

Summary Report 2 Aboriginal Children, Young People and Families

Child and Family Focus SA Forums "Improving Family Wellbeing and Child Protection: What are our priorities for the next four years in SA?"

Purpose of this summary report.

On 6 May 2022, 68 participants from 28 organisations attended a forum to discuss priorities for action to improve family wellbeing and child protection in South Australia.

After the Forum, a Summary Report (Summary Report 1) and it was circulated to all attendees and CAFFSA Members. It provided an overview of key issues discussed at the Forum and a range of the comments received in the evaluation sheets completed on the day.

This second summary report provides more information about the key issues raised by Aboriginal' speakers and participants on the day and the response of participants generally.

Overview

The following is an extract from Summary Report 1 focussing on issues regarding Aboriginal people that has already been circulated to CAFFSA members.

Aboriginal peoples' cultural authority:

Recognition, resourcing and implementation

There is a great interest in the role of Aboriginal people as the source of cultural authority in decision-making about the care and welfare of the children in their communities. There was a strong message that Aboriginal people need the support of the most senior leaders in the sector's organisations in order to obtain the resources, the Aboriginal staff and the cultural authority to promote the cultural safety and cultural identity of the Aboriginal children and young people in care. The need to maintain the cultural safety and general wellbeing of Aboriginal' staff themselves within our organisations is also a key concern.

The forum heard from several Aboriginal speakers about initiatives in South Australia. We also heard presentations about the significant developments in Queensland and Victoria in relation to the transfer of decision-making authority to Aboriginal people within the child protection and family welfare systems in those states.

The Evaluation Sheets asked participants to nominate what they had found most useful at the forum. Many commented on the value of hearing the views of Aboriginal speakers. Here are some examples.

"Hearing from some of the Aboriginal leaders in the sector. Sarah from Relationships Australia and her ideas and passion for family consultation and comparing data and outcomes to NZ." Forum Participant

"Hearing the discussion from the Aboriginal women in the room." Forum Participant

"Listening to the cultural expertise and the importance of family relationships."
Forum Participant

"Sarah's very powerful presentation on Aboriginal children and the importance of Family Group Conferencing and children's stories having the power to effect family change." Forum Participant

Participants nominated a range of priorities for action in relation to Aboriginal' issues in their worksheets. Here are some examples:

"Increased input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Considering the statistics of more Aboriginal young people coming into care, we need to listen to these voices. I feel there has been little meaningful change in this space. I'd love to see more resources and support for culturally safe and appropriate recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster and kinship carers." Forum Participant.

"Getting it right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Changing the way that society interacts with us to listen to us deeply and give us back the power and resources that we need to make the right decisions." Forum Participant.

"More resources towards reunification and support services to get more children and young people back home safely." Forum Participant.

"Stronger focus on the voices of key people in the young person's life. Young person's view on their family and where they want to live, particularly Aboriginal people. Ensure face-to-face visits happen regularly. Lower caseloads. Allow a greater focus on support and relationships. Consideration for private sector to take on case management." Forum Participant.

Further information on Aboriginal' issues raised at the Forum.

“Keep our families together. If there are safety concerns, come in and support us to remove those safety concerns. Don’t just take the kids away.”

Several key concerns raised at the Forum by Aboriginal’ professionals working in member organisations, Aboriginal’ young people who had been in care and non-Aboriginal staff members of member organisations were considered. These included:

- the over-representation of Aboriginal’ people in care;
- the powerful desire to keep families together, while addressing safety issues;
- the value and importance of Family Group Conferencing;
- the need to employ Aboriginal people in member organisations to promote cultural safety and cultural identity among families, children and young people receiving services;
- the essential role of senior leadership and governance structures within member organisations to ensure workplaces are culturally safe for Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal staff are well supported to manage the potential for triggering and traumatising work-related experiences in the sector;
- the need for more Aboriginal foster families; and
- the under-representation of Aboriginal people on the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee in South Australia.

Family Group Conferencing.

Participants at the forum showed a keen interest in Family Group Conferencing and a desire to learn more. Here are some of the comments made about Family Group Conferencing at the forum:

“We need a radical change in decision-making in South Australia to reduce the number of children in care. Our numbers are rising compared to other states. If the number of people with cancer was rising as rapidly as the number of children going into care, action would be taken.

“Decision-making needs to be given back to families, children and community. We need Family Group Conferencing at every level of the child protection system.

“Family Group Conferencing is family decision making. Family Group Conferencing involves the family and the child and we widen the circle. It is a Aboriginal’ practice. You put the problem right at the centre. So what is the problem? If we’ve got drug use, we put the problem right at the centre and you widen the circle around that problem by getting the people that are most affected by the problem at the table to make the decisions. Family Group Conferencing is a Aboriginal’ model. We know what is important and that a child belongs in a village. We need to bring back the village and not the siloed approach run by professionals that we have now.

“It is about relationships. Young people are asking for relationships and stability. Good therapeutic work is done through relationship. It involves deep listening. We need to listen to the story to create change and we don’t do enough listening.

“The current focus is on compliance with procedures and not on outcomes for the children and families. Family Group Conferencing brings children and families into the centre of decision making. It is used extensively in New Zealand and a far lower proportion of children are brought into care in New Zealand than in South Australia. We need to change our decision making to change our outcomes for children.

“Family Group Conferencing creates transparency. Transparency means people are accountable at every level. The family is accountable. The services are accountable. The department is accountable. Even the child is accountable.

“We need Family Group Conferencing when children are exiting care too. We need to bring together the family, the foster carers, the services. We need to work out our wrap-around services and who is going to do these things when the child leaves care so the child is fully supported.”

Information about Family Group Conferencing Is available on the Relationships Australia South Australia website.

Relationships Australia South Australia
Ngartuitya Family Group Conferences - Information for Families
<https://www.rasa.org.au/nfgc-families/>

Two websites which provide some information about Family Group Conferencing as it is being used in Aotearoa/New Zealand can be found here:

Review of family Group Conferences, Ministry of Social Development New Zealand
<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/evaluation/review-family-group-conferences/index.html>

Family Group Conferences: Official Action from Oranga Tamariki
<https://communitylaw.org.nz/community-law-manual/chapter-13-dealing-with-oranga-tamariki-ministry-for-children/if-oranga-tamariki-deals-with-you-outside-the-court-system/family-group-conferences-official-action-from-oranga-tamariki/>

Promoting Aboriginal’ Cultural Safety and Cultural Identity.

“A child should not come into care with culture and leave without it”.

CAFFSA Forum participants heard about initiatives within Anglicare SA to nurture cultural safety and cultural identity for children and young people in care. Aboriginal staff from Anglicare SA to discuss their work because specific, real-life examples are the most efficient and informative way to raise topics for discussion.

A very clear message from the Forum feedback and evaluation sheets is that CAFFSA members want more opportunities to gather together as a sector to focus on solutions. This most definitely applies to solutions to improve the results for Aboriginal children, young people and families. There is a strong interest in more opportunities for staff to come together to discuss their work and how to improve it. People want to hear what is working well in services. They want to discuss common challenges, but with the primary focus on how to address them. While the participants at the May 2022 Forum applauded the opportunity to hear panel members discuss a wide range of issues, they also want to have time to discuss issues in small groups at future events.

Summary of initiatives at Anglicare SA to promote Aboriginal' Cultural Safety and Cultural Identity.

Anglicare SA has employed a Director of Aboriginal Services, a Principal Aboriginal Consultant and Cultural Practitioners.

The role of the Director of Aboriginal Services is essentially to focus on the Aboriginal children and young people in the care of the organisation.

This work recognises the importance of governance and data collection to inform and support all decision-making in this field. "The first step was to better understand the experience of Aboriginal people that are in our care. We needed to collect and analyse data. You need the data to know where to head. We did our research to find out about the Aboriginal children and young people in our care: How many are there? Are they in emergency, short-term or long-term placements? Do they have a Cultural Connection Plan? How well is that plan being implemented?"

A key recommendation that arose during the Anglicare SA discussion is that every non-government agency should have a Principal Aboriginal Consultant. "We need to keep our kids connected to culture and strengthen their identity, while they are in care, regardless of whether they are in foster or kinship or residential care."

The role of the Principal Aboriginal Consultant is a strategic and high-level role. "You cannot get right into the detail for each and every young person, as they deserve, if a review is to be done well. So we introduced Aboriginal Cultural Practitioners into the Foster Care Teams. We changed roles that were existing and made them identified

roles, targeted towards Aboriginal people, and advertised towards Aboriginal people."

"Any young person placed in care within Anglicare has a Cultural Consultation. Through these conversations we identify whether the child has a Cultural Plan. Do they have their language groups identified? What do we need to do as an agency to ensure this happens? What can the Cultural Practitioner do to ensure the young person's culture is not lost while they are within the Foster Care placement?"

A network of Aboriginal Cultural Practitioners works to provide positive male and female role models for Aboriginal children in care. They work to ensure that these young people are strengthened in their culture and identity. They work directly with the young people and visit regularly. "You need absolute continuity of one person coming in."

Cultural Practitioners need to have a hand in governance throughout the organisation to make sure that they are culturally safe at work as well. "We need to be able to remain in worlds that are challenging and difficult and can be triggering and traumatising for ourselves at work as well. To have success in this role we need good support around us as well."

A clear message from this discussion was the importance of governance structures. While Aboriginal cultural leadership within an organisation is vital, it is essential for these cultural leaders have access to the overall leadership of the organisation to be successful. The governance structure is imperative for the success of the role of the Director of Aboriginal Services and the Principal Aboriginal Consultant. "We don't have enough influence without recognition of cultural leadership within the organisation."

Another clear message was the urgent need for more Aboriginal Foster Carers. "We don't have nearly enough for the number of children. The standard recruitment for Foster Carers won't work for Aboriginal people. This needs to be a major focus so that we can follow the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

"However, while we currently don't have enough Aboriginal Foster Carers, Anglicare has made it mandatory that all Foster Carers should be culturally competent within the assessment phase. We are also retrospectively going back to all Foster Carers to test their cultural competency and if we find any gaps we need to support them to be well educated to support Aboriginal children in their care."

**Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee SA:
Under-representation of Aboriginal People.**

Aboriginal participants at the forum in May 2022 noted that there is only one Aboriginal representative on the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee in South Australia, despite the significant over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in care and the number of Aboriginal children that die or are injured.

Child Death & Serious Injury Review Committee. <https://cdisirc.sa.gov.au>

Participants reported and applauded a plan to assemble an Aboriginal Advisory Group to this committee. It is anticipated the Advisory Group will be looking at early intervention, prevention and the intervention points where something could have been done to potentially prevent injury and death.

A young Aboriginal man at the forum, now in his late teens, who had spent most of his life in care, asked why the suicide rate for young people in care continued to be high.

It is noted that the death rate for suicide amongst Aboriginal young people is approximately seven times higher than it is for non-Aboriginal young people in South Australia. Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee South Australia: <https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/Submission%2050%20-Child%20Death%20and%20Serious%20Injury%20Review%20Committee%20South%20Australia.pdf>

The establishment of an Aboriginal Advisory Group to the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee was seen as an important step towards lowering this disturbing suicide rate, as well as addressing the high rates of death of Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia.

At the time of writing this summary report in early August 2022, the website for the Child Death and Serious Injury Committee includes a list of the membership and provides a brief bio for each member: <https://cdisirc.sa.gov.au/members/>. There is only one person currently listed on the committee who is identified as a Aboriginal person.

The 2020–21 Annual Report of the South Australian Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee

The Executive Summary of the 2021 Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee identified:

Over the 16-year reporting period to 2020:

- The rate of death for Aboriginal children and young people usually resident in South Australia was 66 deaths per 100,000. By comparison, the rate of death for non-Aboriginal children and young people was 27 deaths per 100,000.

Relevant data in relation to Aboriginal children from the latest Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee Annual Report is important to highlight and for those who may wish to read further, the latest and earlier reports can be found here: <https://cDsirc.sa.gov.au/annual-reports/>

END

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