

PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: BUILDING BACK BETTER

Address by Dr Brian Babington, CEO, Families Australia

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I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we meet, and by paying respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

I would also like to acknowledge NAPCAN's outstanding work to improve outcomes for children and families. Families Australia, as a national peak body, has been working closely with NAPCAN over many years for improved child and family wellbeing and safety against the backdrop of significant ongoing national challenges, including that:

- there has been a three-fold increase in the number of children in out-of-home care over the past two decades, to now reach 45,000,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed in out-of-home care at 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children, and
- there has been a 50% increase in the number of substantiations of child abuse/neglect over the past decade.

Our starting question has always been: ***How can we make Australia a country in which all children and young people grow up safe and well?***

That was the question we posed to over 800 people from across government, NGOs and academia, and to parents, young people, carers and other community representatives in the past year or two as we travelled around the country inviting ideas to help design the successor to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

By way of background, the National Framework was established in 2009 when all Australian Governments, strongly supported by the non-government and research sector, came together for the first time on these issues and decided that a new concerted national approach was needed to turn around unacceptable rates of child abuse and neglect. It is the nation's first-ever plan to improve child safety and wellbeing – and it's a plan that, after 12 years, is about to end.

Our consultations revealed a profound sense that, despite great effort and commitment, far more needs to be done to turn around child abuse in Australia. There was a resounding agreement that the successor to the National Framework must drive real change by galvanising collective effort across governments, sectors and disciplines in actions that evidence tells us will ***address causal factors and prevent*** children, young people and families entering child protection systems.

Our [report](#) identified several priority areas for future national policy. In a nutshell, some of the key messages from participants were that the next National Framework should:

- be a long-term, measurable, aspirational and achievable plan
- contain tangible desired outcomes, targets and timeframes and be positively framed around a comprehensive view of children's lives that includes but is not limited to safety and protection, and which emphasises prevention
- identify and track high level outcomes which align with existing allied national policies in areas such as education, youth, health and housing, and related initiatives
- strengthen prevention and early support and focus on families with the greatest level of multiple and complex needs

- prioritise the voices of children, young people and families, and work to enhance how the community values children and childhood, and
- focus on priority cohorts by strengthening efforts to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, make more effort to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independent adulthood, and better respond to the needs of carers.

Coming months will see continued discussions between governments and the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing, which is convened by Families Australia, to further develop the next framework.

Although, and perhaps because, we are in such seriously challenging times, we have an opportunity to build on the foundations of the National Framework. I am heartened that, in March this year, Community Services Ministers committed their governments to a ten-year successor to the National Framework and have been discussing key themes for inclusion.

I'll end by saying that the challenge for us all is to make the successor plan as ambitious and effective as possible and find ways in which it can catalyse and support the complex range of efforts, policies and programs across and within government and non-government sectors to achieve early, measurable and sustained improvements for children and their families. Thank you.