

Report: Northern Rivers NSW consultation on the future of national child and family wellbeing policy



Families Australia, Ballina Surf Club, 15 October 2019

Families Australia had been contracted by the Australian Government Department of Social Services to lead consultation on the future of national child and family wellbeing policy on behalf of the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. The results of this consultation will inform policy to replace the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, which is due to end next year.

The Better Chances Forum (BCF) invited Families Australia to hold a consultation in the Northern Rivers. The consultation was held at Ballina Surf Club on 15 October 2019. Forty-three people from 20 different community and government services and community groups in our region attended and contributed to the information included in this draft report.

Purpose of this report

This report has been prepared by Social Futures, as the BCF convenor. It has been circulated to people who registered and/or attended the Northern Rivers consultation session for review and comment, and for further input from BCF members and stakeholders. The report is being presented to Families Australia to inform their report to the Australian Government. It will also inform work BCF is exploring regarding a conversation in our region about involving community in responding to child protection concerns.

About the Better Chances Forum

The BCF supports better chances for children and young people (C&YP) and their families by bringing together skills and expertise from across the Northern Rivers to:

- explore service system challenges, gaps and opportunities
- identify and share information about what's working well and what's not in our services and communities
- consider how BCF members can work better alongside communities.

The BCF is working to reduce the number of C&YP in out of home care in our region.

Earlier in 2019 the BCF prepared a submission to the NSW Government *Their Futures Matter Access System Review*, which includes further information relevant the future of national child and family wellbeing policy. The submission is available at www.socialfutures.org.au/?ddownload=44312

You can find more information about BCF at www.socialfutures.org.au/development/better-chances-forum/

Northern Rivers consultation results:

Participants at the October 2019 consultation session worked in groups to explore and respond to the following four questions.

1. What needs to be in our national policy to support children and families' wellbeing and safety?
2. Which of these are the 2 most important things – likely to produce the best outcomes for children and families?
3. How will we know if we have been successful?
4. How can we balance child and family wellbeing with the need to protect children?

Detailed responses to these questions are documented at Appendix 1, along with key issues and elements emerging from the table discussions identified at the end of the session.

Summary of consultation results – what needs to be in our national policy to support children and families' wellbeing and safety?

Equitable society to support wellbeing

National child and family wellbeing policy needs to be underpinned by commitment to a more equitable society where all people have access to safe, affordable housing, quality health services, education, transport, employment, technology and other wellbeing supports.

Collaboration, integration and flexibility

Holistic and multidisciplinary approaches to support are needed, with greater collaboration and less competition between agencies and communities, including:

- respecting and collaborating with families and community groups including Grandmothers Against Removal (GMARs)
- multidisciplinary responses to support families experiencing domestic and family violence
- multidisciplinary approaches to early intervention supports, such as those provided in integrated preschools, including clinicians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
- collaboration between agencies across all levels of government and non-government services
- collaboration between State agencies (including child safety, justice, education and health agencies), the National Disability Insurance Agency, disability service providers and families to support wellbeing and safety for C&YP with disability
- whole services and systems offering trauma informed care and space for healing
- flexibility – supporting services to be child-centred
- First Nations workers at pivotal points in services and systems to support and facilitate access for communities
- confidence among existing services to liaise with each other.

Cultural appreciation

Northern Rivers stakeholders identified the need for significant focus on improving cultural appreciation and using a trauma lens to understand the situations children, young people, families and communities are facing, and the impact of their experiences. This goes beyond one-off opportunities for cultural awareness or competency training. It is about appreciation of culture and history being ingrained in practice, in the way services, programs and activities are delivered and how community connects with them.

Consultation participants noted acknowledgement of Aboriginal communities is often lip-service and many communities are suffering with intergenerational trauma that is not being addressed. We identified need to acknowledge and appreciate those providing local services and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and to build the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Workforce capability

Developing the capability of our workforce is critical to support wellbeing for children, young people and families. Specific issues and priorities identified include:

- services being culturally competent and understanding the impact of trauma
- capacity to offer carers and parents the support they need
- culturally appropriate and informed assessment tools
- matching the percentage of Aboriginal staff in the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to the percentage of Aboriginal children in out of home care
- trauma informed approach to all workforce education and practice
- leaders with a hands-on reality-based approach who can mentor this to others
- good relationships with case workers with lived experience.

Engagement, participation and decision-making – children, young people, families and communities

Children and young people's participation enhances their wellbeing (Anderson & Graham 2016¹). Authentic involvement of C&YP at all stages of policy development and implementation needs to sit above the priorities in Australia's child and family wellbeing policy/ plan. The involvement of C&YP in this way is a fundamental right and also a key pillar of child safe organisations (<https://childsafeforhumanrights.gov.au/>). Collaboration with C&YP throughout the process of decision making, policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation is also critical to a rights-based approach (Byrne & Lundy 2019²). Including C&YP people with disabilities is also critical.

In addition to children and young people's participation in policy, our national policy needs to support involvement in decisions and planning about individual children, young people, families and communities. Priorities and considerations include:

- working with the whole community and understanding that child protection is everyone's business and affects all communities
- understanding that people don't feel heard and strengthening accountability by supporting stakeholders to drive and determine outcomes – ask people most affected what they think, what success looks like, what services need to do to support their needs, and move to a system where community have much more involvement at all levels
- engaging men
- taking services to where they are needed, including reaching out to mission communities, rather than just focusing on major towns
- finding ways to deliver funding directly to communities where projects are co-designed with community and integrate services and supports
- re-calibrating funding so that supports are distributed to all family members around the child
- a relational approach to consultation and connecting children, young people and families with services and community activities
- importance of language to support accessibility of services and policies
- asking and listening to C&YP who have experience within service systems, including those with disability, and culturally diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander C&YP
- supporting family empowerment through family-led decision-making, including collaborating with families on achievable safety plans
- including extended family and kin supports in plans.

¹ Anderson, D., & Graham, A. (2016) Improving student wellbeing: having a say at school, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27:3, 348-366, DOI: 10.1080/09243453.2015.1084336

² Byrne, B., & Lundy, L. (2019). Children's rights-based childhood policy: a six-P framework. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23(3), 357–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1558977>

Early intervention and prevention

Northern Rivers stakeholders provided very clear input about the need for greater focus an investment in prevention and early intervention services and supports. This includes:

- evidence-based early intervention programs with therapeutic services
- focus on the first 1000 days of life
- support survivors of abuse to be the best parents they can be
- more funds directed to early drug and alcohol support and
- more funds directed to mental health and other wellbeing services to support adults and young adults who have come out of out of home care to break the cycle
- more support for pregnant women and their partners, including high-risk birth alert triggering interagency/ multidisciplinary support
- broad opportunities for C&YP and their families to participate in other social support activities that foster wellbeing and belonging
- protective behaviour workshops in schools, parenting classes/child care courses, education on contraception and awareness around domestic and family violence
- ensure early intervention services are sustainable and available as families grow, and culturally competent
- invest in targeted early intervention led and delivered by Aboriginal organisations
- address trauma and its links to poverty, including the challenge of parenting on Newstart
- reduce stigma associated with involvement in universal and early intervention services.

Stable funding and systems

Short-term and unstable funding to support child and family wellbeing is a serious concern among Northern Rivers stakeholders. The national policy/plan needs to support consistent long-term funding for ongoing and sustainable programs and activities, including resources and time required to support a relational approach in our work and flexibility to respond to the needs of children, young people, families and communities.

Stakeholders noted need for consistent, long-term funding for successful, evidence-based programs and longer-term funding for workers on the ground to support job security and staff retention; and funding for community led groups, such as Grandmothers Against Removal, and for supporting Kinship carers at the same level as non-related carers.

Accountability

National practice standards supporting stability, accountability and follow-through were identified by Northern Rivers stakeholders as essential to accountability required to support child and family wellbeing. It was noted that national frameworks and policy are often aspiration and need greater focus on accountability for investment in infrastructure and early intervention needed to support successful implementation.

Specific considerations and issues related to accountability are listed below.

- Ensure children, young people, families and communities with a stake in decisions about them and policy that affects them are heard – ensuring accountability for all elements listed in the engagement, participation and decision-making section earlier in this report.
- Solid program evaluation driving ongoing investment to scale up programs and activities that work.
- Key person support – offering a lead contact for support alongside a child, young person or family.
- State Government agencies audit where resources are going aligned with policy and shift it towards national policy priorities. Being accountable, delivering the infrastructure to implement national priorities.

- Understanding what good enough parenting is; and strengthening relationships and trust needed for a shared understanding of neglect between family, community and agencies.
- Acknowledge cultural capital and relationships needed to support effective service delivery.
- Services are culturally informed, use culturally informed assessment tools and employ local Aboriginal staff – supporting culturally informed assessment of wellbeing, risk and safety.
- Government and non-government services provide safe and inclusive supports for C&YP with disability – underpinned by a sound understanding of the rights of C&YP, the barriers they face, and service providers' responsibilities.
- Following cultural and community protocol.
- Multidisciplinary and collaborative responses – are visible to and include those who have a stake in an issue, opportunity, child, young person, family or community.
- Authentic dialogue between services, children, young people, families and communities.
- Policy, programs and activities are informed by evidence, research and lived experience.
- Outcomes and performance measures for organisations and programs are relevant to local needs and are informed by children, young people, families and communities.
- The NSW Aboriginal Case Management Policy supports practitioners to engage early with Aboriginal families to shape case planning and identify tailored solutions to keep children safe with their family and community. Stakeholders identified this policy, which shifts power back to family-led decision-making is not being used well enough. There is opportunity for greater collaboration to support implementation of this NSW policy.
- SNAICC, the National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, is leading the call to establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People³. This is an important accountability measure to support wellbeing and safety for children, young people, families and communities.

Organisations contributing

- Bundjalung Ballina Grandmothers Against Removal
- Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University
- Coraki Preschool
- Department of Social Services
- Heartfelt House
- Human Nature Adventure Therapy
- Jarjum Centre
- Murwillumbah Community Centre
- Ngunya Jarjum Aboriginal Child and Family Network
- Northcott
- Northern Rivers Child Care Services
- Northern Rivers Community Gateway
- Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- NSW Department of Education
- NSW Department of Health
- Social Futures
- Stepping out Program Inc.
- The Family Centre
- YWCA

³ See the Family Matters Report 2019, <https://www.familymatters.org.au/>

Appendix 1 – workshop data from the Northern Rivers consultation, Ballina October 2019

Key issues/ elements/ priorities for national policy on child and family wellbeing – as documented at the October consultation workshop

- Empowering families, including family lead decision making.
- Services are culturally competent and understand the impact of trauma.
- Understanding what is good enough parenting?
- Focus on cultural appreciation.
- Continued, sustainable, targeted, multifaceted and authentic programs and activities.
- Multidisciplinary approach to early intervention.
- Society – improve access to housing, health, mental health, education, transport, employment, etc.
- Consistent, long-term funding and evidence-based programs in early intervention with therapeutic services.
- National best practice standards for stability, accountability and follow through.
- Outcomes driven by stakeholders – accountability.
- Relational approach.
- More engagement with the children this is all about.
- Reach out to mission communities.
- Work with the whole community. Understand that child protection is everyone's business and affects all communities.

Question 1: What needs to be in our national policy to support children and families' wellbeing and safety?

- The voices of children.
- Consultation with communities.
- More funds directed to early drug and alcohol and mental health support.
- More funds directed to supporting adults and young adults who have come out of 'out of home care' to break the cycle.
- Services targeted to high risk areas, instead of just putting them in major towns.
- Same amount of funds and support given to Kinship carers as non-related carers.
- Funding for community led groups, such as GMARs (Grandmothers Against Removal).
- Continual, sustained, funded community support systems.
- NSW Department of Family and Community Services (now Communities and Justice) should match the percentage of Aboriginal staff to the percentage of Aboriginal children in care/ removed.
- Same percentage of Aboriginal people involved in decision-making and policy making.
- Language is important.
- Inclusion of children with disabilities – needs assessment for families.
- Focus on first 1000 days.
- How to align programs to early prevention, including mental health for C&YP.
- Highlight needs of survivors of abuse- some may not have the support to be the best parents.
- Wrap-around funding.
- Need culturally appropriate assessment tools.
- Strengthen family-led decision making.
- Placement principles – with consistent reflection.
- Need longevity of programs as engagement can take a long time.
- Safe, affordable housing for women and children.
- Focus on prevention:

- key person support
- education in protective behaviours
- public health approach
- more support for pregnant women:
 - including education and implementation
 - intense support i.e. high-risk birth alert, triggers an interagency support and response.
- Multidisciplinary response to domestic violence.
- Continuation and increased funding to roll out programs (i.e. losing staff).
- Create universal children's and police checks – check is a free service and nationwide not just in each state.
- Addressing trauma and poverty.
- Program evaluation and scale up those that work.

Participation

- How will we/the policy plan for more meaningful and authentic engagement with key stakeholders, on all policy development and delivery points?
- How can participation play a central role?
- For example, advanced indicators for services and children e.g. a child not turning up to school.

Holistic Approach

- How could the policy encourage a holistic approach between agencies?
- More collaborative and less competitive - services are child-centred and longer term.

Accountability and infrastructure

- State governments commit to audit where resources are going aligned with policy and shift it towards national policy priorities. Being accountable, delivering the infrastructure to implement national priorities.
- Deliver funding directly to communities where projects are co designed with community with integrated services. Long-term funding, 10 years plus.
- Delivery in established organisations that have cultural capital. Long term relationships.
- Engagement and participation as long-term indicators and ability of families to access services independently and increased capacity.
- Build relationships and educate families. Many people don't understand FACS' [NSW Department of Communities and Justice] interpretation of neglect, however this can't be done without trust and relationship.
- Significant focus on improving cultural appreciation of those providing services and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families: localized perspective, capacity building of Indigenous staff.
- Equality of social determinants that impact on issues such as health, employment, mental health, wellbeing – e.g. increase Newstart allowances.
- Co-designed programs- sustainable long-term funding.
- Improve access to Early Intervention Services that are multi- disciplinary.

Question 2: Which of these are the 2 most important things – likely to produce the best outcomes for children and families?

- Continued, sustained, targeted, multi-faceted approach that is an authentic dialogue.
- Accountability that concentration of funds at the coalface- individual communities consulted.
- Empowering families, through; family led decision making; involving families right across the spectrum; and ensure carers/parents have the support they need which is trauma informed.
- Longevity of successful programs.

- Ensure culturally informed services for example local Aboriginal staff, culturally informed assessment tools. Think about “what is ‘good enough’ parenting?”
- Consistent long-term funding for successful, evidence-based programs.
- Examples of local early intervention, prevention and therapeutic programs:
 - Ready Set Go (YWCA)
 - PUP [Parents Under Pressure] (Northern Rivers Community Gateway (NRCG))
 - Trauma Informed Practices and Counselling (NRCG)
 - Sexual abuse therapy (Heartfelt house)
 - Family Referral Service (Social Futures)
 - Elements (Social Futures)
 - Kids in Mind (Social Futures)
 - Headspace (Social Futures)
 - Brighter Futures
 - Flourishing Families (NRCG).
- National Best Practice Standards for stability, accountability and follow through.
- Relational approach to consultation.
- Meaningful participation and sustained consultation with C&YP.
- Outcomes driven by stakeholders:
 - For example: young person turning up at the service
 - organisations to set outcomes relevant to local area needs
 - accountability to people being funded
 - evidence-based and research.
- Policies informed by evidence/research/lived experience.
- Delivery in established organisations that have cultural capital. Long-term relationships.
- Multi-disciplinary approaches to early intervention supports, such as those provided in integrated preschools (includes clinicians (early childhood experts, speech, occupational therapists, physiotherapists) and Indigenous staff. Whole service offers trauma informed care. Examples: Jumbunna, Jarjums (preschools).
- Make a more equitable society – improve social determinants – health, education, transport, employment, housing, communications and technology
- Significant focus on improving cultural appreciation and using a trauma lens.

Question 3: How will we know if we have been successful?

- Data will demonstrate a reduction in child reports and removals for all people.
- We would see happier, healthier communities designing and delivering their own support services.
- Asking the family how they are going.
- Ask what services need to do to support their needs.
- Increased service collaboration.
- See a decrease in children receiving child care/protection services.
- Increase in families and community resource and capacity.
- Long term early intervention and voluntary services.
- Decrease in stigma over receiving/involvement in support services.
- Increased confidence in services already in place to liaise with each other.
- See Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities having a voice and choice of control over their own mobs.
- Ask what does success look like for us?
- Transparency of data.
- Reduction of children in out of home care can't come at the cost of their wellbeing.
- Evaluation of early intervention services.

- Evaluation of interventions should include children and young people's views/ measures should be suitable for C&YP (e.g. youth friendly).
- Evaluation through the whole program.
- Face to face consultation with young people rather than surveys.
- Relational approach to consultation.
- Good relationships with case workers with lived experience.
- Engagement and participation as long-term indicators and ability of families to access services independently and increased capacity.
- Most children will have:
 - access to pre-natal, post-natal, early intervention, quality child-care, preschools
 - have happy, healthy lives
 - connection to their communities
 - be in affordable housing.
- Less children in care.
- Access to quality health services.
- Access to family preservation services.

Question 4: How can we balance child and family wellbeing with the need to protect children?

- Re-calibrating funding so that supports are distributed to all family members around the child.
- Wellbeing services.
- Broader opportunities for children and families to participate in other social support activities that foster wellbeing, belonging.
- Space for healing.
- Need to ensure assessment tools are cultural appropriate to assess risk and safety.
- Make support and education for case workers.
- Trauma informed approach to all education to better inform workforce.
- Better understanding of family need.
- "Good enough parenting".
- Respect of a child's voice and actions to bring in a safe environment.
- Protective behaviour workshops – parenting classes/ child care courses in high school contraception and domestic violence awareness.
- Leaders that have a hands-on reality-based approach and mentor this to others.
- Policy shift from victim of family violence to perpetrator.
- Early intervention.
- Build relationships and educate families. Many Indigenous people don't understand FACS' (now NSW Department of Communities and Justice) interpretation of neglect, however this can't be done without trust and relationship.
- Develop with families – achievable safety plans to support families
- Include extended family and kin supports in plans, make sure they are family-led.
- Ensure early intervention services are sustainable and available as families grow, they are culturally competent.

Regional and local examples of things that are working well

Participants at the October 2019 consultation were also invited to identify examples of successful programs and activities that support child and family wellbeing, building on some of the information under question 2 above. They are listed below. Some are described in more detail, where information was provided.

- Jumbunna Community Preschool and Early Intervention Centre.
- Heartfelt House, including sexual abuse therapy service.
- Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre, including legal advice and support relating to domestic and family violence and child protection matters.
- Brighter Futures.
- The Family Centre (including parenting and relationship support, parenting courses, supported play groups, youth housing, youth mental health, intensive family preservation, men's domestic and family violence support, and REALskills High Schools). See www.thefamilycentre.org.au for more information.
- Northern Rivers Community Gateway (including Parents Under Pressure, Trauma Informed Practices and Counselling and Flourishing Families). See www.nrcg.org.au for more information.
- Social Futures (including Family Referral Service, Elements Youth and Family Relationships Program, Mijung Jarjum Kids in Mind family mental health support service, and Headspace). See www.socialfutures.org.au for more information.
- The Communities for Children Program (facilitated by YWCA Australia) aims to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children (aged 0-12) and their families in disadvantaged communities. In the Northern Rivers areas of Lismore and Murwillumbah, Communities for Children facilitates a range of place-based programs and community development initiatives, including: Kids Caring for Country; Early Years Network; REALskills Primary Schools; Therapy Connect; Ready Set Go; Lismore Transition Program; In School Support; Jump Up Jarjum Homework Hub; Jarjum Community Development; Parent Education; Ngalingah Mijung Dubais (Our Happy Women); and Child and Family Forums / Sector Professional Development.

For more information about CfC programs please visit: www.childandfamilysupport.info/community-partners/

- Lismore Transition Program is a locally designed, evidence-based early childhood learning program for children from vulnerable families who are in the year before school and have developmental delays or behavioural challenges. Evaluation of the program is ongoing and has showed improved developmental outcomes, regular attendance at school in first year, and an increase in parent/carer knowledge and skills in supporting their child⁴.
- The Family Referral Service (FRS) supports families to connect with services and community based on their individual needs using a holistic and strengths-based approach and applying a child-focused lens. The FRS case coordination framework supports families to identify achievable goals, navigate and connect with services and supports, and to connect with their community. The program also advises workers across the human services system to understand options for families and navigate pathways for support and intervention⁵.

⁴ See also Communities for Children above.

⁵ See also Social Futures above.