protective behaviours programs that incorporate the following elements: peer support and education; whole of community protective behaviours education; community education on impacts of abuse and neglect; and an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child rearing.
- A national child protection workforce strategy aimed at building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. This should focus on the NGO sector as well as Government and be developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- A review to identify the opportunities for Multifunctional Aboriginal Childcare Services (MACS) and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services

to be scaled-up to take on a broader range of early years, parenting and family support programs and to support services to provide additional child care places in line with population growth in their communities.

- A program to provide grants to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Out-of-Home care services to develop and implement support services for youth transitioning from care, the learnings from which are documented and promoted.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are supported through additional funding and resources to adequately meet the national out-of-home care standards. The national out-of-home care standards should require Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competent practice for all services.
- Incorporation of cultural competence standards within service contracts for all child and family service providers, reflecting, for example, the inclusion of cultural competence within Community Service Organisation registration standards in Victoria.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input is further strengthened in relation to the Indigenous Children and Family Centres currently being developed, particularly to ensure that they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community controlled and developed. Such a review should also lead to the development of new models of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support that will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at key points of vulnerability have access to culturally-safe and supportive services.
- A plan with set targets for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services within the National Quality Framework, including additional funding for capacity building to ensure they can meet the quality standards under the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Framework should include clear, measurable cultural competence standards that must be met by all services.
- In light of the importance of transition to school for good education and ultimately developmental outcomes, a program to fund and promote innovative transition to school programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services.
- A national mechanism/program to monitor and support implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in each jurisdiction, initiated through implementation of Principle 3 of the national out-of-home care standards.
- The national research agenda include a focus on innovative, culturally-sensitive models and programs that respond to child abuse and neglect.
- The development of a National Partnership Agreement in relation to progressing the Closing the Gap plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and their families in the context of the National Framework.
- In all actions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, issues relating to disability are highlighted for special attention given that rates of disability within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are higher than in the general population.
- Special attention is given to developing services specifically addressing the needs of the children and families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison.
- A specific Supporting Outcome under the National Framework should continue to be devoted to Closing the Gap and all other Supporting Outcomes should each highlight the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers

The Commonwealth Government-funded Social Policy Research Centre report on formal and informal support for carers (2010) verified a range of inequalities in terms of supports for foster and kinship carers across jurisdictions and inadequacies in relation to the actual costs of caring for a child or young person in the out-of-home care system (McHugh & valentine, 2010).

Kinship care now comprises over half the out-of-home care services provided for children in some States/Territories (for example, in NSW), and this form of provision disproportionately affects Aboriginal families (Yardley, Mason, & Watson, 2009). Yet, Governments provide relatively little casework support for families and are increasingly withdrawing from funding these placements. **Attachment C** contains information about existing inequalities for carers.

We recommend:

- Government financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers are harmonised nationally without any reduction in support levels by any jurisdiction. As well as becoming nationally consistent or complimentary, carer financial supports should then be increased on an ongoing basis in keeping with the actual costs of providing care.
- Development of a model to support family carers specifically in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Carers are supported in gaining free or subsidised access to services not available at present. These include: full insurance protection (personal and property); legal advice and support in respect of child protection matters; and access to ongoing quality, professional training as required.
- The Commonwealth Government amends workplace law and other provisions to extend work/employment options to carers*.
- Discretionary Centrelink payments specifically targeted at assisting grandparents and other kinship carers in cases where children are placed in care and where establishment costs are incurred*.
- Additional and sustained, multi-year funding for grandparent/kinship and foster carer support groups at the local level and access to respite services and local information.
- A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for foster, grandparent and other kinship carers providing primary care of children leading to action to overcome barriers to access to Legal Aid by these groups.
- Assistance with funeral costs where the death of the child/children in the care of a grandparent/kinship or foster carer occurs. Also, funeral cost assistance for the parents of children in the care of a grandparent/kinship or foster carer.

Transitioning from care

The NGO Coalition welcomes the decision by the Standing Council on Community, Housing and Disability Services (SCCHDS) Ministers in October 2011 to increase support for young people transitioning from care to better establish their independence, including through a nationally consistent approach to planning for, and supporting young people transitioning from care. The SCCHDS Ministers' acknowledgment that improving support for young people leaving care will continue to be a priority under the National Framework is also strongly supported.

The situation for young people in, and leaving, the out-of-home care system continues to be a matter of major concern for the NGO Coalition. It is vitally important that all young people in the care system have a care plan in place which specifies not just immediate care issues but also addresses an overall direction for continuing care. This is a matter of urgent priority given the vulnerability of children and young people in care

who have already been abused and neglected. Young people who are transitioning from care require additional support in order to overcome the significant barriers they face, including the need to secure housing, employment and education after they turn 18. Young people also need access to supportive relationships that help sustain their transition to independence.

We recommend:

- All young people in out-of-home care have a personal care plan (including an educational plan) that extends through to 25 years of age.
- The Transitioning to Independent Living Allowance align with the real costs of moving successfully to adult independence*.
- An urgent examination of the needs of young people transitioning from care is undertaken to highlight practical ways to enhance job, housing and educational prospects, for example, through priority listing for courses, or for the courses to be free or subsidised.
- All post-school education expenses, including Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education contribution fees, are waived for young people in, or leaving, out-of-home care*.
- Funding for programs that provide access to supportive relationships for young people after leaving out of home care, such as mentoring.
- A program to provide grants to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander out-of-home care services to develop and implement support services for youth transitioning from care, the learnings from which are documented and promoted.

Early childhood services

Universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have untapped potential to support vulnerable families and to provide rich learning environments for children who experience disadvantage at home. Minimum quality standards in ECEC are now improving and within a few years all services will have the potential to meet the complex needs of high risk children and families. It is time to raise the bar and require universal services to tailor their offerings to fully engage families in crisis, so that disadvantaged children have full access to the proven benefits of high quality early childhood programs. This requires highly skilled staff and additional resources to train staff in relationship-based practices, provide outreach to vulnerable families and maintain strong links with the other services that these families need.

We recommend:

- Approval of Special Child Care Benefit is made more flexible to allow for approval for longer than 13 weeks for families with ongoing vulnerabilities and for parents seeking to better their situation through avenues such as counselling*.
- A report is provided on Commonwealth expenditure under the National Framework on the uptake and effectiveness of the Special Child Care Benefit and other measures to enhance access to childcare services for children at serious risk of harm*.
- Adequate funds and resources are provided directly to children's services that are both actively working with and reaching out to vulnerable and at risk families, allocated and administered through the Child Care Management System.
- Support is provided for vulnerable children to regularly attend ECEC, such as community buses accessible to children's centres to enable collection of children from families experiencing difficulties. Outreach workers are funded to supervise community bus transport of young children. Such programs should be carefully designed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, facilitate linkages

between families and services and should be integrated into service contracts in a flexible manner.

- Family support services are funded for additional outreach workers to assist parents to engage with, and utilise, ECEC for their children.
- Resourcing of networks between universal ECEC, family support and child welfare services is improved.
- Funding to support improved access to therapeutic programs for children and parents that reduce the impacts of trauma and build capacity for positive relationships in the future.
- Additional supported playgroups are funded.
- A plan with set targets for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services within the National Quality Framework, including additional funding for capacity building to ensure they can meet the quality standards under the National Quality Framework.
- Development of the National Quality Framework to include clear, measurable cultural competence standards that must be met by all services.

Workforce

The NGO Coalition is seriously concerned about current and projected gaps in the child protection workforce at Government and NGO levels. While recognising that a useful initiative of workforce mapping is underway under a National Analysis of Workforce Trends and Approaches, the NGO Coalition notes that this work excludes the NGO sector workforce. The Productivity Commission is well placed to undertake a comprehensive national examination of the current situation for, and future needs of, the child protection and related workforce, building on recent inquiries into the early childhood workforce and the not-for-profit sector.

We recommend:

- A comprehensive national child protection (Government and NGO) workforce strategy is developed on the basis of a Productivity Commission inquiry with input from the National Framework Implementation Working Group*. Such a national workforce strategy should also aim to ensure the cultural competence of all staff in mainstream support agencies who serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- The issue of the child protection workforce is the subject of the next set of national standards, for example, encompassing matters such as qualifications.
- A trauma-informed approach to care is integrated into all child protection and related human services systems.

Common approach to assessment, referral and support (CAARS)

The CAARS trial is indicating that this tool is likely to be important for universal service providers, including GPs, in responding effectively to the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families. The completion of the formative CAARS evaluation in late 2012 is anticipated.

We recommend:

- Subject to the outcomes of the independent evaluation, the CAARS initiative is further supported by the Commonwealth and/or State and Territory Governments in terms of a full-scale efficacy/effectiveness evaluation.

Responding to childhood trauma, including sexual abuse

Useful initial work in relation to responding to child sexual abuse has been undertaken in the first action plan. The leadership of the Western Australian Government has been valued in relation to the development of a learning resource to support carers and staff responding to concerning sexual behaviours in children and young people who are in their care.

Responding to child sexual abuse needs to be given a higher priority in the second action plan. To illustrate the importance of this issue, a review by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse found that between 4-8% of adult males reported experiencing penetrative child sexual abuse and 12-16% reported experiencing non-penetrative sexual abuse, while adult females reported rates of 7-12% for penetrative sexual abuse and 23-36% for non-penetrative sexual abuse. *Child protection Australia 2010-11* showed that, nationally, the most common type of substantiated abuse was emotional (36%) while the percentage of all substantiations that related to sexual abuse nationally was 14% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). While responding to the needs of children and adults impacted by child sexual abuse is a priority, the needs of those impacted by the complex trauma of child abuse and neglect in all its forms needs to be similarly prioritised.

Further work is required to address the needs of three populations: children who have experienced or are at risk of child sexual abuse; adult survivors of child sexual abuse and other forms of abuse and neglect (complex trauma); and children and young people with sexualised/sexually abusive behaviours. The NGO Coalition considers that activities that have been proven to be effective should be scaled-up.

We recommend:

- Further support is provided to raise public awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Further support is provided to expand proven prevention programs aimed at highly vulnerable children and young people.
- An examination is conducted of the adequacy of resourcing provided to law enforcement agencies to investigate child sexual offences, including online offences and historical offences.
- Further enhance training and ongoing support programs and resources for professionals and carers working with children who have been, or are at risk of, sexual assault or exploitation.
- NGO initiatives for adult survivors of abuse are supported that include education and awareness campaigns and educational programs for supporters/partners and children of survivors.
- Special attention is given to workforce development in order to build capacities of community workers in responding to complex trauma and of health professionals to better support the needs of survivors with complex trauma
- The development and implementation of a comprehensive model of care for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect.

National Children's Commissioner

The Commonwealth Government's recent publication of a discussion paper on a National Children's Commissioner is welcomed and the NGO Coalition looks forward to the announcement of the National Commissioner at the earliest possible time. Amongst other roles, the National Commissioner will have an important role to play in raising public awareness about child safety and wellbeing, promoting the rights of the child (in keeping with Australia's obligations under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), and in providing independent public reporting on the *outcomes* of National Framework activities. It is vitally important that the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are adequately reflected in this new entity. This could, for example, take the form of a deputy, or a key advisor, to the National Commissioner.

We recommend:

- The Office of the National Children’s Commissioner: is established as soon as possible; is adequately funded to ensure its capacity to engage with and outreach to children all over Australia; and gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s issues the highest possible priority*.

Information sharing

There is scope to improve information sharing and partnership between NGOs and Governments when children are at serious risk or have experienced trauma from abuse, for example, through changes to privacy law, more consistent processes, and overarching agreements and protocols. The current information sharing project should also be extended to focus on establishing a means by which NGOs can become much more active participants in information sharing designed to enhance the protection and wellbeing of children and young people at risk.

One area that requires priority attention relates to carers. At present, carers are prohibited by law from sharing private and sensitive information. Improved information sharing arrangements would, for example, assist carers in being able to provide information about the children they care for in order to access some benefits (for example, Centrelink benefits and leave from an employer).

We recommend:

- Remedial action is undertaken, on the basis of a review, to overcome barriers to information sharing in relation to carers.
- Prioritising development of information sharing technologies across Government and NGOs to ensure timely responses to early warning signs, risks at key transition points, and changes in circumstances.

2. Enhancing coordination, partnership and building local solutions

The second three-year action plan should give attention to:

1. Strengthening whole-of-government approaches.
2. Supporting innovative practice.
3. Establishing place-based funding in high needs areas.

Strengthening whole-of-government approaches

An important goal of the National Framework is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Government interventions to prevent child maltreatment and its impacts across the life cycle, including through greater coordination across and within Government systems and NGOs. Progress has been made at various levels of Government to engender whole-of-government approaches through mechanisms such as inter-departmental committees and place-based approaches to planning, evaluation and governance. Yet, much still remains to be done to optimise coordination and to clarify roles and responsibilities.

These whole-of-government approaches should be further strengthened in the next action plan at all levels of Government. One way to proceed is to examine all major Government social policy strategies and frameworks to ensure that these consistently and amply reflect the protection, safety and wellbeing needs of children. The Commonwealth Government could, for example, audit all national strategies, such as the national mental health and housing strategies, to ensure that children’s safety and wellbeing issues are given priority in terms of strategic goals, programs, funding and reporting mechanisms.

Australia can learn from other similar countries that are also attempting to institute national approaches to child protection, especially in multi-jurisdictional settings. The NGO Coalition sees value in benchmarking Australia's experiences and progress against analogous countries through a research study.

We recommend:

- Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments examine all high-level social policy strategies and frameworks to ensure that child safety and wellbeing issues are given priority and are linked to National Framework aims and objectives.
- A comparative study is undertaken to highlight the experiences of, and lessons learned from, similar countries that have sought to establish national child protection systems and frameworks*.

Supporting innovative practice

As demonstrated in the first COAG *Annual Report on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, the NGO sector provides the bulk of on-ground services to promote child protection, safety and wellbeing. However, the NGO sector generally struggles to have innovative practices that aim to strengthen families and communities recognised, funded and replicated. In the first National Framework action plan, some welcome provision was made for grants to NGOs to develop and deliver innovative practices. It is strongly recommended that grants for innovative practices be expanded in the second action plan.

It is noted that the Commonwealth Government has established an Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission. This Commission should provide a useful structure for Governments and NGOs to work together to reduce and harmonise regulatory, reporting and compliance requirements so that resources may be shifted away from administrative tasks and towards increased service provision. Efforts need to continue to reduce the regulatory and administrative burdens placed on many NGOs by contracting arrangements with Governments.

Scores of NGO Coalition representatives participate in various National Framework consultative forums, such as working groups on data and performance, out-of-home care, research, transitioning from care, Closing the Gap, and responding to child sexual abuse. The Commonwealth Government's support for the NGO Coalition secretariat is welcome. However, as National Framework implementation has grown in complexity and requires greater numbers of NGO representatives to participate, many NGOs are being confronted with significant resource constraints. This is already limiting the scope for engagement and is expected to worsen without additional support.

We recommend:

- An annual grant funding scheme is established to assist in supporting the development, trailing and scaling-up of integrated prevention-focused NGO practice and service delivery, in accordance with the priorities set out in the action plan. An annual funding level of \$20 million is recommended, as well as the establishment of annual national child protection awards.
- Efforts continue by all levels of Government to reduce the administrative burden on NGOs supporting children and young people and adult survivors of childhood abuse, by harmonising and reducing regulatory, reporting and compliance requirements.
- Further support is provided to the NGO Coalition to enable participation in National Framework consultative processes.

Placed-based funding in high needs areas

The NGO Coalition strongly urges a significant refocusing of existing investments towards targeted *local or place-based funding responses* aimed at bringing together the efforts of all Governments and NGOs to meet the specific needs of high-needs families and children, including in responding to mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, disability and other predisposing social and economic factors. This initiative will also help to take forward the National Collaboration Framework for Family Support Services, as agreed by Community and Disability Services Ministers on 21 October 2011 (Community and Disability Services Ministers, 2011).

More can be done to make protecting children a priority matter in planning, resourcing and reporting across *all* relevant strategies and frameworks at *all* levels of Government, for example, in Commonwealth, State and Territory and local Government strategies on disability, housing, early childhood education and care services, workforce and carers.

In that regard, a trial of a re-designed family and children's services localised 'placed-based' funding model is recommended. This new system of funding services for a specific group of families and children would be a bold approach to the planning, funding and delivery of human services: it could be designed to create a more efficient use of available resources, improve the level of community input and direction for social service delivery, reduce duplication and service system complexity, and, ultimately, improve outcomes for a group of families and children who are at significant risk of not accessing resources (for example, housing, education, recreational facilities) and/or achieving their potential. Some prototypes are already in place, funded largely by NGOs and based on existing Commonwealth and State grants. It is important that such an initiative be developed from the outset as a partnership between Governments, the NGO and academic sectors. Genuine, respectful and equal partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peaks and services will also be fundamental.

The Commonwealth Government has endeavoured to establish a more rational approach to the provision of child and family services through its place-based model of Communities for Children. Such an approach allows for a more dynamic setting of priorities based on local conditions and circumstances. However, existing uses of place-based funding have largely managed to only add a further layer of Government planning and funding oversight to existing service systems. They have not sought to rationalise or re-organise pre-existing services and have either served to plug gaps, add additional capacity or provide for new and sometimes more innovative solutions for local issues/problems.

These trials could be based in principle upon the recent initiative undertaken in the UK to establish 16 *Community Budget Pilots*, which pooled funding to assist families with complex needs. These local area funds draw resources from a range of existing commitments and provide local discretion and accountability in their allocation using practice and policy evidence to ensure funds are used for programs (and in some instances provided directly to families) to improve wellbeing and functioning.

In the Australian context, pooled funding would require an unprecedented level of commitment to co-operation between all three tiers of Government and NGOs. Rather than being a top-down, Treasury-led exercise (as is the case in the UK) (Allen, 2011), any trialing of a community or place-based budgeting model would require a high degree of co-operation from all funding parties (as well as service delivery agencies, given their practical interest and expertise). The budgeting approach should be based on a population health model.

A trial might have the following characteristics:

- Be limited to a small number of sites, say 2–3, with a mixture of regions across metropolitan and rural/regional to test differences based on locality.
- Be restricted to localities where there is a known commitment from NGOs, the State Government and Local Government Authorities that are prepared to participate and consider freeing up existing resources for the trial.
- Be based in localities where there is a known complexity in the range of service offerings available and where entrenched problems for families and children exist and where current service infrastructure is struggling to make inroads.

- Operate where there are a number of NGOs prepared to become engaged and which do not have such a strong ownership of existing models of intervention which prevent the potential for change.
- Have very clear boundaries about the population group or issue that is to be resolved through a community or localised place-based funding/pooled budget approach, for example, children reported to Government departments and at risk of entry to out-of-home care.
- Have clear population outcomes, indicators and measures to track the safety and wellbeing of the children targeted for assistance.
- Include mapping of universal, secondary and tertiary service and resources available in the community
- Include documenting the experience of vulnerable children, young people and families in getting their needs met in universal, secondary and tertiary services.

Attachment D contains further information.

We recommend:

- A trial of localised, place-based funding of children and family services is conducted in localities where entrenched problems exacerbate child protection risks for families and children, in particular in identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and where there is known complexity in service offerings available. This trial would be the centrepiece of the next action plan under the National Framework.

3. Addressing special areas of need

More attention is required to address the needs of relatively hidden and marginalised groups, including children with disability, children from culturally diverse groups, children living with parent/s or carer/s experiencing mental health and other disability issues, children living with parents who have substance abuse issues, children in families with a refugee experience, children of offenders, siblings of children with a chronic illness or disability, and adult survivors of childhood abuse and trauma.

Supporting families at critical life stages

Evidence from overseas (including the US and Ireland) points to the benefits of home visiting programs that support families, especially mothers, immediately after the birth of children. Such services offered by trained professionals, such as nurses or community workers, have proved to be beneficial in supporting families and identifying family and child needs early so that services can be accessed before problems worsen. The Commonwealth Government has already invested in HIPPIY services that focus on Aboriginal communities. The NGO Coalition strongly recommends that these types of targeted early intervention services be carefully examined by Governments with a view to scaling up programs that have proven effectiveness. This might, for example, be an element incorporated within the local solutions model proposed above.

Children with disability

No national data exists on the prevalence of abuse of children with disability in Australia, and the proportion of children currently involved with the child protection system that have disabilities remains unclear. International research indicates, however, that children with disability are a group at high risk of child abuse (Stalker & McArthur, 2010). The data that is available about parents with intellectual disabilities shows they are over-represented in child protection and legal proceedings (Lamont & Bromfield, 2009).

Improving both specialist child protection interventions and secondary service responses with this special needs group would reduce unnecessary interventions, improve access to appropriate support from across different sectors (disability, health, family support, education) and promote better outcomes for families. Action should focus on young people in care and relinquishing parents who have an intellectual disability, and aim to improve the quality of assessments, establish effective case plans and agreed parent actions, and identify appropriate support services across different sectors in the service system. A particular focus on children with disability in out-of-home care is warranted as these children are currently unlikely to be

receiving all of the early intervention and therapy services that would assist their development – connections with disability services should be strengthened. This is also the case for older children leaving out-of-home care and in need of some ongoing support.

It is also important to ensure that workers fully understand the impact of disability on children and on broader family systems so that they may better identify families in need of additional support. A promising example of child protection training provided to disability services is the partnership that has been formed with the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has an important role to play in improving service access and delivery for children with disabilities and further analysis of the impact of the NDIS on children's wellbeing should be undertaken in the second National Framework action plan to support both the NDIS trial and roll-out.

Disability issues disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Productivity Commission, 2011). There are also ongoing concerns about significant levels of disability that remain undiagnosed. The experience of disability has broad ranging impact, including in poor education and health outcomes, and over-representation in juvenile detention and out-of-home care. Parents are often reluctant to raise issues for many reasons, including fear of stigma and removal of their children. The environment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled, integrated early childhood education and care services provides a non-judgmental, supportive space in which to assist parents to identify disability issues their child may be experiencing, and to ensure that appropriate assessments are undertaken and that supports are put in place before the child goes to school.

Children affected by carers with mental health and substance abuse issues

The child protection needs of children living in families where carers suffer mental health and substance abuse issues, including 'dual diagnosis', are both complex and notoriously difficult to address. This group is particularly vulnerable to removal into care. Further research is needed into targeted strategies that can better support these families and children.

Children and families of offenders

The needs of families and children of offenders have gone largely unrecognised at the national level. It is particularly noteworthy that the imprisonment rate, in 2010, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults was 1,892 per 100,000, compared with 134 per 100,000 for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults; this adds to the disadvantage already experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. The majority of justice bodies do not collect data on whether offenders have dependents, or whether offenders experienced parental incarceration as children. This information is invaluable and provides useful information regarding the intergenerational patterns of crime (Victorian Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders, 2011).

Work is required to examine the needs of families and children of all offenders with a view to taking higher levels of coordinated action and systems planning across different levels of Government. The Victorian Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders report (2011), *Next Generation on the Outside: Better Outcomes for vulnerable families in contact with Australian criminal justice systems*, outlined the main issues faced by these families at each critical stage of contact (police, courts, community corrections, custody and reintegration) and recommended a number of actions that are needed at systems levels, including by Governments taking greater responsibility for the impact that contact with the criminal justice system has on families and in creating the next generation of offenders (Victorian Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders, 2011).

Young people in the juvenile justice system

Young people who have been in the child protection system are over-represented in the criminal justice system, both as juveniles and as adults. Action needs to be taken to reduce the risk of offending and of imprisonment. At an individual level, after care plans need to actively attend to the needs of young people who have been in the criminal justice system, and include measures that reduce the risk of offending, for

example, by ensuring secure housing. Particular attention is needed to meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The recommendations from the 2011 report, *Doing Time - Time for Doing - Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, provide a framework for action to reduce offending and imprisonment of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2011).

At a community level, justice reinvestment has been an effective approach to reducing offending and improving individual and community outcomes. Justice reinvestment is a localised criminal justice policy approach that first emerged in the United States. Under this approach, a portion of the public funds that would have been spent on covering the costs of imprisonment are diverted to local communities that have a high concentration of offenders. The money is invested in community programs, services and activities that are aimed at addressing the underlying causes of crime in those communities. Justice reinvestment has a strong community focus. It recognises that incarcerating or otherwise detaining a large proportion of the population weakens the community and creates the conditions for further crime. Justice reinvestment still retains prison as a measure for dangerous and serious offenders but actively shifts the culture away from imprisonment and starts providing community wide services that prevent offending (Gooda, 2010).

Siblings of a child with a chronic condition

Siblings of a child with a chronic condition have been identified as a cohort who is at risk of developing physical or mental illness and for whom there are no coordinated or integrated supports. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) has identified key systemic gaps in understanding and service system responses for siblings and recommended the need, *inter alia*, to: identify pathways to include siblings in current policies/strategies; identify one existing Government department to take a lead role and responsibility for siblings; support the development of effective data collection about siblings in conjunction with relevant organisations to estimate numbers and needs of this cohort; and support the development of quality assessment tools to ensure that at risk siblings access appropriate and relevant interventions (The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2011).

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees

Compared with many other areas of child protection, there has been relatively little attention to issues facing culturally and linguistically diverse communities and those from refugee backgrounds (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2009). The NGO Coalition suggests the consolidation of existing research and understandings, in close conjunction with these population groups, to obtain a comprehensive picture of the needs of such communities which may lead to further policy and program development.

Adult survivors of child abuse and trauma

Research establishes the profound effects of extreme experiences not only on the developing brain in infancy but throughout the life cycle. The multiple impacts of childhood trauma on adults are well documented, as are their costs in individual, societal and economic terms. Substantive international research shows that with appropriate working through of even severely traumatic early experiences, it is possible for trauma to be resolved. When parents have worked through their trauma their children can also do well. Action is needed to translate this research into practice. This will not only improve the lives of adults abused or neglected as children, with reductions in mental health issues, substance abuse and homelessness, but also reduce the trans-generational impacts of abuse, neglect and family violence.

We recommend:

- Greater support is provided to meeting the needs of families at times of heightened vulnerability through scaled-up home visiting programs.
- Existing research and understandings of the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in areas relating to the National Framework are consolidated, in close conjunction with these population groups, to obtain a comprehensive picture which may lead to further policy and program development.

- Special attention is paid, for example, through a targeted review, to meeting the needs of children with disability in the out-of-home care system.
- Key issues are identified relating to the needs of children with disability, with national data on rates of abuse of children with disability to be collected on a comprehensive basis.
- The national working-with-children check system is progressed to enable mutual recognition between States and Territories to maximise protection for children with disability.
- Child protection training provided to disability services is expanded to include awareness training of issues for children with disability being provided to workers involved in child safety and protection programs.
- Further analysis of the impact of the NDIS on children's wellbeing is undertaken.
- The National Disability Strategy implementation plan for 2011-2014 contains separate indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including children.
- A targeted early intervention program is established through which ECEC services catering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are tasked to raise awareness of disability issues, support families to confirm diagnosis and assist families to establish required supports for children with disabilities.
- Culturally appropriate resources and training for services to respond to priority needs are developed.
- Children living in families where mental health and substance abuse issues exist are prioritised for strategies which target prevention of entry into care via whole of Government approaches.
- A national-level examination is undertaken of the needs of families and children of offenders, including an assessment of the merits of current service models and the need for consistent national approaches to better support this population group.
- Care Plans and After Care Plans include actions to reduce the risk of offending and imprisonment.
- Trials of justice reinvestment are co-facilitated by COAG in partnership with NGOs.
- The proposals in the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists report on siblings are considered with a view to early implementation across Governments.
- Ongoing support and funding for proven programs that assist adult survivors of childhood abuse and their families.
- The development and implementation of a comprehensive model of care for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect based on proven extant approaches.

4. Strengthening results-orientation

Public awareness

In keeping with a public health approach, child safety and wellbeing issues require greater community awareness and support in order to build community competence to identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families.

COAG, via the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), has supported development of a public education / behaviour change strategy to increase the understanding of parents, carers and the community of evidence-based information about early childhood development, and thereby influence their interactions with children to improve children's wellbeing

(Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010). The project is termed the “Engaging families in the early childhood development story” initiative. Research is currently underway to inform the development of this national social marketing and communications campaign, which includes developing and testing potential campaign strategies to understand their likely impact on engaging and motivating the target audience. This developmental work is due for completion in late 2012, and will be undertaken in close consultation with the NGO sector and professions. This strategy is consistent with the recommendations recently proposed in a report commissioned by the UK Government (Allen, 2011) and has the potential to facilitate sustained behaviour change to improve the wellbeing of child and young people.

In relation specifically to child protection issues, there is a need to establish an overarching public communications strategy under the National Framework. Such a strategy should, *inter alia*, explore, and build upon, child-centred messaging in existing Government-supported social marketing campaigns, for example, incorporating a trauma-informed approach to alcohol and mental health, incorporating information about the effect of family violence on children in crime and safety campaigns. The strategy should take a pro-active perspective, that is, one of promoting solutions to the problems of abuse and neglect. There is also merit in promoting more thoughtful media consideration about the issues – one that focuses on encouraging preventive activities.

Targets

The first three-year plan contained several ‘indicators of change’ but no overall quantitative target or targets. The next National Framework action plan requires both qualitative and quantitative targets. It is important that tangible, measurable and meaningful goals are set, to which all parties can aspire, and which can give confidence to the broader community that the problem of child abuse can be effectively addressed.

The absence of targets—for example, about the rates of children entering out-of-home care—may predispose parties to the National Framework to be distracted by activities or outputs, at the risk of losing sight of substantive outcomes for children, young people and families. On the other hand, the presence of targets can have strong effects in terms of influencing resource allocation decisions, ensuring that activities are evaluated for their effectiveness, and identifying areas that require more attention.

It is noteworthy that other important national agreements contain targets. For example, under the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education (Council of Australian Governments, 2008), COAG has agreed to a number of targets to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, in particular, ensuring that all four-year olds in remote areas have access to early childhood education by 2013.

Data and performance

Data and performance monitoring is a critical area of activity under the National Framework as it is through the collection and interpretation of meaningful data that we can identify critical issues and populations in need, monitor the success of the National Framework in making a real difference to the lives of vulnerable children and their families, and make informed decisions about planning and resource allocation for future priorities. There is a need to go beyond existing State and Territory Government administrative systems data to adequately measure the indicators in the National Framework. In the next action plan, it is crucial that data development focus on the strategic intent of the National Framework and measuring meaningful changes in the outcomes for children in a timely manner.

In relation to the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care, it is now important to collect more outcome-related data, rely less on proxy measures, and encourage the uptake of the standards by carers of children in informal situations. Careful consideration needs to be given to the intent as well as the specific wording of the standard when considering how best to implement and monitor progress. Ultimately, the standards are not designed to be more red tape; the intent is to improve outcomes for children in care. For example, while a health check is the minimum national standard, the intent is that health checks will lead to better health outcomes for children in care. Action is needed to ensure that data that can improve services is made available to service providers in a timely way.

Research

The National Research Agenda is a significant development, being crafted through close collaboration between Governments and the NGO Coalition. The recent announcement of \$600,000 in Commonwealth-

State/Territory Government funding for the next three years is appreciated. However, it is suggested that the level of future funding be substantially increased to help drive research efforts and avoid funding of multiple, small projects that may lack adequate rigour. It is noted that the National Homelessness Research Agenda has been funded to the level of \$11.4 million over the four years 2009-2013. It is proposed that the research agenda is used to drive more large-scale research that balances quantitative and qualitative research projects identified in the national research audit. Australia would be much better placed to have some larger-scale projects with contributions from States/Territories, the NGO and academic sectors that could significantly advance the evidence base.

We recommend:

- The Commonwealth Government allocate long-term funds to roll out the COAG supported public awareness/social marketing strategy *Engaging families in the Early Childhood Development Story* commencing in late 2012*.
- A National Framework public communication strategy is devised jointly by Governments and the NGO sector that would include the cost-effective use of existing communication platforms to incorporate child safety and wellbeing messaging and the enhancement of existing national public awareness initiatives. This campaign should be carefully planned so that any increase in demand for services is fully met.
- Key quantitative, as well as qualitative, targets are included in the next action plan to be monitored through the COAG annual report and National Children's Commissioner's annual report to the Federal Parliament.
- Further consideration is given to the proxy measures for the National Out-of-Home Care Standards to ensure that they relate as closely as possible to the desired intent of each Standard, and that the indicators align closely to those contained in other national strategies such as Closing the Gap.
- The Commonwealth Government invest in 'cloud-based' data systems that State and Territory Governments and NGOs can utilise for national reporting on the National Framework and standards*. This will need to be practice-based and minimise red-tape.
- Documentation of the current research effort relevant to vulnerable children, young people and families, and how research findings are contributing to improved child protection policy and practices.
- The funding for the National Research Agenda is increased substantially beyond the current funding level. An additional \$5 million over the next action plan is recommended. These funds should be derived from a combination of State/Territory and Commonwealth Government sources committed to researching an agreed strategy and set of research priorities.
- In addition to direct funding of new research projects, research funding be used to develop infrastructure, such as data warehousing, that will build the capacity of the research sector to undertake more large-scale quantitative research.
- Explore the possibility of the identifying vulnerable children and families as a National Research Priority under the Australian Research Council and National Health and Medical Research Council research grants*.

Conclusions and the way ahead

As evidenced by the latest national figures (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012), Australia is yet to see clear signs of a turn-around in rates of child abuse and neglect. Still greater effort is urgently required by all parties— Governments, the NGO sector and the community at large—to make a sustained and substantial improvement in the situation for children.

Some distance has been travelled in the first three-year action plan under the National Framework, building on the momentum generated in the preceding decade. The next action plan needs to start showing—and be seen to show—clear and substantial signs of improvement in the situation for children and young people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse and neglect.

The National Framework is based on a belief that a paradigm shift is required in the nation’s activities to protect and nurture children. This means a shift toward greater partnership amongst the key Governmental and NGO players. It means a shift toward greater emphasis on anticipating and responding early to the needs of ‘at risk’ or vulnerable families and children. It means enhancing public awareness about the rights and needs of children and young people, and implementing the most effective ways to uphold and meet those rights and needs.

In the next action plan, it will be important to build on the knowledge and goodwill that has been generated so far and continue to strengthen the partnerships and linkages between and across Government and NGO sectors.

The NGO Coalition remains strongly committed to the National Framework and looks forward to continuing to work closely with all Governments, and the broader Australian community, to produce real improvements in the safety and wellbeing of all Australian children and young people.

The next action plan needs to start showing—and be seen to show—clear and substantial signs of improvement in the situation for children and young people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse and neglect.

Attachment A: NGO Coalition

Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children (‘NGO Coalition’)

Aims

The NGO Coalition's aims for the first three-year action plan under the National Framework (2009-12) are to:

1. Promote the importance of the National Framework within the NGO sector and to the public.
2. Work with State/Territory and Commonwealth Governments and others to ensure the successful implementation of the first three-year action plan under the Framework.
3. Work to develop robust future three-year action plans under the Framework, including on the basis of an evaluation of achievements in the first three-year action plan.
4. Provide high level strategic and expert input into the various consultative and decision-making forums established to implement the Framework.
5. Enable the implementation phase to be informed by a wide range of appropriate perspectives (for example, service providers, academia and consumers).
6. Maintain a capacity to undertake independent work in relation to the National Framework.

Membership (alphabetical listing as at February 2012)

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
2. Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW)
3. Aboriginal Family Support Services Inc
4. ACT for Kids
5. Adults Surviving Child Abuse
6. Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia
7. Alliance for Forgotten Australians
8. Anglicare Australia
9. Anglicare (SA)
10. Anglicare (WA)
11. Anglicare Tasmania and Child and Family Welfare Association Tasmania
12. Australian Association for Infant Mental Health
13. Australian Association of Social Workers
14. Australian Catholic University, Institute of Child Protection Studies
15. Australian College of Neonatal Nurses
16. Australian Community Children's Services
17. Australian Council on Social Services
18. Australian Federation of Disability Organisations
19. Australian Foster Care Association
20. Australian Medical Association
21. Australian Network of General Practice
22. Australian Nursing Federation
23. Australian Physiotherapy Association
24. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
25. Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
26. Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (NSW)
27. Barnardos
28. Benevolent Society
29. Berry Street (Vic)
30. Brain Injury Australia
31. Bravehearts
32. Brotherhood of St Laurence
33. Cape York/Gulf Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Advisory Association Inc

34. Carers Australia
35. Catholic Social Services
36. Centrecare Inc
37. Centacare Broken Bay
38. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (Vic)
39. Child Adolescent and Family Welfare Association of Australia
40. Child and Family Welfare (SA)
41. Children with Disability Australia
42. Children's Protection Society
43. Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program
44. Childwise
45. Connect Child and Family Services Inc
46. CREATE Foundation
47. Crisis Support Service/MensLine Australia
48. Early Childhood Australia
49. Early Childhood Intervention Australia
50. Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland
51. Families Australia (and NGO Coalition Secretariat/convenor)
52. Family Life
53. Family Relationship Services Australia
54. Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia
55. Good Beginnings Australia
56. Gowrie Australia
57. Grandparents Australia
58. Griffith University School of Human Services and Social Work
59. Griffith Institute for Social and Behavioural Research, Professor Ross Homel, PhD, FASSA, AO, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice
60. Heartfelt House
61. Homelessness Australia
62. International Social Service Australia
63. Life Without Barriers
64. MacKillop Family Services
65. Marymead Child & Family Centre
66. Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation Inc
67. Melbourne Citymission
68. Menzies School of Health Research
69. Mercy Family and Community Services
70. Micah Projects (Qld)
71. Mission Australia
72. National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
73. National Association of Community Legal Centres
74. National Disability Services
75. NAPCAN
76. Newcastle University Family Action Centre
77. National Children's and Youth Law Centre
78. National Investment for the Early Years (NiFTeY)
79. NSW Family Services
80. Parenting Research Centre
81. Parkerville Children and Youth Care
82. Peakcare (Qld)
83. Playgroup Australia Inc
84. Public Health Association of Australia
85. Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Limited – QATSICPP
86. Relationships Australia National
87. Relationships Australia Queensland
88. Royal Australasian College of Physicians
89. Royal College of Nursing, Australia

90. The Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne
91. The Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses
92. Save the Children Australia
93. Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
94. Siblings Australia
95. Smart Population
96. St Vincent de Paul Society
97. The Mirabel Foundation
98. The Smith Family
99. UnitingCare Burnside
100. UnitingCare National
101. University of Melbourne, Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare
102. University of South Australia, Australian Centre for Child Protection
103. University of Western Australia, The Research Centre for Vulnerable Children and Families
104. Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
105. Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
106. Wanslea Family Services
107. Yorganop Association
108. Youth Affairs Council of South Australia
109. Youth Off The Streets
110. YMCA Australia

Attachment B: Summary of NGO Coalition recommendations

General¹

- Funding at least to the level in the first three-year action plan, and desirably higher, in order to sustain momentum, achieve gains and signal a continued determination to improve outcomes for children and young people.

1. Following-through on the 1st action plan

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities

- A comprehensive national-level examination to explore, in concert with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, approaches that are effective, or show promise, in meeting the wellbeing and safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities with a view to additionally funding and scaling-up such approaches. The review, which could be the first high-level task of the newly-appointed National Children's Commissioner (with funding provided from that Office), should gather evidence from the widest possible range of interested parties using culturally-appropriate methods.
- A major child abuse prevention initiative with funding to develop, promote and deliver culturally-based protective behaviours programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and community leaders across Australia. This initiative should provide long-term funding for protective behaviours programs that address sexualised behaviour in children and provide children and young people with the tools, language and strategies to safely speak up when they are at risk. Funding should support evidence-informed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protective behaviours programs that incorporate the following elements: peer support and education; whole of community protective behaviours education; community education on impacts of abuse and neglect; and an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child rearing.
- A national child protection workforce strategy aimed at building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. This should focus on the NGO sector as well as Government and be developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- A review is conducted to identify the opportunities for Multifunctional Aboriginal Childcare Services (MACS) and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services to be scaled-up to take on a broader range of early years, parenting and family support programs and to support services to provide additional child care places in line with population growth in their communities.
- A program to provide grants to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Out-of-Home care services to develop and implement support services for youth transitioning from care, the learnings from which are documented and promoted.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are supported through additional funding and resources to adequately meet the national out-of-home care standards. The national out-of-home care standards should require Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competent practice for all services.

¹ Where the recommendation has specific relevance to the Commonwealth Government, it is marked by an asterisk.

- Incorporation of cultural competence standards within service contracts for all child and family service providers, reflecting, for example, the inclusion of cultural competence within Community Service Organisation registration standards in Victoria.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input is further strengthened in relation to the Indigenous Children and Family Centres currently being developed, particularly to ensure that they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community controlled and developed. Such a review should also lead to the development of new models of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support that will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at key points of vulnerability have access to culturally-safe and supportive services.
- A plan with set targets for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services within the National Quality Framework, including additional funding for capacity building to ensure they can meet the quality standards under the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Framework should include clear, measurable cultural competence standards that must be met by all services.
- In light of the importance of transition to school for good education and ultimately developmental outcomes, a program to fund and promote innovative transition to school programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services.
- A national mechanism/program to monitor and support implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in each jurisdiction, initiated through implementation of Principle 3 of the national out-of-home care standards.
- The national research agenda include a focus on innovative, culturally-sensitive models and programs that respond to child abuse and neglect.
- The development of a National Partnership Agreement in relation to progressing the Closing the Gap plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and their families in the context of the National Framework.
- In all actions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, issues relating to disability are highlighted for special attention given that rates of disability within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are higher than in the general population.
- Special attention is given to developing services specifically addressing the needs of the children and families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison.
- A specific Supporting Outcome under the National Framework should continue to be devoted to Closing the Gap and all other Supporting Outcomes should each highlight the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers

- Government financial and non-financial supports for foster and kinship carers are harmonised nationally without any reduction in support levels by any jurisdiction. As well as becoming nationally consistent or complimentary, carer financial supports should then be increased on an ongoing basis in keeping with the actual costs of providing care.
- Development of a model to support family carers specifically in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Carers are supported in gaining free or subsidised access to services not available at present. These include: full insurance protection (personal and property); legal advice and support in respect of child protection matters; and access to ongoing quality, professional training as required.
- The Commonwealth Government amends workplace law and other provisions to extend work/employment options to carers*.

- Discretionary Centrelink payments specifically targeted at assisting grandparents and other kinship carers in cases where children are placed in care and where establishment costs are incurred*.
- Additional and sustained, multi-year funding for grandparent/kinship and foster carer support groups at the local level and access to respite services and local information.
- A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for foster, grandparent and other kinship carers providing primary care of children leading to action to overcome barriers to access to Legal Aid by these groups.
- Assistance with funeral costs where the death of the child/children in the care of a grandparent/kinship or foster carer occurs. Also, funeral cost assistance for the parents of children in the care of a grandparent/kinship or foster carer.

Transitioning from care

- All young people in out-of-home care have a personal care plan (including an educational plan) that extends through to 25 years of age.
- The Transitioning to Independent Living Allowance align with the real costs of moving successfully to adult independence*.
- An urgent examination of the needs of young people transitioning from care is undertaken to highlight practical ways to enhance job, housing and educational prospects, for example, through priority listing for courses, or for the courses to be free or subsidised.
- All post-school education expenses, including Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education contribution fees, are waived for young people in, or leaving, out-of-home care*.
- Funding for programs that provide access to supportive relationships for young people after leaving out of home care, such as mentoring.
- A program to provide grants to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander out-of-home care services to develop and implement support services for youth transitioning from care, the learnings from which are documented and promoted.

Early childhood services

- Approval of Special Child Care Benefit is made more flexible to allow for approval for longer than 13 weeks for families with ongoing vulnerabilities and for parents seeking to better their situation through avenues such as counselling*.
- A report is provided on Commonwealth expenditure under the National Framework on the uptake and effectiveness of the Special Child Care Benefit and other measures to enhance access to childcare services for children at serious risk of harm*.
- Adequate funds and resources are provided directly to children's services that are both actively working with and reaching out to vulnerable and at risk families, allocated and administered through the Child Care Management System.
- Support is provided for vulnerable children to regularly attend ECEC, such as community buses accessible to children's centres to enable collection of children from families experiencing difficulties. Outreach workers are funded to supervise community bus transport of young children. Such programs should be carefully designed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, facilitate linkages between families and services and should be integrated into service contracts in a flexible manner.
- Family support services are funded for additional outreach workers to assist parents to engage with, and utilise, ECEC for their children.
- Resourcing of networks between universal ECEC, family support and child welfare services is improved.

- Funding to support improved access to therapeutic programs for children and parents that reduce the impacts of trauma and build capacity for positive relationships in the future.
- Additional supported playgroups are funded.
- A plan with set targets for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care services within the National Quality Framework, including additional funding for capacity building to ensure they can meet the quality standards under the National Quality Framework.
- Development of the National Quality Framework to include clear, measurable cultural competence standards that must be met by all services.

Workforce

- A comprehensive national child protection (Government and NGO) workforce strategy is developed on the basis of a Productivity Commission inquiry with input from the National Framework Implementation Working Group*. Such a national workforce strategy should also aim to ensure the cultural competence of all staff in mainstream support agencies who serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- The issue of the child protection workforce is the subject of the next set of national standards, for example, encompassing matters such as qualifications.
- A trauma-informed approach to care is integrated into all child protection and related human services systems.

Common approach to assessment, referral and support (CAARS)

- Subject to the outcomes of the independent evaluation, the CAARS initiative is further supported by the Commonwealth and/or State and Territory Governments in terms of a full-scale efficacy/effectiveness evaluation.

Responding to childhood trauma, including sexual abuse

- Further support is provided to raise public awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Further support is provided to expand proven prevention programs aimed at highly vulnerable children and young people.
- An examination is conducted of the adequacy of resourcing provided to law enforcement agencies to investigate child sexual offences, including online offences and historical offences.
- Further enhance training and ongoing support programs and resources for professionals and carers working with children who have been, or are at risk of, sexual assault or exploitation.
- NGO initiatives for adult survivors of abuse are supported that include education and awareness campaigns and educational programs for supporters/partners and children of survivors.
- Special attention is given to workforce development in order to build capacities of community workers in responding to complex trauma and of health professionals to better support the needs of survivors with complex trauma
- The development and implementation of a comprehensive model of care for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect.

National Children's Commissioner

- The Office of the National Children's Commissioner: is established as soon as possible; is adequately funded to ensure its capacity to engage with and outreach to children all over Australia; and gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's issues the highest possible priority*.

Information sharing

- Remedial action is undertaken, on the basis of a review, to overcome barriers to information sharing in relation to carers.
- Prioritising development of information sharing technologies across Government and NGOs to ensure timely responses to early warning signs, risks at key transition points, and changes in circumstances.

2. Enhancing coordination, partnership and building local solutions

Strengthening whole-of-government approaches

- Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments examine all high-level social policy strategies and frameworks to ensure that child safety and wellbeing issues are given priority and are linked to National Framework aims and objectives.
- A comparative study is undertaken to highlight the experiences of, and lessons learned from, similar countries that have sought to establish national child protection systems and frameworks*.

Supporting innovative practice

- An annual grant funding scheme is established to assist in supporting the development, trailing and scaling-up of integrated prevention-focused NGO practice and service delivery, in accordance with the priorities set out in the action plan. An annual funding level of \$20 million is recommended, as well as the establishment of annual national child protection awards.
- Efforts continue by all levels of Government to reduce the administrative burden on NGOs supporting children and young people and adult survivors of childhood abuse, by harmonising and reducing regulatory, reporting and compliance requirements.
- Further support is provided to the NGO Coalition to enable participation in National Framework consultative processes.

Establishing place-based funding in high needs areas

- A trial of localised, place-based funding of children and family services is conducted in localities where entrenched problems exacerbate child protection risks for families and children, in particular in identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and where there is known complexity in service offerings available. This trial would be the centrepiece of the next action plan under the National Framework.

3. Addressing special areas of need

Supporting families at critical life stages

- Greater support is provided to meeting the needs of families at times of heightened vulnerability through scaled-up home visiting programs.

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees

- Existing research and understandings of the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in areas relating to the National Framework are consolidated, in close conjunction with these population groups, to obtain a comprehensive picture which may lead to further policy and program development.

Children with disability

- Special attention is paid, for example, through a targeted review, to meeting the needs of children with disability in the out-of-home care system.
- Key issues are identified relating to the needs of children with disability, with national data on rates of abuse of children with disability to be collected on a comprehensive basis.
- The national working-with-children check system is progressed to enable mutual recognition between States and Territories to maximise protection for children with disability.
- Child protection training provided to disability services is expanded to include awareness training of issues for children with disability being provided to workers involved in child safety and protection programs.
- Further analysis of the impact of the NDIS on children's wellbeing is undertaken.
- The National Disability Strategy implementation plan for 2011-2014 contains separate indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including children.
- A targeted early intervention program is established through which ECEC services catering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are tasked to raise awareness of disability issues, support families to confirm diagnosis and assist families to establish required supports for children with disabilities.
- Culturally appropriate resources and training for services to respond to priority needs are developed.

Children affected by carers with mental health and substance abuse issues

- Children living in families where mental health and substance abuse issues exist are prioritised for strategies which target prevention of entry into care via whole of government approaches.

Children and families of prisoners

- A national-level examination is undertaken of the needs of families and children of offenders, including an assessment of the merits of current service models and the need for consistent national approaches to better support this population group.
- Care Plans and After Care Plans include actions to reduce the risk of offending and imprisonment.
- Trials of justice reinvestment are co-facilitated by COAG in partnership with NGOs.

Siblings of a child with a chronic condition

- The proposals in the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists report on siblings are considered with a view to early implementation across Governments.

Adult survivors of child abuse and trauma

- Ongoing support and funding for proven programs that assist adult survivors of childhood abuse and their families.
- The development and implementation of a comprehensive model of care for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect based on proven extant approaches.

4. Strengthening results-orientation

Public awareness

- The Commonwealth Government allocate long-term funds to roll out the COAG supported public awareness/social marketing strategy *Engaging families in the Early Childhood Development Story* commencing in late 2012*.
- A National Framework public communication strategy is devised jointly by Governments and the NGO sector that would include the cost-effective use of existing communication platforms to incorporate child safety and wellbeing messaging and the enhancement of existing national public awareness initiatives. This campaign should be carefully planned so that any increase in demand for services is fully met.

Targets

- Key quantitative, as well as qualitative, targets are included in the next action plan to be monitored through the COAG annual report and National Children's Commissioner's annual report to the Federal Parliament.

Data and performance

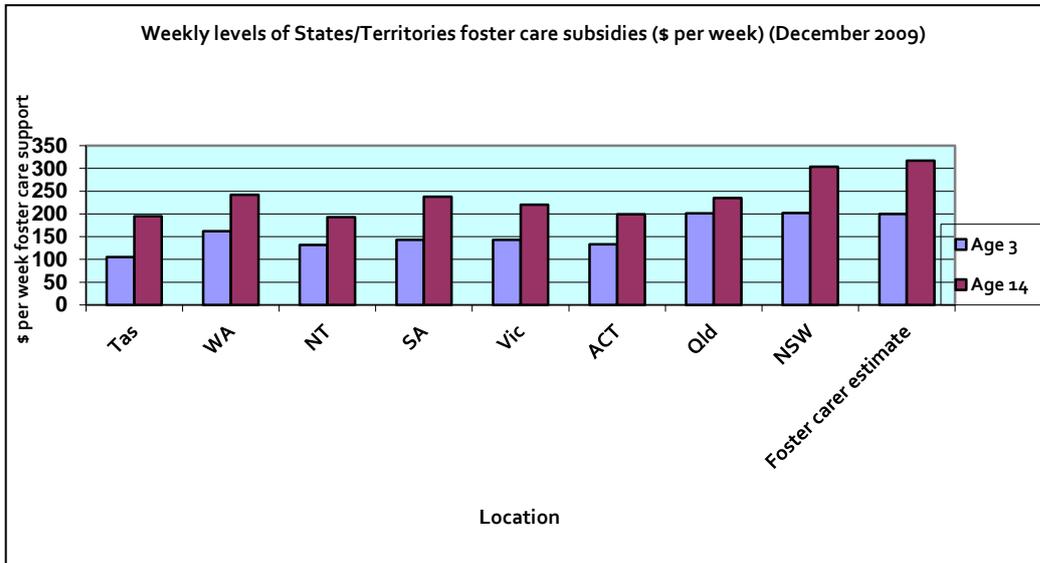
- Further consideration is given to the proxy measures for the National Out-of-Home Care Standards to ensure that they relate as closely as possible to the desired intent of each Standard, and that the indicators align closely to those contained in other national strategies such as Closing the Gap.
- The Commonwealth Government invest in 'cloud-based' data systems that State and Territory Governments and NGOs can utilise for national reporting on the National Framework and standards. This will need to be practice-based and minimise red-tape.

Research

- Documentation of the current research effort relevant to vulnerable children, young people and families, and how research findings are contributing to improved child protection policy and practices.
- The funding for the National Research Agenda is increased substantially beyond the current funding level. An additional \$5 million over the next action plan is recommended. These funds should be derived from a combination of State/Territory and Commonwealth Government sources committed to researching an agreed strategy and set of research priorities.

- In addition to direct funding of new research projects, research funding be used to develop infrastructure, such as data warehousing, that will build the capacity of the research sector to undertake more large-scale quantitative research.
- Explore the possibility of the identifying vulnerable children and families as a National Research Priority under the Australian Research Council and National Health and Medical Research Council research grants*.

Attachment C: Financial and non-financial supports for carers



Source: State Foster Carer Associations and Departmental informants (various, 2009) (McHugh & valentine, 2010)

Attachment D: Placed-based funding in high-needs areas

The Challenge

In an environment where there is a growing demand on both public and private funds to deliver improved social good and outcomes it is imperative that available resources are used judiciously. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the domain of family and children's services where there is growing pressure to find solutions to family breakdown and violence, child and family poverty, child neglect and maltreatment and in improving the healthy development of children especially in the early years.

Australia's response to these and related challenges has been to establish a complex labyrinth of services and interventions delivered by an array of agencies in both the public and private sectors. These offerings are underpinned by a diversity of funding arrangements with varying levels of sustainability, including short-term trials and time limited projects. Funding is administered via a mixture of Local, State and Commonwealth programs as well as philanthropic and non-Government contributions.

Whilst this environment has helped to foster diversity and innovation in program design, it has also created an overly complicated, often confusing and largely inefficient approach to addressing the problems and issues the 'services system' was designed to solve. As a result, a great deal of emphasis in recent years has been placed on facilitating 'services integration' in the human services field as a means of overcoming duplication and in ensuring people have access to the variety of services and resources on offer.

Building service provider networks and protocols for referrals between service agencies have been particular features of this effort to build more integrated systems – with varying levels of success. Turf boundaries, privacy and confidentiality considerations and often the sheer effort required to establish and maintain cross-agency relationships have hindered effective collaboration. What has remained for most potential 'consumers', is a complex set of service options with different eligibility and prioritisation criteria. In some communities with a seemingly rich array of services and programs, families requiring assistance continue to 'fall through the cracks' and remain under-supported.

In large part, the service systems that have been created are neither logical nor particularly effective. They have developed over time into a patchwork of services, programs and projects which is merely added to each time a new funding program is established or an NGO becomes involved in a community.

Current responses

The Commonwealth has endeavoured to establish a more rational approach to the provision of child and family services through its place-based model, Communities for Children. The model digresses from more traditional approaches to program-based funding which have generally incorporated more prescriptive modes of directing resources for specific services.

Place-based funding allocations allow for a more dynamic setting of priorities based on local conditions and circumstances. By its very nature localised, place-based funding incorporates a greater degree of flexibility in the application of resources to suit local needs and existing supply.

However, existing uses of localised, place-based funding such as Communities for Children or even the Commonwealth Government's more recent targeted initiative 'Community Innovation Through Collaboration', have still largely managed to only add a further layer of planning and funding to existing service systems. They have not sought to rationalise or re-organise pre-existing services and have either served to plug gaps, add additional capacity or provide for new and sometimes more innovative solutions for local issues/problems.

An Alternative Approach

The opportunity exists to move beyond the more limited application of place-based planning or 'adding on' services to existing social service infrastructure, to trialing localised, place-based funding of children and family services.

These trials could be based in principle upon the recent initiative undertaken in the U.K. to establish 16 *Community Budget Pilots*, which essentially pool funding aimed at assisting families with complex needs into a single fund. These local area funds draw resources from a range of existing commitments and provide local discretion and accountability in their allocation using practice and policy evidence to ensure funds are used for programs (and in some instances provided directly to families) to improve wellbeing and functioning. The Pilots were first mooted in 2010 as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review but the target communities have been more recently selected.

The aims of the Pilots align with what the Local Government Association in the UK has referred to as place-based budgeting by addressing 5 core objectives (*Local Government Association: June 2010*).

- Move away from command-and-control provision to more citizen driven mechanism.
- Greater aggregation and simplification among existing multitude of budgets and bureaucracy.
- Greater devolution of managerial responsibility and decision-making.
- Greater transparency.
- Greater democratic leadership and outward accountability for decision-making to local people.

There is clearly a different set of existing governance and constitutional arrangements in Australia which present some challenges to how such an approach could be trialed in our jurisdiction. Furthermore, whilst Australia experiences some of its own fiscal challenges, it would seem more likely for such a concept to work in the current Australian environment. This entails supporting the overall recommendation of an increase in funding to sustain such a momentum. It will be imperative to lay the foundations that are necessary for communities to take such leadership as was completed through the Sure Start agenda in the UK.

Within the Australian context, pooled funding would require a level of co-operation between all three tiers of Government and NGOs which is probably unprecedented. Rather than being a top-down, Treasury-led exercise as is the case in the UK (Allen, 2011), any trialing of a community or place-based budgeting model would require a great degree of co-operation from all funding parties (and to an extent, service delivery agencies too, given their vested interest).

In these circumstances, it would perhaps be best for an Australian trial to:

- Be limited to a small number of sites, say 2–3, with a mixture of regions across metropolitan and rural/regional to test differences based on locality.
- Be restricted to localities where there is a known commitment from NGOs, the State Government and Local Government Authorities that are prepared to participate and consider freeing up existing resources for the trial.
- Be based in localities where there is a known complexity in the range of service offerings available and where entrenched problems for families and children exist and where current service infrastructure is struggling to make inroads.
- Operate where there are a number of NGOs prepared to become engaged and which do not have such a strong ownership of existing models of intervention which prevent the potential for change.
- Have very clear boundaries about the population group or issue that is to be resolved through a community or localised place-based funding/pooled budget approach, for example, children reported to Government departments and at risk of entry to out-of-home care.
- Have clear population outcomes, indicators and measures to track the safety and wellbeing of the children targeted for assistance.
- Include mapping of universal, secondary and tertiary service and resources available in the community
- Include documenting the experience of vulnerable children, young people and families in getting their needs met in universal, secondary and tertiary services.

Methodology

In the UK, *Community Budget Pilots* have focused on families experiencing multiple social, economic and health problems as well as serious problems experienced by children within these families. A broad array of publicly-funded services from police to health, social services, housing and jobs programs are involved in pooling existing funding to be reallocated to services and interventions known to be effective in improving family and child functioning and wellbeing.

For the purposes of a limited trial under the auspice of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children a similar focus could be applied, with some work being undertaken to establish a commonly understood definition of what constitutes a family with multiple needs/problems.

Given the need to establish the pilots as a co-operative venture, enlisting the trust of various players and agencies, it is proposed that the following general steps might need to be implemented over a 3-4 year cycle.

1. Preliminary work to identify potential regions/localities which would fit the criteria as outlined above (i.e. an area in which there are high numbers of vulnerable families and where there is willingness by Government and NGO agencies to trial a bold new approach to reallocating resources for an improved and streamlined service).
2. Establishing a local steering group involving decision making representatives of all 3 tiers of Government and NGOs which would undertake the oversight of service re-design for the region (some separate identified resource to provide leadership and administrative support for this group would be necessary).
3. Undertaking an assessment of existing resources dedicated to addressing the needs of the target group and determining which of these resources is
 - discretionary expenditure (i.e. that funding which could be refocused without compromising the capacity to deliver essential or statutory services).
 - mandatory expenditure (i.e. that funding which could not be withdrawn and pooled without significantly impacting upon essential service provision).

As there is likely to be a great deal of conjecture as to how these definitions apply to different programs and for a pooled system of collective funding to be established, it will be essential to draw as much funding into the 'discretionary' category as possible. This is where the co-operation and goodwill of Commonwealth, State and Local Government officials is imperative. 'Ring fencing' of existing resources or services to protect particular interests or maintain the status quo will ultimately be the enemy of a Community Budget model.

4. Negotiating with those authorities with control over the allocation of resources earmarked as part of the 'Discretionary' funding pool to enable such funds to be allocated to an amalgamated local funding account. The implications in terms of existing contracts (with organisations or individual staff/personnel) would also need to be carefully managed to ensure a successful transition of funding. At the same time any future accountability arrangements for the issuing and reporting of funding would need to be established with the relevant fund holders.
5. Concurrently a local/regional plan would need to be undertaken, driven by
 - input from the local community including those who will be most directly affected (i.e. vulnerable families)
 - professionals and others with experience and knowledge of what interventions are likely to be most effective within the designated region.

The plan would focus on how to allocate the pooled funding which had been created and in determining the indicators which would be used to measure success.

6. A resource allocation process. This could include those involved in the 'local steering group' as outlined in Step 2 but would need a way of managing potential conflicts of interest and ensuring appropriate accountability mechanisms are put in place to protect the use of what will predominantly be public funds (consideration should also be given to drawing in private funds where possible).
7. A rigorous reporting and evaluation process would also need to be built in to ensure the new system of integrated services and provisions for vulnerable families was delivering on its intended objectives.

This new system of funding services for a specific group of families and children represents a bold new approach to the planning, funding and delivery of human services. It aims to create a more efficient use of available resources, improve the level of community input and direction for social service delivery, reduce duplication and service system complexity and ultimately improve outcomes for a group of Australian families and children who are at significant risk of not achieving their potential. The National Framework provides an ideal platform in which such a new way of doing business can be trialed and it is proposed that the model be incorporated as part of the next 3 year implementation plan for the Framework commencing in July 2012.

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