



everyone's family

The Smith Family

Submission to the development of the successor
plan to the National Framework for Protecting
Australia's Children 2009-2020

July 2021

Wendy Field
Head of Policy and Program
Level 9, 117 Clarence Street
GPO Box 10500
Sydney NSW 2001

Phone: 0408 792 132
Email: wendy.field@thesmithfamily.com.au

Context

The Department of Social Services is seeking feedback on the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*. We commend the intent of the discussion paper to engage the sector and the wider community in the development of an implementation approach.

Our general observation would be that the discussion paper clearly articulates and summarises the key issues gathered through feedback. Consistent with a range of other consultations conducted by DSS in relation to support for (in particular) vulnerable families and communities, it is clear that we understand what **could** be done to drive system change, and to provide a comprehensive continuum of support from a universal, non-stigmatising platform of service delivery. We acknowledge the modest progress achieved to date through the 2009-2020 National Framework.

However, despite myriad reports, inputs and discussion papers articulating the same messages and recommendations we have not yet been able to co-ordinate approaches across a range of portfolios and levels of government to align policy agendas and associated service delivery for all children and young people. An Occasional Paper (No.30) commissioned by the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in 2010¹ articulates clearly the experiences of families with complex lives in endeavouring to access appropriate supports to address a wide range of challenges in their lives. The paper articulates the infuriation, frustration and humiliation they felt in navigating a wide range of reporting and compliance procedures that take significant time and effort to fulfil. Sadly, little will have changed for these families across the past eleven years.

Relevance to The Smith Family

As Australia's largest national education-oriented charity, The Smith Family supports disadvantaged Australian children to participate fully in their education, giving them the best chance at breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our programs intersect with the wider service system and the National Plan will influence the support for families available in the 91 communities across Australia in which we work.

In addition, The Smith Family is the facilitating partner for nine *Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP)* sites across Australia. We sub-contract sixty-one community agencies to deliver early intervention and prevention support to families and children in these communities. The Review will have direct impact on the services provided through CfC FP and the outcomes achieved for families and children in these communities.

Our responses below draw on this experience as well as direct feedback about service experience from our families.

¹ <https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/op30.pdf>

Responses to consultation questions:

Beyond delivering on the existing commitments in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, what is the most important thing we can implement under the successor plan to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45%²?

We commend the process being conducted through SNAICC to garner input to the plan from Aboriginal owned organisations and community members and acknowledge that self-determined, culturally safe solutions are needed to address these long term issues.

The Smith Family acknowledges the significant and deeply concerning over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems across Australia. We also acknowledge the significant over-representation of (in particular) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander former wards of state in the juvenile justice system and adult prison population and the intergenerational cycle generated through lack of focussed support for children who have a parent who is incarcerated. Equally troubling statistics have been widely acknowledged over the years, and there is a long history of government inquiries by various jurisdictions into the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the system over many years, largely agreeing on how to progress. As an example, the NSW Independent Review into Aboriginal Children and Young People in OOHC (*Family is Culture Review*), whose Final Report was published in 2019.³

Whilst The Smith Family is not an Aboriginal-controlled or led organisation we work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across the country through our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff network. In 2019-20, a total of 12,417 students on our *Learning for Life* program identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, about 21.5 per cent of the entire cohort. We acknowledge that the child protection system does not treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children with dignity, equality and respect under the law. The present structural failings in the NSW child protection system have been clearly articulated in the *Family is Culture Review Report*. Similar to the ongoing value of the Tune Review and the NSW Audit, the *Family is Culture Review* offers a detailed framework for reforming the child protection system to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, including the need to develop an agreed understanding on the right to genuine 'self-determination' for Aboriginal peoples within the NSW system and the central role that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations must play in the delivery of early intervention and prevention services for Aboriginal children.⁴ The

² Please note that further Indigenous specific consultation questions are being progressed through the co-design process.

³ https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/726329/Family-Is-Culture-Review-Report.pdf

⁴ https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/726329/Family-Is-Culture-Review-Report.pdf Chapter 7

importance of Aboriginal-led programs that build on cultural connections within Aboriginal communities was also supported by the NSW Audit.⁵ Governments remain responsible and accountable for assisting and investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in order that they thrive. However governments, as well as civil society and business, must follow the lead of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and provide necessary support as they take ownership of their individual and collective futures. A genuine partnership supports the ambition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for self-determination as described in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

How do you think we could facilitate greater access to and navigation through public supports such as disability, early childhood education and care, health and mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, justice, housing, and employment service systems?

We observe from feedback from and interactions with the families we support that not having enough money is a major barrier to accessing services. The Australian Government commissioned Occasional Paper 30, 'Families Experiences of Services, written by the Institute of Child Protection Studies at Australian Catholic University⁶ articulates the key barriers to access to required services for vulnerable families. They are:

- Knowing about services;
- Cost of Services
- Waiting times and lack of availability
- Feeling judged or intimidated
- Repeating story multiple times
- Contradictory information provided – getting the 'run around' from services creating constant struggle
- Inflexible processes and eligibility
- Practical issues such as public transport or opening hours.

The Smith Family's recent work with families to canvass their views on ways to improve attendance at pre-school for disadvantaged children Small Steps Big Futures⁷ heard broadly similar themes as well as the particular 'place based' barriers.

On the same themes, recent qualitative research (unpublished) with families participating in The Smith Family's On PAR program outlined their experiences as follows:

For carers, the burden of navigating engagement with so many professionals and agencies for access to the necessary supports for their children was a significant concern. Every carer interviewed described a lengthy and exhausting set of engagements with a number of different health care, therapeutic, government and/or legal organisations in the search for supports that might assist their child at school.

Some carers described the long waiting periods to see clinicians and hospitals in order to progress their understanding of their child's needs and seek appropriate supports. Other carers described the conflicting professional opinions they had received in seeking to identify the causes of a child's learning difficulties.

⁵ <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/our-work/reports/their-futures-matter>

⁶ <https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/op30.pdf>

⁷ <small-steps-big-future-report.pdf> (thesmithfamily.com.au)

All carers noted the significant financial challenges posed when paying for therapeutic care for an extended period (spanning years), even when subsidies are accessed to reduce cost. Engaging with health and welfare agencies became even more onerous for those families with child custody or contact agreements or who were caring for children under a protective or guardianship order.

However, families in all of these reports also articulated changes that could be made to create more positive experiences and facilitate access. These included:

Individualised responsiveness: A key finding was that a positive service experience for most people involved an active, caring response to the individual situation of the family, parent and child. Being treated as though they are important

Active linking Universal services such as schools, early childhood centres, Centrelink etc. have a key and important role to play in this regard. Both reports cite the importance for parents that they were linked to the most appropriate service for their needs. Warm referrals with follow up and support to attend appointments. .

Focus on children's needs Services need to start from the premise that parents want the best for their children and provide services to families where they are.

Communication between services Families highlighted the importance of services fitting in with each other's processes or working together for the benefit of the family or child. At a minimum, families need services that avoid conflicting requirements and processes

Listening and respect: the human connection: A prevailing theme in the ACU study was the transformative experience for parents of coming across a person from any professional background whom they felt treated them as a human being. ,

Low-cost services: Families on income support or on low incomes struggle every day to make ends meet. Services should take account of the obvious and hidden costs of using the service. These costs may include simple factors such as the cost of a phone call, or assuming digital access to interact online. It may also include child care, work time, transport, fee for service

What action can governments take to support collaboration between services to offer wrap around supports to vulnerable children and families?

Within a place or community, service provision must be client-centric and acknowledge the multiplicity of client need as well as the movement of families between early intervention, prevention and tertiary services To date there has been little demonstration of 'systems thinking' or consideration of how families want to access services. One of the obstacles to creating these seamless pathways is the disjointed nature of State and Commonwealth funded services. Funding requirements sometimes result in siloing of the services and the isolation of families. A reactive client management system can impede identification of family's needs that could be better met by early intervention services.

Building shared understanding of logic behind prevention approaches, including knowledge of risk and protective factors and the public health model of prevention can help services recognise the benefit of upstream approaches to risk. This would lead to better early intervention support for families at the right time.

Better dialogue, policy coordination and funding decisions between local, State and Commonwealth Government agencies could demonstrate result in practice change amongst service providers. This in turn would result in less duplication and more responsive services for families and children.

In addition, restrictive 'fee for service' arrangements that do not provide any flexibility for service providers to respond to individual needs or family circumstances inevitably lead to siloed services that are singularly focussed on one outcome at the expense of being able to deliver what families have been telling us for many decades now they want and need.

How can children, families and communities be better engaged in service design and delivery?

The Smith Family firmly believes that families, communities, children and young people can and should be engaged in service design and delivery in every decision that affects them. Through our work over many years as Communities for Children Facilitating Partner, and more recently through our co-design work to develop place based solutions to improve attendance at preschool⁸ we have seen that service users have unique insight and self-awareness that needs to be respected and acted on if services are to meaningfully address their needs.

With children and young people, this is their right and it is our obligation to take that engagement seriously/make it have effect – that is, for us to be honest and genuine in why and how we are partnering with children and young people, our shared intent and anticipated result.

This means taking a planned, evidence-based, accountable and inclusive approach with children and young people, in accordance with their age and stage of development and life circumstance. It means we always work with a child-focussed lens, asking ourselves why and how we work - and how we know our work is in the best interests of children.

For this work to be successful, engagement needs to be resourced– including enabling partnerships with families and communities; being publicly accountable with participants and more widely; and adding to the published evidence and shared stories of learning how to do this better.

Many Frameworks exist for public participation, and child participation. In the absence of an agreed approach, the International Association for Public Participation (iap2.org) **Spectrum of Participation** is widely used globally. The spectrum defines public participation goals (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) and the linked promise to the public/participants. The model also identifies example tools for each goal which can be customised to the engagement of children and young people.

There is an extensive and growing body of literature regarding consumer engagement in **service co-creation**. This literature differentiates between consumers with 'lived experience' related to the service, and those who take a representative and inclusive view of the needs, wants and perspectives of those for whom the service is intended. The literature also considers engagement that includes governance of services as well as management, research, operations and activities within organisations.

In The Smith Family, Child Safe Organisations National Principle 2: *Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously* is our top child protection development priority. We are mindful

⁸ <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/small-steps-big-future-report.pdf?la=en&hash=AA6924AF4C7032F141CCFCFB1468B4D2>

that, while we are a child-focussed organisation, we have a lot to learn about how to genuinely, sincerely, inclusively and effectively engage children and young people in the decisions that affect them. It is easy to confuse our adult judgement about 'what's best for children' with 'acting in the best interests of children'; and it is easy to confuse consultation events with a group of children and young people with genuine, ongoing involvement and collaboration.

Strategic Priority: Improved information sharing, data development and analysis

What data and information is needed to better understand and improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families?

What information should be shared between non-government organisations and governments to support service delivery and outcomes for vulnerable children and families?

How should monitoring and reporting on the successor plan be made available to the public (i.e. online dashboard, annual reporting)?

The Smith Family believes that the work previously done through COAG to define an agreed set of National Targets and measures with all jurisdictions provides a good template for how data and information could be agreed and organised. The development of improved data capture and analysis through the development of Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX), now utilised by a number of jurisdictions increases our capacity to meaningfully track progress and align policy responses. Data tracking and progress reporting are meaningless unless policy and practice are adjusted in response to emerging knowledge.

There should be a combination of consistent national indicators and measures and specific measures for different communities. With the large amount of data collected at national, state and local level, there is a need for this data to be more easily available for communities to plan, implement and evaluate. **Democratisation of Data** is as important as collection of data.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides essential early childhood developmental data of value to communities. One of the advantages of this measure is the ability to compare across country, state and at a community level. Unfortunately, there are not many such multi-level measures that can be easily assessed and understood by community.

The Productivity Commission's Data Availability and Use Inquiry, 2017 identified a "lack of trust by both data custodians and users in existing data access processes and protections and numerous hurdles to sharing and releasing data are choking the use and value of Australia's data", and recommended "the creation of a data sharing and release structure that indicates to all data custodians a strong and clear cultural shift towards better data use that can be dialled up for the sharing or release of higher-risk datasets". The Smith Family believes that implementation of the recommendations in this report would go some way to enabling data to meaningfully inform decisions about policy and associated support for vulnerable families.

The 2018 Tune Review report⁹ recommends

- A Whole of Government outcomes framework that reinforces shared accountability across agencies and provides a set of quantifiable measures of client success•
- A single vulnerable families dataset: a single dataset to capture and analyse data across policy areas to support evidence-based funding decisions.
- Clear structures to enable and monitor system change and implementation of new solutions and ensure cross-agency accountability in funding decisions.
- A cyclical monitoring and review environment to provide regular, coordinated monitoring and reporting to ensure that resource allocation is based on evidence.

Strategic Priority: Strengthening child and family sector workforce capability

What skills, competencies, and/or practices does the workforce need to provide the most effective support for children and families in the priority groups?

What changes are needed to prevent high levels of turnover or burnout for staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage?

Establishing trust between child/family sector workers and children and families in the priority groups is essential. This takes time to develop, and requires an approach that both meets the family where they are in terms of location (e.g. neutral ground, homes, parks, family fun days), and adopts a “whatever it takes” attitude (that is, working with the child/family on what **they** consider their priorities and goals for support in order to work toward the desired outcome work). Too few family and child organisations have the capacity to be truly client centred, as the system is highly segmented and there are few “linkage” services available. Those that are available are showing very promising results, for example, The Hive in Mount Druitt, Links to Early Learning in South West Sydney, Working Together in Tasmania. These services are all focused on early childhood education and take a local place based approach, maintaining long term relationships with families, and step in with support if problems with other services emerge. The effect of this is that the families remain engaged with the system as the trust with the linkage worker is leveraged.

This kind of support is important as we know that staff in the child and family sector are generally time poor, and so holistic, long term relationships are difficult to develop. Children and families in the priority group are frequently driven by distrust in government and “the system”, and this leads them to disengage easily and quickly. Linkage support will not only support families, it would also support workers, who are often constrained by targets and/or ratio regulations, when connections with families become fragile.

In addition, services need sufficient flexibility in the funding model to allow for effective networking, so that families receive warm referrals to services that are known by the (trusted) referrer. And funding models need to be driven by need – children and

⁹ <https://www.acwa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/TUNE-REPORT-indepth-review-out-of-home-care-in-nsw.pdf>

families with complex and multiple needs should absorb more resources if their needs are to be responded to appropriately.

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. Skills need to be built through educational and training settings, and they need to be supported through effective professional supervision to minimise burn out.

Priority groups

Supporting families with multiple and complex needs

What are the top things that work to develop the referral mechanisms, partnerships, practices and services needed to better support families with multiple and complex needs?

Deep and persistent disadvantage requires a re-think of how services are delivered. Holistic case management is frequently only available after a family has reached crisis, but we know that if families are effectively supported, crisis can be averted and positive outcomes achieved. Qualitative research conducted with highly disadvantaged families participating in our *On PAR* program, which provides an early intervention, child-centred, family-focused, intensive case management approach to support the wellbeing and improve educational outcomes for vulnerable children, notes the efficacy of an 'insider/outsider' linker and support role, located within universal service systems, but independent of that institution or service. Families are best supported through:

- **Universal services that create safe space for targeted vulnerable client participation:** Universal early intervention and prevention activities provide non-stigmatising and warm referral points to specialists who are expert at supporting children and families experiencing particular vulnerabilities, including the risk of entering the child protection system. For example, activities can be targeted to support children and families who are at risk of incarceration, but the service or program itself can remain universal and inclusive to ensure a whole of community approach to supporting those needing the targeted intervention thus reducing stigmatisation.
- **Practices that reach families where they are most comfortable:** services that meet families where they are most comfortable-through outreach, through trusted intermediaries like local GP or elders- are able to establish trust which lead to a deeper understanding of the presenting issues and a more coordinated support for the family. These practices take many forms, including actively attending places where vulnerable families and children would be, such as home visits, government services, public housing estates, parks and shopping centres.
- **Place based and family centric service system:** for the referral system to be effective there first needs to be sufficient, relevant services within the place where families will find it easiest and least stigmatising to access them. The services then

need to have a willingness and capacity to coordinate and create pathways between them so that there is a smooth, no wrong door access for families with complex needs who might present with one issue but have multiple causal factors that need addressing and requires a coordinated holistic response.

The Linker Network of Organisations <https://linker.org.au/> is an attempt to create such a system where families with multiple and complex needs do not have to tell their story multiple times nor do they have to worry about accessing the services, but rather the services coordinate to make themselves available for the family and respond to the need holistically.

- **Data informed and technology supported systems and process:** the disruption caused by the COVID19 pandemic has led many services to accelerate their use of technology and reach out to the most vulnerable families in a way that was not deemed practical earlier. Services that were data enabled and had systems that allowed identifying trends early, were better able to support families with complex needs such as safety at home (DV, lack of safe space), mental health, isolation and financial crisis. Additionally, in response to service closures through Covid 19, The Smith Family was a member of an investor group led by The Parenting Research Centre and Karitane, who supported the development of a Telepractice Framework. Drawing on evidence from telehealth these tools enabled practitioners to continue to provide evidence based service and support service to their clients. Many participating services found that this mode of delivery enabled them to work with traditionally 'hard to access' clients and we believe that further exploration of this option as a choice for service users should be explored.¹⁰

Role of the non-government sector

How can governments and the non-government sector and Aboriginal community controlled sector work best together to improve outcomes for children and families?

As noted elsewhere in this submission, better alignment between levels of government in relation to policy and program development prior to implementation would support some level of co-ordination of service offering across the system. In addition, the development of a set of nationally agreed measures of children's wellbeing across agreed domains against which progress is regularly measured would provide a common base for collaborative action, if political barriers could be overcome.

At the community level, the process of uniting agencies around a common purpose and set of measures is a powerful tool to garner support and 'buy in' from interested agencies. Service mapping as part of this process identifies potential duplication and service gaps and provides the basis for the development of a plan of action for communities.

Services need to be responsive to the particularities of the community in which they operate. Integration of services, including strong linkages with soft entry initiatives like Communities for Children Facilitating Partner or the WA Child and Parent Centre

¹⁰ Framework tools and resources can be found on the PRC website:
https://www.parentingrc.org.au/telepractice_hub/

initiatives can engage vulnerable parents/carers as a key 'linker' or door opener in the service system. Additionally concerted efforts need to be made to link child-centric services with adult focused services. This approach, aimed at providing families increased access to tiered, multi-level services and has demonstrated increased engagement and participation of the most vulnerable families and children in CfC FP funded activities with further connections with other targeted service.

Given the significant ongoing outcomes gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and the challenges in their access to mainstream services, organisations could be supported to develop kinship mapping and respectful relationships with and between services (both mainstream and Indigenous specific). The Smith Family believes that Reconciliation Action Plans are an excellent vehicle through which non-Aboriginal organisations can set out a range of practical actions they will undertake to hold themselves accountable for ensuring that their services are culturally safe and accessible and that they make meaningful efforts to engage and build partnerships respectfully.

What would success look like?

What changes do you expect to see in the short, medium and long term?

Ground breaking work undertaken by Taylor Fry for the NSW Government *Their Futures Matter* and published in 2018¹¹ aimed to define groups of vulnerable children and young people and highlight the poor social outcomes and high government service and support costs needed to address the needs of these groups. The report examined the personal and family characteristics that drive the social outcomes of individuals in these groups, and importantly showed the interdependencies between service uses.

This is important consideration for the National Framework and the data and information that is collected, but also provides a framework for how we could monitor success in changing outcomes for vulnerable children in the short medium and long term. The report used data from a range of Federal and State Government portfolios to identify vulnerable groups and pointed to a range of identified risk factors that could form the basis of a population level outcomes framework.

¹¹ https://www.theirfuturesmatter.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/673284/Forecasting-Future-Outcomes-Stronger-Communities-Investment-Unit-2018-Insights-Report.pdf