



Australian Government  
Department of Social Services

# Implementing the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 - 2020*

Summary of DSS Engage submissions



This report summarises key findings from the public consultation process to inform the First 5-Year Action Plans for [Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031](#) (Safe and Supported). This consultation process was open to all members of the public, and complements more targeted consultations that included:

- the National Children's Commissioner's consultations with children, young people and families from Safe and Supported's priority groups as reported [here](#)
- SNAICC – National Voice for our Children's [consultations](#), including national Knowledge Circles and an online survey
- co-design workshops involving the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders
- engagement with the broader non-government sector through the National Coalition for Child Safety and Wellbeing.

The outcomes of consultations and planning have informed the first 5-Year Action Plans (2022-2026) for Safe and Supported. Separate General and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific Action Plans will be finalised in mid-2022.

## Background

In May 2021, the Assistant Minister for Children and Families, the Hon Michelle Landry MP, launched an online consultation to support the implementation of the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*.

The consultation process was conducted through the Department of Social Services' [engage.dss](#) platform and was open from 1 June to 26 July 2021.

The successor plan, named [Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031](#), aims to ensure increased involvement and accountability across all levels of government as well as the children and families' sector to achieve better safety and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable or disadvantaged children and young people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

## Submission processes and responses

[The Consultation Paper: Implementing the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020](#) sought feedback on:

### Focus Areas

1. A national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage
2. Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems
3. Improving information sharing, data development and analysis
4. Strengthening the child and family sector and workforce capability

### Priority Groups

1. Children and families with multiple and complex needs
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable
3. Children and young people and/or parents/carers with disability experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable
4. Children and young people who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, including children in out-of-home care and young people leaving out-of-home care and transitioning to adulthood.

Feedback was also sought on the role of the non-government sector and what success would look like as a result of delivering the successor plan.

## Responses and analyses

The consultation received 114 responses, including from individuals, non-government and government organisations, researchers and people with an interest in or lived experience of child protection, child safety and child wellbeing. Of these, 54 answered a set of survey questions, and 60 provided more extensive written submissions.

Responses were grouped together into themes, which were the specific ideas or issues raised. Around 650 individual themes were identified, with a number of themes attracting support from a significant number of responders.

The most common themes that fall into areas of joint responsibility of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, as per the scope of Safe and Supported, are set out below. Themes with a broader remit were provided to relevant Commonwealth and state and territory government agencies to ensure DSS Engage findings are carefully considered across different portfolio areas.

## Summary: main themes raised

### Focus areas

Prominent themes arising for the Focus Area, **a national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage** involved addressing barriers to seeking support.

These included simplifying service interfaces for children and families, stronger awareness of what is available, addressing long waiting lists, and reducing the stigma of seeking support. Enablers for early intervention and targeted support included ensuring approaches are tailored to the community and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approaches, and better supporting children in out-of-home care to mitigate intergenerational impacts.

Improving legal supports and other related areas of the justice system were also identified as an important part of early intervention. These included more access to specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) legal services, and improvements to the intersection between federal and state family and children's courts for child protection-related matters.

**Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems** was a prominent issue for many respondents who noted that support services were not often equipped for, or sensitive to, cultural or trauma informed responses. Respondents thought that community-designed and delivered ways of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, such as through ACCOs, leads to better outcomes.

In relation to **improved information sharing, data development and analysis** a number of respondents considered there is an underutilisation of existing datasets held by agencies.

This data could be accessed more widely by different levels of government and service providers to improve understanding of the trajectory of children and families over time and how best to respond. Suggested solutions included making better use of existing data to protect children; actively enhancing mechanisms to share success factors between stakeholders; and better linking and sharing of data sets within and across governments and the sector.

Respondents also stressed that data development, capability and sovereignty in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context requires significant work to gain a better understanding of local culturally-informed issues, and to empower targeted responses. Respondents suggested mainstream data and knowledge systems alone do not capture the unique needs or metrics that are important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Key messages about how to make **monitoring and reporting on the successor plan** available to the public included through an online dashboard, multiple platforms such as emails, social media, forums, interagency meetings, and sessions tailored to cultural audiences. Reporting should be in plain English, visual, graphic, and frequent. In-depth annual reports should provide contextual and analytical narrative.

Respondents highlighted the stressful working environments and workloads experienced by workers in the child and family support sector. To **strengthen the child and family sector workforce capability** there is a need to better support and attract more workers, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Related to the workforce, further supports were needed to meet the specific needs of carers of children in out-of-home care.

### Priority groups

To better support families with **multiple and complex needs**, respondents highlighted the need for the intensive family support workforce to have more access to mental health and wellbeing supports for themselves to prevent “burn out”; and to address the lack of universal and specialist services in rural and remote locations.

To better support **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families**, there was a need for strong compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

Better support was needed for **kinship and other carers, and parents who have a disability or who have children with a disability**. There was a need for early assessment of disability in early intervention and child protection settings, and to review the support needs of children in care with disability. To enable better and early identification of children, young people and parents/carers with disability, more training and awareness was needed amongst professionals across a range of sectors.

There was a call for priority access to health, education and disability services and supports for **children placed in out-of-home care**. For **young people leaving care** there is a need to improve access to stable accommodation, education and employment, and provide more information about the supports available to them.

### Working together

In relation to **how governments, the non-government sector and the ACCO sector might work best together** to improve outcomes for children and families, there were prominent themes to adopt partnership principles for governance arrangements under the successor plan, to widely communicate and embed National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, and for collaborative and client-centred practice in service design and delivery, including to engage service users in the process.

### Changes expected

Respondents provided views on what **changes** they would expect to see in the **short, medium and long term**. Broad expectations on positive changes included:

- services that are focused on outcomes
- taking a child rights’ approach in policy development and service delivery
- easier access to services for children and families and families feeling supported
- children being developmentally on track or receiving appropriate early supports for identified issues including to address disability or trauma

- a reduction in the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection and criminal justice systems
- increased support for children in care and care leavers
- improved information sharing, data development and analysis
- improved retention of staff and job satisfaction.

Further details of the prominent themes related to each Focus Area, Priority Group, the role of the sector, and the changes expected as a result of delivering the successor plan, including indicative quotes from respondents, are below.

## Focus Area: A national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage

- improve the service system by removing silos and better connecting services, tailoring services to meet local needs, and making services easier to navigate and more accessible for families in locations across the country

"...Each service has its own language, expectations and outcomes and families have to navigate these differences many times with a variety of services. If services could come together to provide a universal service that incorporated many facets but with one language, expectation and outcome this would be much easier and more accessible to families."

- support placed-based approaches to respond to specific vulnerabilities and local needs

"A one size fits all solution will never work. More nuanced community solutions that respect the local community culture, norms and practices are essential."

- co-design service delivery with service users including young people, their families and carers

"Undertake a community based approach to co-design and develop outcomes that are relevant to the community... Don't just let the same people in the same positions in NGO and government continue to make decisions about what they think is best. "

- extend care for children in out-of-home care until at least the age of 21; and increase access to services for young people leaving care to improve stable accommodation, education and employment outcomes

"Young people have also reported that a more gradual and supported transition would help them develop confidence, maturity and life skills necessary to thrive in adulthood."

Views were also expressed in relation to particular areas of the justice system and legal supports that needed attention as an important part of early intervention. Strong themes were to refer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, particularly family and domestic violence survivors, at the earliest opportunity to culturally appropriate, specialist ACCO legal services, and to improve their access to First Nations' lawyers. Provision of more specialist legal services was also needed for children and their families, especially in remote areas, and enhanced access to Legal Aid to navigate child protection systems.

The need to manage the divide between state and federal child and family law jurisdictions in relation to abuse and protection orders was raised in a number of submissions. This included the suggestion to consider use of 'national bench books' which link related jurisdictions, such as federal family law, to best practice approaches when dealing with children in contact with child protection systems.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific themes raised**

- increase investment in culturally appropriate, ACCO-led early intervention and intensive family support services

“Such services are integral to both reducing the rates at which Aboriginal children are entering out of home care, and in effecting successful restoration of children to the care of their families for those children already within the out of home care system... Research and evidence supports Aboriginal controlled services as having a far greater capacity to effectively engage Aboriginal children and families.”

- address disadvantage and inequality to improve outcomes for children and families and prevent involvement in the child protection system

“Perceptions of disadvantage and vulnerability are subjective. Understanding each child and each family's experience is critical – what's important *to* a child and family can be different from what's important *for* them.”

### **Focus Area: Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems**

- improve cultural competency and safety for services that children and their families interact with, through staff and organisational development (also relates to Focus Area 4)

“[Mainstream] services vary in the extent to which they provide culturally sensitive service settings and practice responses and may in fact be “culturally destructive”... [R]esources are required to support both mainstream and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to collaborate, innovate and respond to the needs of children and families in

a way that is culturally safe and does not exacerbate past (intergenerational) and trauma.”

- strengthen ACCOs to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led services and programs, and embed the principles of self-determination and self-management

“Since the inception of [state-based programs delegating child protection authority to ACCOs], statistics have shown that the quality of care/services and outcomes for Aboriginal Children in out-of-home care has been significantly better.”

- ensure consistent use of and compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including through oversight mechanisms

“...in order to achieve meaningful change, a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the extent to which full implementation of, and compliance with, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is achieved in practice is essential.”

## Focus Area: Improved information sharing, data development and analysis

- make better use of existing datasets, and improve information sharing and linked datasets across organisations, sectors and jurisdictions to protect children

“[I]mproved data sharing across portfolios and jurisdictions would likely result in better program design and delivery across the country. Proactively sharing more granular content of plan monitoring and reporting may promote collaboration...”

- ensure data sharing is underpinned by commitments to transparency, accountability, privacy and accuracy

“[T]he principles that guide how client information is used should balance the right to privacy with accountability for service effectiveness. A greater balance between privacy and accountability in what data is collected and used would likely improve the responsiveness of health and human (including legal assistance) services to people’s needs at the times and in the places where people seek help.”

- share learnings about success factors for service delivery and engagement methods



“De-identified data about the success rates of certain models of service delivery, methods of engagement, and successful retention methods ought to be freely exchanged to prevent organisations from spending time ‘re-inventing the wheel’.”

- make monitoring and reporting on the successor plan available to the public using an online dashboard, multiple platforms such as emails, social media, forums, interagency meetings, and sessions tailored to cultural audiences, in addition to annual reports

“Reporting should be in plain English, visual and graphic, and frequent. In-depth annual reports should provide contextual and analytical narrative.”

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific themes raised**

- support ACCOs to build capacity in local data collection, analysis and program evaluation, through sharing information and systems with ACCOs

“[O]ften, Government bodies want western models of evidence and data collection. The [ACCO] sector requires a “clearinghouse” for knowledge and evidence related to Aboriginal children and families, supporting ACCOs to build their capacity and capability to collect, analyse their data and share information across the service system on what works for Aboriginal children and families.”

- recognise the right to data sovereignty

“Aboriginal services must be resourced to evaluate their programs so they can build their own Aboriginal evidence base – this is in line with the right to self-determination and data sovereignty [and] Priority Reform Four: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level as part of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.”

### **Focus Area: Strengthening child and family sector and workforce capability**

- improve staff and organisational competency to be trauma informed, culturally aware, disability aware, family inclusive, to have gender/sexuality awareness, deliver better case coordination and be competent in their field of work

“Staff across the child and family support workforce need targeted skills and support in

trauma informed practice. Families that come into contact with child protection almost always have experienced long term, and potentially intergenerational trauma.”

- improve remuneration, working conditions and wellbeing supports for early childhood and family support workers to provide more effective support and reduce turnover/burnout

“Personal history of mental health, trauma and vicarious trauma can be contributors to staff burnout, compassion fatigue or becoming emotionally triggered. Staff supports, and supervision must always be trauma informed with an understanding of how these experiences impact their own wellbeing and their capacity to meet the needs of children and families.”

- consider the support needs of kinship carers, parents and carers, in particular those who have a disability or who care for children with a disability

“Global evidence shows that supporting existing carers is also the best way to recruit new carers (as well as retain current). To ensure there are enough family homes for children in care so that children have the chance to truly thrive, support of carers is vital.”

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific themes raised**

- improve cultural competency training to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors of family and domestic violence

“...the reactive nature of decisions to remove Aboriginal children, attributing the problem partly to a lack of cultural awareness, inadequate training, a misunderstanding of the problem and under-resourcing.”

- establish vocational pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in partnership with tertiary educational institutions to enable the growth of a culturally appropriate workforce

“...reform for the system should be the creation and support of a culturally appropriate workforce, which recognises the knowledge and skills specific to staff of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. Partnerships between universities and employers should be used more effectively to identify and nurture a culturally specific workforce, recognising the cultural

knowledge and lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. “

## Common messages by Priority Group

### **Families with multiple and complex needs**

Ideas for how to better support families with multiple and complex needs included better nurturing the intensive family support workforce by improving workers' accessibility to mental health and wellbeing supports to avoid burnout; and providing longer term program funding to embed trust and partnerships, retain staff, and improve local responses and impacts.

Other issues raised were a lack of universal and specialist services, such as mental health, in rural and remote locations; and the need for improved practical supports for families and children escaping domestic and family violence. Work is needed to address the intersection between out-of-home care, youth detention, and child sexual abuse, including suggestions to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families**

A number of consistent themes were conveyed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families' experiences with family support and other targeted services and their ability to access and/or navigate them, including to:

- ensure a consistent use of, and compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle
- embed the principles of self-determination with respect to services to strengthen families' ability to be empowered and listened to, inform what help is needed, and enable cultural safety
- increase investment in culturally appropriate, ACCO-led early intervention and intensive family based services
- raise awareness across systems, services and workers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to kinship and family, and to use the strength of community, and the wisdom and resilience of Elders and Traditional Owners, for advocacy and service delivery.

### **Children and young people with disability and/or parents and carers with disability**

A strong theme communicated was the need to provide better support to kinship and other carers, and parents who have a disability or who have children with a disability. This included a need for early assessment of disability in early intervention and child protection settings including to identify children with cognitive disabilities, and to review the support needs of children in care with disability. To improve navigation of supports, the intersection between the child protection system/leaving care and National Disability Insurance Scheme should be considered.

To better identify, understand and respond to the needs of children, young people and parents/carers with disability, it was considered that more training and awareness was needed amongst all health care professionals, educators and social and community service workers.

The findings of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability were commonly referred to, including to address structural issues designed to improve the willingness of children and families with disability and/or additional needs to engage with services.

### **Children and young people experiencing or who have experienced abuse or neglect**

Submissions called for an increase in the number of child protection workers; to reduce caseloads for each worker; and to provide clearer decision making and managerial support frameworks. There was a need for priority access to health and education services and supports for children placed in care. To improve placement stability, it was considered that better medical and psychological support and resources were needed for children, including to receive assessments for early identification of disability and to access the right therapeutic supports. A focus on reunification and family preservation was needed for vulnerable families.

The highest priorities expressed to address the needs of care leavers were to improve access to stable accommodation as well as education and employment, and to information about the supports available including through mentors. There was a need to look at how the Transition to Independent Living Allowance can be more effective in meeting the needs of young people leaving care; to extend the age for leaving care; and to strengthen leaving care plans including around broader wellbeing domains.

### **Role of the non-government sector**

Views were communicated on how governments and the non-government sector and the ACCO sector might work best together to improve outcomes for children and families.

These included the need to adopt partnership principles to deliver the successor plan based on commitment, trust, equality and shared responsibility and accountability. The importance of all parties communicating and embedding the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations in practice and governance was expressed.

There was support for multidisciplinary approaches which would bring together governments, non-government organisations and ACCOs across areas including health, disability services and social services. This would involve parties identifying and agreeing integrated, client-centred approaches in communities focused on outcomes and based on access, equity, cultural proficiency and participation. The need to engage service users in this process, such as young people, carers, grandparents, as well as academics, was raised. Being able to work in this way was also recognised as a workforce development need.

"The successor plan can be positioned as a key driver for a more joined up approach for the target cohort across portfolios, by providing the authorising (policy) environment and actively 'enabling' services across sectors to work

differently and more collaboratively, including at the practitioner level."

"Share issues, build relationships, understand each culture, respect each other, reduce competitiveness, work collaboratively, work in partnership and consortiums, share information and systems."

## What would success look like?

A strong theme in submissions was the need for better recognition of rights. This ranged from fully integrating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child including best interest principles in domestic law, provision of child-centred services and specifically protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's human rights, to the need for child-centred assessment of government policies at federal and state levels.

Short term changes in relation to the right for children and young people to have a say in what happens to them were expected to involve children, young people and families in successor plan governance, implementation, evaluation and improvement; in the medium term to build capacity of organisations and governments to meaningfully engage with children and young people and incorporate their views; and in the long term for children, young people and families to have timely access to the targeted and culturally informed supports they need.

Mechanisms suggested to represent children's views to government and other decision-makers included to establish a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner and jurisdictional commissioners, and to strengthen the role of the existing National Children's Commissioner.

Short, medium and long term changes expressed with respect to service and system collaboration were to enable/facilitate better engagement between services in the short term, to have better collaboration between services in the medium term, and toward more joined up health, housing, education, child protection and disability services for at risk families in the long term. Other short term changes cited included:

- increased trauma supports including trauma informed behavioural supports
- greater investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations and services
- improved access for grandparent, foster and kinship carers to accurate information about national supports and services and direction to state level support and assistance
- development of a comprehensive and accessible process to address information sharing
- implementing strategies toward well trained and culturally competent staff.

Medium term changes expected included:

- better communication among policy and program providers about what programs deliver better outcomes for young people and families

- First Nations communities leading in co-developing and co-implementing policy, services, research and evaluation activities that meet their needs
- greater system transparency and consistent child protection frameworks between state and territories that provide enhanced outcomes for children and families as they move between jurisdictions
- all young people leaving care having a long term and adequately resourced support plan resulting in reductions in youth self-harm, engagement with the justice system, homelessness and unemployment
- a clear and measurable reduction in the high turnover of staff in the workforce.

Long term changes expected included:

- early intervention and prevention services as the dominant funded model
- families have the necessary environment within their communities to build the skills and support networks they need to thrive
- improved outcomes for families and children, where child safety interventions are a last resort, resulting in much lower rates of children in care
- a reduction in the over-representation of children with disability in the child protection system
- life outcomes of care leavers are on a par with those of young people not in the care system.

“The ultimate goal is for children to be able to live safely with their families of origin nurturing them.”

## How will we use the information we received?

The information you provided to us was analysed, grouped into themes, and used to inform development of the Safe and Supported first 5-year Action Plans, and related policy work.

Thank you for contributing your time, effort, knowledge and understanding toward children and young people being safe and supported.