

30 March 2019

Secretariat
Steering Committee
Review of Government Service Provision
Productivity Commission

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What Works – Protecting Children

Thank you for the opportunity for the Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies to make a submission to this consultation process.

The Institute of Child Protection Studies enhances outcomes for children, young people and families through quality research, program evaluation, training and community education, advocacy and policy development. We are nationally recognised for our expertise in child protection, and preventing and responding to the abuse and neglect of children. We promote children's participation, strengthen service systems, inform practice and support child-safe communities.

The key messages which the Institute offers to this Review are as follows:

- To endorse the initial findings contained in the Secretariat's Consultation Paper including the importance of system leadership.
- To reiterate the programs and policies required for the implementation of a comprehensive public health approach as set out in the identified publications.
- To propose that a more structured approach to measurement and accountability is required.
- To recommend review of governance arrangements including broadening the range of stakeholders involved, increased monitoring and greater public engagement with the process.
- To support recommendations of "Measuring Progress under the National Framework" report.
- To propose the development of key measures of progress in reform and outcomes.
- To recommend greater coordination with other relevant national policy commitments.
- To identify child safety as a key area for coordinated strategy particularly in awareness raising.
- To call for commitment to listening to the views of children including in decision making.
- To encourage greater use of and engagement with international child rights reporting to build engagement and accountability.

A more detailed explanation of our position is set in the attached paper.

Yours sincerely



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Introduction

The Secretariat for the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (“Secretariat”) is seeking input into “*what is known about systems that enable the ‘public health approach’ to protecting children*”. The focus is on systems that protect children from abuse and neglect that occurs within families.

Australian governments have committed to taking a public health approach to protecting children in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020*. A range of initiatives have been developed across the country to date, but there is growing concern that efforts are still too focused on responding to child abuse and neglect after they have occurred, rather than on prevention.

The Secretariat is looking specifically at system design: what is known about ‘what works’ to build a system where all the parts are working together to enable the public health approach to protecting children. It will seek to examine system-change approaches that appear effective, but will not assess the effectiveness of individual programs or interventions.

Current Knowledge

The Secretariat has set out in its Consultation Paper a summary of the current knowledge around child protection based on a public health approach. Key points include:

- Complex systems such as this combine processes and structures with normative elements (attitudes, assumptions and value systems)
- Systems should be built around children, families and communities
- Efforts for prevention should address the needs of children, families and communities
- Prevention programs should use a skilled and professional workforce in organisational settings where families and children regularly or routinely attend
- Evidence should measure the nature and extent of the problem (child abuse and neglect), what programs and services are effective, and what outcomes the system is delivering
- Collaboration and coordination are required across organisations, settings and government
- Shared underlying values should be reinforced across the system structures and processes

Challenges

The Consultation Paper notes that there is less available knowledge on how the system works as a whole; how the system is to be built; and in particular how a more effective system is developed from the existing system.

It notes that change is required at multiple levels. This includes structural change that operates and interconnects at local, regional and national levels; improving outcomes at a family and community level; and at the same time builds system capacity and streamlines processes and funding arrangements.

The Paper notes the success of particular models in connecting at-risk children and families with services in communities. These include network models that allow communities to develop approaches tailored to their local context; and models that focus on a coordinated service response through an accessible universal platform.

Whether larger scale system designs that seek to apply approaches across regions or countries have been successful is less clear.

The Paper identifies the risk that reform efforts may focus on engagement with families at the expense of structural and system change.

It suggests (as yet without strong evidence in support) the importance of system leadership ('system stewardship') and the use of intergovernmental funding arrangements to create incentives for reform.

The Institute's Views and Experience

The Institute of Child Protection Studies enhances outcomes for children, young people and families through quality research, program evaluation, training and community education, advocacy and policy development. We are recognised for our expertise in child protection, and preventing and responding to the abuse and neglect of children. We promote children's participation, strengthen service systems, inform practice and support child-safe communities.

The key messages from the Institute concerning the programs and policies required for the implementation of a comprehensive public health approach are set out (inter alia) in the following publications:

- Daryl Higgins "A public health approach to enhancing safe and supportive family environment for children" (2015) Family Matters no. 96, Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Matthew Sanders, Daryl Higgins and Ronald Prinz "A population approach to the prevention of child maltreatment" (2018) Family Matters No. 100, Australian Institute of Family Studies

Some of the key messages include:

- Ensure that the required parenting programs are incorporated as core business across the range of universal service delivery platforms that provide services to children and families;
- Build strong community and consumer engagement and access strategies to consolidate relevance;
- Build a strong social marketing strategy with positive child development messages;
- Develop a coordinated commitment across and within governments;
- Develop complementary parenting support strategies across childhood and adolescence;
- Develop a detailed benchmark of parenting behaviours and capacities for prevention;
- Develop a secure and integrated funding model that builds sector ownership;
- Develop an integrated and funded evaluation and research framework that is iterative and collaborative;
- Incentivise prevention in service contexts and build professional development into practice;
- Support community development, coordination and collaboration based on shared values.

The second article concludes

*"The sustained implementation of a multilevel evidence-based approach adhering to principles of "proportionate universalism" holds the greatest promise in turning the tide of unacceptably high rates of child maltreatment and inadequate parenting, and it must become a public policy priority. Australia is fortunate to have developed a range of high quality evidence-based programs that are readily deployable but the public benefits of these programs to promote the future generation of children requires **political will** and an ongoing commitment to **monitoring outcomes**." [our emphasis]*

Governance, Leadership and Monitoring

We offer some comments on the barriers to the development of coordinated political will in Australia in the last ten years and make some suggestions for the review of structures and mechanisms and the effective use of monitoring to support the development and maintenance of that political will for reform in the future.

We support the suggestions contained in the Consultation Paper concerning the importance of system leadership and the use of funding arrangements to create incentives for reform. We would add to these suggestions consideration of the value of a more structured and more public approach to measurement and accountability. Ideally this approach would measure progress in a staged shift to a public health model as well as include overall measures of outcomes for children and families.

Currently the key governance mechanisms used to guide the work of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children are the Community Services Ministers, the Children's and Families Secretaries Group and the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children ("the Forum"). The Forum is a tripartite group including representatives from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, and the nongovernment sector represented by members of the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children ("the NGO Coalition").

We think that there would be value in reviewing these arrangements. In particular we recommend that attention is given to the range of stakeholders, the extent of monitoring undertaken and the limited nature of public engagement with the issues discussed and monitored by the various mechanisms.

We note that there is a critical moment approaching as the existing National Framework concludes and consideration is given to what comes next. It could not be said that the work of the National framework is complete. The Institute notes that we have not made material progress in reducing the number of children receiving child protection services. Progress in the shift to a public health approach to the prevention of abuse and neglect has been at best incremental.

The 2015 ACIL Allen Consulting Report to the Department of Social Services "*Measuring Progress under the National Framework*" identified the need for greater attention to implementation, governance and measurement of the National Framework. Its recommendations offer valuable guidance in building on the existing governance arrangements to better address sectoral; intragovernmental and intergovernmental barriers to implementation and reform.

In order to build on the existing governance arrangements, the Institute would support the expansion of the range of stakeholders including in the Forum (or its successor). We suggest that there are a number of sectors that play a critical role in creating an environment committed to the health, safety and wellbeing of children and to the prevention of their maltreatment. These include health, education as well as community services beyond those focused on child protection and each could contribute to the Framework and its reform objectives.

The extension of the range of stakeholders should occur in parallel across sectors and systems. There should be balance in ensuring the most effective contributions from government (Commonwealth and state and territory), the service sectors and from research, policy and advocacy institutions and individuals.

It may be valuable to review the particular governance arrangements at a Commonwealth Government level. Ensuring the commitment of different government departments could require the overall coordination responsibility to rest with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. This could ensure the involvement where necessary of the Council of Australian Governments which in turn may assist in greater and broader commitment at a state and territory level.

Planning, Measurement and Monitoring

The governance structures should balance the need for political and government leadership and engagement with the need for critical and independent analysis, debate and advocacy. Additional mechanisms to achieve this could include independent chairing roles, guaranteed resourcing for stakeholder consultations and public reporting.

There is a critical need for more careful planning, more rigorous measurement and monitoring of progress and outcomes. Ideally this would be developed within a commitment to greater public accountability. There is a strong case for the development and use of measures to support both the reform objectives of the existing National Framework (and its successor) and more comprehensive Closing the Gap style targets for child protection and child safety.

There will be the need to consider the different approaches and values that are used in different sectors and stakeholders. Work will be required to develop a common language that will engage health, education and other sectors in child protection and child safety.

This work should also take account of the most effective levers of influence and incentive to encourage different sectors and stakeholders to support and commit to the development of meaningful outcomes for children and communities and to genuine collaboration.

It may be appropriate to consider the work of driving reform in child protection in the context of the development of a broad National Plan for Children. This could integrate programs and initiatives across health, education, safety and wellbeing and use measures that acknowledge the impacts (benefits and challenges) across these domains.

We note that there is work currently underway to develop a National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People. It claims to be “an Action Plan for everyone” but it is our observation that the consultations outside the health sector appear to have been cursory and brief.

The health sector would be in a good position to contribute a key body of knowledge¹ around constructing services for children and young people including in circumstances where access will not be appropriate through a family setting.

There are a range of other opportunities that could be used to build awareness and commitment across government and the community. These include the ongoing national conversation around child safety (which could be supported through the National Office of Child Safety) and the work of the National Children’s Commissioner in building respect for the rights of children across their lived experiences. There is a strong argument that there should be greater connection and coordination between child-focused initiatives, research and programs with the work of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022.

¹ Robards et al. International Journal for Equity in Health (2019) 18:41
Institute of Child Protection Studies

Towards A National Approach to Child Safety and Child Protection

We note that the Consultation Paper distinguishes the work of child protection reform from the work of implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse. However there is considerable overlap in policy terms as the two areas are both critical aspects of creating safe environments for children and young people.

There will be opportunities for connecting the two conversations. Both call for more effective public campaigns around child safety. We note that the implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations is driving the development of more effective measures for child safety and the prevention of abuse, particularly through the monitoring, compliance and enforcement of Child Safe Standards. This will provide a key opportunity for a more deliberate sharing of responsibility for awareness raising, education, capacity building across government and community agencies.

The Royal Commission has made detailed recommendations² as to a comprehensive national strategy to prevent child sexual abuse. This work is to be coordinated by the National Office for Child Safety and is to be given attention in the development of the successor to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. It would also coordinate with existing (and future) measures developed in implementation of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 and the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020.

In particular we note that the Royal Commission has recommended that the future work on national strategy (currently described as a National Framework for Child Safety) should encompass social marketing campaigns to raise general community awareness and education programs for children, parents and community members to increase knowledge and build skills around the prevention of child sexual abuse. These are to be built around information and help-seeking services for children and young people, parents and community members.

The strategies will need to focus on issue of abuse beyond child sexual abuse and will include knowledge and skills that will be of value in creating and supporting safe environments for children that will include family and care settings.

The Views of Children and Young People

Critical to the Institute's understanding of children's safety and wellbeing is the importance of listening to the views of children and supporting their involvement in decision making. Planning for how to most effectively protect children will also be enriched by their contributions. There is considerable research to support the involvement of children and young people in public policy³.

Whilst the skills for involving children and young people in policy development are relatively scarce within government, it would be possible by working with other sectors to develop an ongoing strategy to include children and young people in the development, implementation and monitoring of a public health model for child protection.

² Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse "Final Report" (2017)

³ Collin et al "Creating Benefit for All: Young people, engagement and public policy" (2016)

International Monitoring and Reporting

We also note that the issues considered in this submission and by the Consultation Paper are also under consideration as part of Australia's reporting to the United Nations on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The current reporting cycle has already raised an important range of issues concerning the development, implementation and monitoring of measures and programs for the protection, participation and engagement of children in Australia today.

We note that the List of Issues presented to the Australian Government by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child for addressing prior to the Government's attendance before the Committee in Geneva in September 2019 include the following questions:

Please indicate the measures taken to establish a budgeting process with clear allocations to children, specific indicators and a tracking system to monitor and evaluate the impact of budgetary allocations to children's rights

... Please provide information on the measures taken to address instances of child abuse, including sexual abuse, and neglect as well as family and domestic violence, including measures to avoid re-victimization

....Please inform on how measures to support families resulted in less children placed in out-of-home care, particularly with regard to Aboriginal and Torres Island families. Please provide information on the criteria for the placement of a child in care, and measures taken to periodically review placements, to improve the training of child care workers, to ensure equal access to education and mental health, to prepare for out-of-care and to establish accessible and child-sensitive mechanisms for reporting cases of abuse...

The Committee invites the State party to provide a brief update ... on new institutions (and their mandates) or institutional reforms;

Please provide, if available, updated statistical data disaggregated by age, sex, type of disability, ethnic origin, national origin, geographic location and socioeconomic status, for the past three years, on

Cases of violence against children, child neglect and abuse and the number of investigations and prosecutions carried out and sentences issued ...

Please provide data ... regarding the situation of children deprived of a family environment, for the past three years, on the number of children separated from their parents; living with relatives; placed in institutions ; placed with foster families, and of these the number of children placed in foster families of their ethnicity.

This international reporting and monitoring mechanism can support more effective accountability and monitoring within Australia and provide insights into the best practice and principles that are available in an international context for child protection and child protection reform.

References

- Australian Government, Draft National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People (2019)
- Australian Government, National Disability Strategy 2010–2020.
- Australian Government, National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020
- Australian Government, National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022
- The Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017)
- The National Statement of Principles for Child Safe Organisations (2018)
- The Report of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations (2013)
- ACIL Allen Consulting Report to the Department of Social Services *"Measuring Progress under the National Framework"* (2015)
- Allen Consulting Group *Inverting the Pyramid: Enhancing Systems for Protecting Children*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2008)
- Australian Medical Association *Campaign for a public health approach to preventing child abuse* (2018)
- Council of Australian Governments *Protecting Children is Everyone’s Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020*
- Daryl Higgins “A public health approach to enhancing safe and supportive family environment for children” (2015) Family Matters no. 96, Australian Institute of Family Studies
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- Philippa Collin et al “Creating Benefit for All: Young people, engagement and public policy” (2016) University of Western Sydney
- United Nations Child Rights Committee, List of Issues for the Australian Government (2019)