CAFFSA Submission on Safe & Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 - 2031

Child and Family Focus SA

September 2026

'Reconciliation' by Kobe and Hamish Collins
Commissioned by CAFFSA 2024

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kaurna people and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We pay our respects to Kaurna Elders past and present.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of land beyond Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains and pay our respects to all Aboriginal Elders past and present.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the cultural authority of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and are grateful for the cultural expertise that they represent.

The role of Child and Family Focus SA

Child and Family Focus SA (CAFFSA) is the South Australian peak body representing the needs and interests of children, young people and families, particularly those connected with or at risk of entering the child protection system, and the NGOs and ACCOs that support them.

Contributors

This submission was prepared with input from members of CAFFSA's Policy and Advocacy Committee, Intensive Family Support, Family Based Care, Disability and Residential Care Networks, and the Aboriginal Leadership Group, in addition to partner organisations external to CAFFSA's membership. Members of these groups comprise over 40 agencies across South Australia who provide services to children, young people and families involved in or at risk of involvement with the child protection system.

Background

CAFFSA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the development of the Second Action Plan under Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031. As the peak body representing South Australia's child and family services sector, CAFFSA is committed to supporting policies and reforms that strengthen the safety, wellbeing and outcomes of children, young people and families.

This submission reflects the views and experiences of CAFFSA member organisations and others consulted as part of this process. The feedback highlights the importance of investing in prevention and early intervention, improving access to family support services, strengthening collaboration across service systems, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and ensuring children, young people and families are genuinely and meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them.

Across the consultation, there was a consistent view that children and families achieve the best outcomes when support is accessible, culturally responsive, relationship-based and provided early, before challenges escalate into crisis or statutory intervention. This submission outlines

key recommendations that CAFFSA believes would strengthen the implementation of the Second Action Plan and contribute to improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

CAFFSA Recommendations:

CAFFSA recommends that the Second Action Plan:

1. Investigate where all federally funded services interact with vulnerable children, young people and families with the aim of incorporating warm referrals for relevant support and assistance, embedding and resourcing Active Efforts as a practice standard over time.

2. Implement measures that strengthen economic support for families that are vulnerable including increased income support and Jobseeker allowance, free or heavily subsidised dental and other health care. increasing minimum wages and ensuring informal carers receive financial support.

3. Improve access to intensive family support services, retaining the emphasis on current priority cohorts, such as young parents with a child protection or out-of-home care experience; out-of-home care leavers, and children and parents with disabilities.

4. Address the social determinants of child and safety wellbeing through coordinated whole-of-family support across the systems that shape families' lives, such as health, housing, education, mental health and family fand domestic violence.

5. Establish nationally agreed measures for prevention and early intervention investment and outcomes, covering Commonwealth, state and territory activity;

6. Increase investment in community-based, place-based soft entry points, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities, that incorporate lived experience and peer support roles and provide system navigation support.

7. Promote policy and practice approaches that recognise help-seeking as a protective factor and support jurisdictions to embed a "support before surveillance" approach across child and family service systems.

8. Support jurisdictions to progressively shift investment towards prevention, early intervention and family support services consistent with the National Child and Family Investment Strategy, including increased investment in culturally safe and Aboriginal Community Controlled services, with ongoing monitoring of outcomes to measure the impact of upstream investment.

9. Embed practice approaches and system enablers that recognise parental help-seeking as a protective behaviour and support practitioners to balance mandatory reporting obligations with engagement and early intervention to the standard of Active Efforts.

10. Include child and family wellbeing indicators and develop national practice guidance that promotes the adoption of relationship-based and family-centred practice models for inclusion in all relevant commonwealth-funded agencies, including housing, justice, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment and social services ensuring families receive coordinated support rather than referrals in isolation.

11. Require *all elements* of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) be applied across all services dealing with children and families, where relevant to the activities enacted via the agencies service delivery.

12. Invest in community-based, place-based soft entry points that enable children, young people and families to comfortably access support early, without the need to enter formal case management processes. Such services should incorporate lived experience and peer support roles, provide system navigation assistance and be prioritised in rural, regional and remote communities to strengthen access, trust and engagement.

13. Enable access to soft entry point responses for young people that do not require the consent of their parents, ensuring those who are at risk from their parent/s or guardian or are disengaged can still have their needs met.

14. Recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right and prioritise access to basic necessities including safe housing, food security, clothing and financial stability as foundational components of early intervention. Governments should support integrated responses that address both immediate material needs and longer-term wellbeing, recovery, education and developmental outcomes for children and young people.

15. Incentivise funding and commissioning approaches to facilitate integrated service delivery and shared outcomes rather than siloed or competitive responses. Strengthen coordinated and collaborative responses across housing, justice, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment and social services by embedding shared responsibility, warm referral practices and family engagement throughout referral and service pathways.

16. Embed Active Efforts as a practice standard across housing, justice, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment and social services requiring agencies to take purposeful and proactive action to support

engagement with services, facilitate warm referrals, address barriers to participation and maintain involvement until families are successfully connected to appropriate supports.

17. Adopt a whole of government systems approach with a focus on identifying and addressing unintended consequences across housing, justice, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment and social services, ensuring government policies and practices work together to improve outcomes for children, young people and families rather than creating additional barriers to safety, stability and reunification.

18. Provide greater investment in and support for foster, kinship and informal carers to ensure children and young people can access stable family-based care that supports their needs and their wellbeing:

    - Ensure appropriate and fair support for carers: Increase financial and practical supports for foster, kinship and informal carers, including the development of nationally consistent support arrangements for informal carers to strengthen care within family environments, improve placement stability and prevent unnecessary entry into Out of Home Care.

    - Address paid parental leave and work-related demands; and retain practical support for high-needs placements, including respite, youth workers and allied health.

    - Ensure needs-based entitlements are available and base children's access to benefits and services on their needs when in care — not on the carer's income or means test.

    - Provide automatic access to at least 12 therapeutic visits when a child enters care, with additional visits based on need. Review support before the initial allocation runs out to avoid gaps. Also ensure timely access after a substantiated allegation or significant change in wellbeing.

    - Provide timely, affordable access to services such as speech and occupational therapy, including for children whose needs are not met by NDIS or Thriving Kids, such as provision of priority access and bulk billing where possible, without adding administrative burdens for carers.

    - Treat family preservation, kinship care, foster care and residential care as connected parts of a continuum, with access to stronger support at each stage to help avoid unnecessary escalation to residential care.

- Design and operationalise a child-held electronic credential, such as an E-Wallet, for every child entering out-of-home care, retained until at least age 25, including where they leave care before turning 18;

- Undertake an implementation planning study for a nationally consistent Health Access Card or equivalent mechanism for children and young people entering out-of-home care, retained until at least age 21, to support timely and continuous access to health services, and

- Broaden recognition of kinship carers and consider the policy and legislative asks raised by Kinship Care Alliance.

19. Improve system navigation and reduce administrative burden for families by streamlining service pathways, information requirements and engagement processes across government departments and services.

20. Establish dedicated system navigation supports for families experiencing vulnerability, including lived experience peer support workers who can coordinate services, advocate across systems and assist families to navigate complex government and community service pathways.

21. Increase flexibility within funding and commissioning arrangements to enable organisations to adapt services in response to changing community needs, emerging service gaps and local priorities. Funding agreements should incorporate resourcing to support collaboration, innovation and place-based responses rather than restricting services to rigid program parameters and activities.

22. Review and strengthen information-sharing frameworks across child and family services, health, education, disability, housing, justice and domestic and family violence services to improve consistency, clarify practitioner responsibilities and support earlier, coordinated responses to cumulative concerns affecting children, young people and families.

23. Ensure disability sector reforms including NDIS and Thriving Kids implementation, incorporate clear shared accountability between Commonwealth and state governments for children and young people in informal and Out of Home Care, with mechanisms to prevent service gaps and ensure continuity of support for children with disability and complex needs. This includes the development of navigation services.

24. CAFFSA supports the priorities identified by Wakwakurna Kanyini and SNAICC in relation to the Second Action Plans and defers to these organisations on the detailed actions required. Members of CAFFSA's Aboriginal Leadership Network also offered the following recommendations:

    Ensure relevant federally funded services and programs enact and S/T jurisdictions are supported to enact:

    - Strengthened implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) through Active Efforts across the entire child and family service system including prevention, early intervention, family support and statutory services. This should ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, communities and cultural decision-makers are meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them, with accountability mechanisms that measure and monitor implementation of all five elements of the ATSICPP.

    - Implementation of long-term, Aboriginal-led system reform that strengthens self-determination, delegated authority and cultural governance, while redesigning funding, contracting and accountability frameworks to support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as preferred providers of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

    - Recognition and embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Authority across policy, governance, commissioning, service delivery and decision-making processes, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, Elders, communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations have a meaningful role in decisions that affect them. This should include supporting delegated authority arrangements, Aboriginal-led decision-making and the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak and representative bodies as key partners in the design, implementation and oversight of child and family service systems.

    - Embedding decolonising approaches across child and family service systems by promoting self-determination, cultural authority, shared decision-making and Aboriginal-led solutions.

25. Australian, state and territory governments develop a national workforce strategy to assess workforce demand and projected need, skills, qualifications and training, recruitment and retention, and the particular requirements for regional and remote and peer workforces. Ensure the strategy incorporates:
    - A broad definition of workforce**,** including government and agency staff, foster and kinship carers, and professionals working alongside children in education, health, disability services, youth justice, police and courts.

- Established core competencies to ensure baseline capability in disability and developmental delay, mental health, trauma, and cultural safety, with expectations able to respond to children's differing needs.
- Embedded key training in all relevant professional qualifications and recognises and supports carer training, including child development, abuse and neglect, trauma identification, FASD and other disability-related training, education and developmentally appropriate responses.

26. Improve safeguarding consistency by pursuing national consistency in working-with-children checks and reportable-conduct arrangements. Implementation may need to be staged, and fair, timely appeal processes and the effects of allegations on carers' livelihoods and placements will require attention.
27. Ensure national contracts provide adequate indexation, funding certainty and realistic performance frameworks that reflect the time required for relationship-based, trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice. Funding arrangements should facilitate workforce retention and service continuity and incorporate a greater focus on outcomes rather than compliance and activity reporting.

28. Strengthen workforce capability to provide relationship based, trauma informed and culturally responsive practice, through investment in clinical supervision, reflective practice, professional development and workforce support.

29. Promote co-design and continuous community engagement across child and family services, ensuring programs and policies are developed, implemented and reviewed in partnership with children, young people, families and communities, with mechanisms to adapt services in response to changing needs and local priorities.

30. Promote structured allyship approaches between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and non-Aboriginal staff from mainstream services to strengthen workforce capability, cultural responsiveness and sector collaboration. Allyship models should support shared learning, professional development, research, practice improvement and ongoing dialogue informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, expertise and lived experience.

31. Embed genuine participatory approaches across child and family services by ensuring children and young people are actively involved in assessment, planning, service design, decision-making, commissioning and evaluation processes. Participation frameworks should support children's voices to be heard, respected and authentically represented and draw on established best practice guidance such as those developed by the CREATE Foundation.

32. Require government departments and organisations to demonstrate feedback loop mechanisms to demonstrate that children and young people's views have informed decisions, policies, programs and services. Commissioning frameworks should also require these mechanisms to demonstrate that children and young people's views have influenced service design and proposed delivery.

33. Create opportunities for children and young people's voices to meaningfully inform prevention, early intervention, service design and policy development.

34. Strengthen accountability and leadership across all levels of government and service systems by establishing performance and reporting frameworks that measure outcomes, as well as measuring the mechanisms to achieve those outcomes, such as Active Efforts and full implementation of the ATSICPP. Accountability should extend from frontline practice through to organisational leadership, governance structures and government decision makers.

35. Establish a dedicated National Minister for Children to provide clear leadership, centralised accountability and cross-portfolio coordination for issues affecting children and young people. A dedicated ministerial portfolio would support a more integrated national approach across housing, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services, ensuring children and young people's safety and wellbeing remains a visible and accountable government priority.

36. Develop outcome measurement frameworks that are informed by children, young people and families and incorporate both quantitative and qualitative measures of success. Evaluation and reporting should capture lived experience, family journeys and contexts and long-term outcomes, ensuring progress is measured by what matters most to children, young people and families rather than relying solely on activity, compliance or performance data.

37. Strengthen Aboriginal data sovereignty by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to access, govern and use local data to inform decision-making, accountability and service improvement consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four.

38. Develop a shared national data and reporting framework linking jurisdictional and Commonwealth data, such as South Australia's BEBOLD platform to strengthen transparency, accountability and evidence-informed decision-making across governments, services and communities.

Supporting children, young people and families early

What.would.make.the.biggest.difference.in.helping.children?young.people.and.families.get.the.right.support.early?before.concerns.escalate?

Recognising poverty and exclusion as a key driver in child protection concerns

Australian research estimates that 27% of child abuse and neglect cases are associated with financial hardship. Poverty and financial stress are significant contributors to child maltreatment. Ainsworth argues that if poverty is a major driver of child protection involvement, families could be entering the statutory system due to disadvantage rather than poor parenting.[1] This study found that strategies to reduce poverty will significantly improve child and family wellbeing and reduce involvement in statutory child protection services. Similarly, US research involving multiple programs suggests income support helps families meet children's needs and reduces child welfare involvement, with evidence of protective effects of income strongest for cases related to neglect.[2]

Limited money and time can force families — especially those navigating low wages, unpredictable work schedules, and lack of affordable or quality child care — into painful trade-offs. A parent may want to spend time reading with their children and looking over their homework but instead must work multiple jobs to pay the rent, so that their children have a safe place to live. One of those jobs might call a parent in for an overnight shift, but without family nearby or money to pay for a sitter, they must decide between risking a job or earnings and leaving their child home alone.

CAFFSA proposes that addressing poverty, financial stress and the resulting exclusion and disadvantage would make a substantial contribution to preventing concerns escalating for children, young people and families.

Recommendations:

1. Investigate where all federally funded services interact with vulnerable children, young people and families with the aim of incorporating warm referrals for relevant support and assistance, embedding and resourcing Active Efforts as a practice standard over time.

2. Implement measures that strengthen economic support for families that are vulnerable including increased income support and Jobseeker allowance, free or heavily subsidised dental and other health care. increasing minimum wages and ensuring

[1] Ainsworth, F. (2020). The social and economic origins of child abuse and neglect. *Children Australia, 45*(3), 202-206. https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2020.36

[2] Income Support Helps Families Meet Children's Needs and Reduces Child Welfare Involvement, Research From Multiple Programs Suggest | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

informal carers receive financial support.

Access to Early Interventions and Supports

Accessibility of services is a key factor in ensuring children, young people and families receive support when it is needed before challenges escalate into more serious concerns. The experience of CAFFSA membership is that the Safe and Supported principle that children, young people and families should have access to quality universal and targeted services designed to improve outcomes and strengthen wellbeing[3] is an extremely important one. When support is available early, accessible and responsive to family needs there is greater opportunity to address issues before they reach the point of statutory intervention. While accessibility is recognised within the framework, members emphasised the need for the Second Action Plan to place greater focus on how this principle is embedded in practice.

Members of CAFFSA's Aboriginal Leadership Network also pointed out that access to services, systemic racism and a lack of culturally safe service responses are some of the most significant barriers experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. These barriers can reduce trust in services, discourage support seeking and contribute to families disengaging from support. Furthermore, access to services remains particularly challenging in rural and regional areas where families often experience limited-service availability, workforce shortages, long travel distances and reduced access to specialist supports.

Shame, fear and stigma were identified as significant barriers to engaging with services or asking for support. Families are often reluctant to engage with services due to fears of being judged, scrutinised or having their children removed. Ensuring services are accessible, non-judgemental, culturally safe and focused on support rather than surveillance is critical to building trust and encouraging families to seek assistance early, before concerns escalate requiring child protection involvement.

As awareness and recognition of what constitutes child abuse and neglect has increased, so has the rates of mandatory notifications. Within Australia, notifications rose by 40% between 2016 – 2027 and 2020 – 2021, despite the number of notifications resulting in a substantiation of harm being drastically smaller[4]. Additionally, there is a need to shift the narrative around help-seeking, recognising that parents who ask for support are demonstrating insight, responsibility and a commitment to their child's wellbeing. Seeking help should be viewed as a protective factor and a strength rather than being interpreted as a parent unable to cope and reason to report.

Referral pathways can be a barrier for families wanting to access early support. Families seeking support before issues reach crisis point are unable to directly access services such as Intensive

[3] Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2023). *Safe and supported: First Action Plan 2023–2026*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/resources/final-first-action-plan.pdf

[4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Child protection Australia 2020-21*. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/contents/about

Family Services (IFS). The inability to self-refer can delay access to support resulting in families not receiving assistance until circumstances have significantly deteriorated, child protection concerns have escalated and a notification is made which then flags a referral to an IFS. Members stressed that families should not have to wait until a Family Group Conference (FGC) is convened or until children have been removed from their care before receiving intensive support. Earlier access to IFS is critical to strengthening prevention and ensuring families receive support when needed rather than once a crisis has emerged. Strengthening referral pathways and providing more opportunities for families to directly access support services would improve early intervention and help prevent concerns from escalating.

Members also highlighted the importance of creating more accessible and flexible entry points into support services. Community-based and place-based approaches that allow families to seek support early without needing to enter formal service systems or wait until concerns have escalated was recommended. Practical supports such as occasional care programs, drop-in services and other easily accessible supports can provide families with assistance at an earlier stage and create trusted pathways into more intensive services if required. Members also emphasised the value of community-led approaches that incorporate lived experience and peer support workers, emphasising that these models can help reduce the shame, fear and stigma that often prevent families from seeking support.

Recommendations:

3. Improve access to intensive family support services, retaining the emphasis on current priority cohorts, such as young parents with a child protection or out-of-home care experience; out-of-home care leavers, and children and parents with disabilities.

4. Address the social determinants of child and safety wellbeing through coordinated whole-of-family support across the systems that shape families' lives, such as health, housing, education, mental health and family fand domestic violence.

5. Establish nationally agreed measures for prevention and early intervention investment and outcomes, covering Commonwealth, state and territory activity.

6. Increase investment in community-based, place-based soft entry points, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities, that incorporate lived experience and peer support roles, provide system navigation support.

7. Promote policy and practice approaches that recognise help-seeking as a protective factor and support jurisdictions to embed a "support before surveillance" approach across child and family service systems.

Shifting Investment Upstream

Members highlighted the need for greater investment and sustainable funding across the child and family support system to improve service accessibility and ensure families can access help earlier. This is consistent with the direction of Safe and Supported which emphasises growing early supports, strengthening child and family services and increasing investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver culturally safe and responsive supports[5]. Members noted that while the value of prevention and early intervention is widely recognised, investment often remains concentrated within crisis and statutory responses. Increased funding for early support services, community-based programs and family support initiatives is required if we are to ensure families receive assistance before concerns escalate. There is also support for investment in face-to-face, relationship-based service delivery particularly in regional and rural communities with members emphasising that trust and relationships are foundational to effective early intervention and cannot always be replicated through telehealth or remote service models.

Mark Galvin, Co-Founder of Lumenia, recently highlighted the importance of shifting investment upstream into prevention and early intervention[6]. His national analysis showed that while expenditure across child protection systems has continued to increase, system responsiveness and outcomes have declined. Importantly, he noted that this trend is not being driven by a significant increase in the number of children entering care but by a rising cost per child in care, reflecting the increasing complexity and intensity of responses at the tertiary end of the system. As a result, more money is being spent while achieving less value per dollar invested. Mark Galvin emphasised that shifting funding upstream is not a quick fix but a long-term investment that requires sustained commitment and ongoing measurement of outcomes to understand what works. He emphasised that meaningful reform requires a culture focused on supporting families rather than investigating and reporting them and that sustained investment in prevention, early intervention and family supports will gradually alleviate pressure on the back end of the system over time. He also highlighted the need for greater investment in kinship care, noting declining foster carer numbers and increasing reliance on costly emergency accommodation options such as hotels and motels.

Recommendation:

8. Support jurisdictions to progressively shift investment towards prevention, early intervention and family support services, consistent with the National Child and Family Investment Strategy, including increased investment in culturally safe and Aboriginal Community Controlled services, with ongoing monitoring of outcomes to measure the impact of upstream investment.

Supporting, Not Reporting

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[5] Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2025). *National child and family investment strategy*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2026-03/national-child-and-family-investment-strategy.pdf

[6] 2026 NAPCAN Webinar: Expenditure and Outcomes in the Child Protection System

In South Australia, one in three children are notified to child protection by the age of 18. This reflects a substantial level of concern in the community about the wellbeing of children, but also a system biased towards simply reporting these concerns, rather than responding to children and families.[7]

1 in 20 South Australian children are subject to a substantiated allegation of child maltreatment.[8] In June 2026, there were approximately 4902 children and young people in care in South Australia.[9]

Creating a service system that is focused on supporting families rather than reporting them into statutory systems wherever possible would assist in ensuring children, young people and families receive support at the right time, before concerns escalate. Mandatory reporting requirements can influence whether families feel safe to seek help, particularly when they fear that disclosure of challenges may result in child protection involvement rather than support. Families should be able to access assistance at the earliest signs of difficulty without fear of judgement or escalation to child protection authorities. A "supporting, not reporting" culture is advocated for where services prioritise understanding and responding to a family's immediate needs, connecting them with practical assistance and appropriate supports before concerns escalate. Such an approach can strengthen trust, improve service engagement and create greater opportunities for prevention and early intervention.

Recommendation:

9. Embed practice approaches and system enablers that recognise parental help-seeking as a protective behaviour and support practitioners to balance mandatory reporting obligations with engagement and early intervention to the standard of Active Efforts.

Practice Approach

Making a meaningful difference in helping children, young people and families access the right support early requires practice approaches that are child focused, family centred and grounded in partnership. Families are more likely to engage with support when services use assertive engagement within a relationship-based practice framework, transparency and open communication to work alongside them.

Early intervention responses should focus on building trusting relationships with families, helping them understand any identified concerns, recognising their strengths and supporting them to participate in decision making. A bottom-up approach that promotes self-determination

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[7] Kate Alexander, Trust in Culture: A Review of child protection in South Australia, November 2022.

[8] Pilkington R, Lynch J (2023). Witness Statement Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, Adelaide: BetterStart Health and Development Research Group, University of Adelaide

[9] Statistical data | Department for Child Protection

can empower families to identify their own goals and solutions, increasing engagement and the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Collaborative practice across government departments and services is also critical. Supporting children and families should be viewed as a shared responsibility across service systems with schools, health services, community organisations and family support services continuing to work alongside families rather than making a referral and disengaging. Incorporating peers with lived experience can further strengthen engagement by reducing stigma, building trust and providing practical support from people who understand the challenges families may be experiencing.

Clear communication about the role and purpose of support services is equally important. Families can sometimes misunderstand the role of early intervention and family support workers, perceiving them as extensions of statutory child protection services. This confusion can contribute to fear, mistrust and reluctance to seek help. Ensuring families understand that support services are there to assist, strengthen and empower families is essential to encouraging help seeking at an early stage and preventing concerns from escalating.

Recommendation:

10. Include child and family wellbeing indicators and develop national practice guidance that promotes the adoption of relationship-based and family-centred practice models for inclusion in all relevant commonwealth-funded agencies, including housing, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services ensuring families receive coordinated support rather than referrals in isolation.

Full Implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

A key area for improvement is the consistent implementation of the full Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) across all agencies, rather than simply statutory child protection agencies. These elements emphasise the importance of working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities and ensuring they are actively involved in decisions that affect them.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families early also requires services to engage with the right people. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, family extends beyond parents and children to include wider kinship networks and Elders. Effective early intervention responses should recognise and work within these existing kinship structures and cultural protocols, drawing on the strengths, knowledge and supports already present within families and communities. Building meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and actively involving them in planning and decision-making can strengthen trust, improve engagement with services and support earlier, more effective responses.

11. Require *all elements* of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) be applied across all services dealing with children and families, where relevant to the agencies service delivery.

Community Based Soft Entry Points

Community based soft entry points can play an important role in helping children, young people and families access support before concerns escalate. Families should be able to engage with services at a level they feel comfortable with and receive assistance without immediately entering formal case management processes. Locally based, relationship-focused approaches can provide opportunities to build trust, develop connections and respond to emerging needs in a way that feels safe and accessible for families. Once relationships have been established, frontline workers can support system navigation by helping families understand available supports and connect with services as needs arise. These roles are distinct from traditional case management models and focus on engagement, prevention and early support. There is also significant value in incorporating lived experience practitioners within these community facing roles as they are often well placed to build trust, foster engagement and help families navigate complex service systems.

Recommendation:

12. Invest in community-based, place-based soft entry points that enable children, young people and families to comfortably access support early, without the need to enter formal case management processes. Such services should incorporate lived experience and peer support roles, provide system navigation assistance and be prioritised in rural, regional and remote communities to strengthen access, trust and engagement.

13. Enable access to soft entry point responses for young people that do not require the consent of their parents, ensuring those who are at risk from their parent/s or guardian or are disengaged can still have their needs met.

Recognising Children as Victim-Survivors

Consistent with the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032[10], which recognises children as victim-survivors in their own right, children should be viewed as directly affected by adversity and crisis rather than only through the experiences of the adults around them. This includes children impacted by family and domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, displacement, migration and other forms of hardship that can significantly affect their safety, wellbeing and development. Recognising children as victim-survivors acknowledges

[10] Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2022). *National plan to end violence against women and children 2022–2032*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dss.gov.au/national-plan-end-violence-against-women-and-children

that they have their own experiences, needs and recovery journeys that require dedicated attention and support.

Supporting children effectively must begin with a strong foundation of practical assistance and access to essential needs. Many children and families never reach support services and therefore miss opportunities for assistance altogether. In some circumstances, families remain in unsafe or harmful situations because they believe doing so is the only way to maintain access to necessities such as housing, food and financial security. Access to basic needs such as food, clothing, housing and income security should therefore be embedded within responses as a foundational form of early intervention.

Ensuring these essentials are consistently available can create greater stability for children and families, improve engagement with support services and reduce barriers to participation in therapeutic, developmental and family support programs. When children's basic needs are met, they are better positioned to benefit from interventions focused on healing, education, skill development, leadership and long term wellbeing. A more holistic approach is required, one that addresses immediate material needs alongside longer-term developmental and wellbeing goals rather than relying on fragmented responses that address only part of a family's circumstances.

Recommendation:

14. Recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right and prioritise access to basic necessities including safe housing, food security, clothing and financial stability as foundational components of early intervention. Governments should support integrated responses that address both immediate material needs and longer-term wellbeing, recovery, education and developmental outcomes for children and young people.

Services and system coordination

How.can.child.and.family.services.work.better.together.with.health?.education?.disability?.housing?.justice.and.family.violence.services.to.support.children?.young.people.and.families?

Coordinated and Collaborative Responses

Child and family services can better support children, young people and families through stronger collaboration, shared responsibility and more coordinated responses across service systems. One way government departments and child and family services can work better together is through referral processes which is an important mechanism for connecting families with support. Referrals alone do not constitute collaboration and can sometimes become a tick-the-box exercise that fails to result in meaningful assistance. A more trauma informed approach would see practitioners actively supporting engagement with other services including direct

communication between agencies and warm referrals rather than relying solely on referral forms and expecting families to navigate complex service systems independently.

Supporting children and families should be viewed as a shared responsibility across child and family services, education, health, disability, housing, justice and domestic and family violence services. Schools and other organisations can sometimes make a referral and then disengage, assuming responsibility has transferred entirely to the receiving service and often not directly contacting the service to facilitate warm referrals. However, no single service can meet all the needs of a child or family in isolation. Better outcomes are achieved when services continue to work together, share responsibility and remain engaged in supporting families.

There is a need for stronger collaboration between services. For example, in one regional community there is an identified lack of coordination between the 12 to 15 services operating in the area despite all working with similar client groups. This demonstrates that the presence of multiple services alone does not guarantee that families will receive coordinated support.

CAFFSA members call for service models that move beyond siloed practice towards genuine cooperation, coordination and integrated service delivery. Competitive funding environments, including tendering processes can create barriers to collaboration by positioning organisations as competitors rather than partners. These dynamics can limit opportunities for coordinated responses and ultimately impact the quality of support available to children, families and communities. Consideration should therefore be given to funding and commissioning approaches that incentivise collaboration and shared outcomes across services.

There is an identified need for involving families throughout the referral process. Concerns highlight that many families are unaware a referral has been made for an IFS on their behalf after a mandatory notification has been received before being contacted by a service. This can create confusion, fear and mistrust and may require practitioners to spend considerable time repairing relationships before meaningful engagement can occur which also blows out KPI expectations. In some cases, trust cannot be rebuilt. Improving communication processes, ensuring families are informed about referrals and actively involved in decisions from the outset would support greater transparency, strengthen trust and improve engagement with services.

A coordinated, trauma informed and family centred approach where agencies work together rather than operating in isolation is critical to ensuring children, young people and families receive timely, holistic and effective support.

Recommendation:

15. Incentivise funding and commissioning approaches to facilitate integrated service delivery and shared outcomes rather than siloed or competitive responses. Strengthen coordinated and collaborative responses across housing, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services by embedding shared responsibility, warm referral practices and family engagement throughout referral and service pathways.

Embedding Active Efforts Across Service Systems

Active Efforts provides a valuable framework for strengthening service and system coordination across a range of federally funded services. Asking agencies and services to examine where they could take purposeful and proactive action to support engagement with services, facilitate warm referrals, address barriers to participation and maintain involvement until families are successfully connected to appropriate supports would make a substantial difference to the goals of Safe and Supported.

South Australia has recently taken steps to embed Active Efforts through its inclusion as one of the Guiding Principles within the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act 2025[11], recognising that achieving positive outcomes for children and families requires purposeful, proactive and sustained action.

In the context of service and system coordination, Active Efforts recognises that effective practice involves more than making a referral and recording that an action has occurred. Instead, services should take practical steps to ensure families can successfully access and engage with supports, including helping families navigate service systems, facilitating warm referrals, addressing barriers to participation, coordinating responses across agencies and maintaining engagement until support is established. This approach encourages shared responsibility across service systems and strengthens accountability for ensuring families are connected to the right support at the right time. Embedding Active Efforts across child and family services, health, justice and social services, education, disability, housing, justice and domestic and family violence services would enable a more coordinated, family-centred service system and help ensure children, young people and families receive meaningful support before concerns escalate into crisis or statutory intervention. This would require agencies to take purposeful and proactive action to support engagement with services, facilitate warm referrals, address barriers to participation and maintain involvement until families are successfully connected to appropriate supports.

Recommendation:

16. Embed Active Efforts as a practice standard across housing, justice, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment and social services requiring agencies to take purposeful and proactive action to support engagement with services, facilitate warm referrals, address barriers to participation and maintain involvement until families are successfully connected to appropriate supports.

System Reform

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[11] *Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act 2025* (SA). https://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/lz?path=%2FC%2FA%2FChildren%20and%20Young%20People%20%28Safety%20and%20Support%29%20Act%202025

Achieving better outcomes for children, young people and families will require a stronger focus on systems reform, recognising that families interact with multiple government and service systems simultaneously and that actions within one system can have unintended consequences in another. A systems thinking approach is needed across child and family services, health, education, disability, housing, justice and domestic and family violence systems to ensure policies, funding arrangements and service responses work together towards shared outcomes for families.

There is an opportunity to strengthen collaboration and shared accountability across government and the broader service sector by exploring alternative approaches to commissioning, funding and service delivery. Relational contracting and partnership-based models are potential mechanisms for encouraging collaboration, reducing siloed practice and supporting agencies to work collectively towards agreed outcomes for children and families, rather than operating within isolated service boundaries.

South Australia's legislation prescribing the development of a State Strategy was highlighted as an example of a framework that recognises shared responsibility between government agencies for improving outcomes for children, young people and families. The State Strategy aims to reduce the risk factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect, provide targeted support to children, young people and families to prevent entry into care, and ensure children and young people in care, transitioning from care, or who have left care receive priority access to the services and supports they need to achieve positive outcomes. This creates an opportunity to consider how service systems and government responses can be directed to support earlier intervention, stronger collaboration and more integrated responses to family needs.

Another model to consider is Victoria's Corporate Parenting approach, known in full as the Children, Youth and Families (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, which makes every Minister, Department and the Chief Commissioner of Police jointly responsible for improving outcomes for at-risk children, young people and families. Modelled on Scotland's successful Corporate Parenting approach, the Scheme ensures supporting at risk children and families is no longer the responsibility of child protection alone. Every portfolio will play a role so that families get the right help when they need it. For children in care, care leavers under 25 and families working towards reunification, the Scheme will deliver more coordinated support across Government, from schools to health services and housing agencies.

Addressing Unintended System Consequences

The need for systems reform is particularly important when considering the unintended consequences that can arise when government systems operate independently of one another.

For example, child removal often results in changes to household income, Centrelink payments and government tenancy arrangements, leading to housing instability or the loss of suitable accommodation. Housing instability subsequently becomes a significant barrier to reunification, with families unable to regain care of their children because they no longer meet housing requirements. Similarly, the imprisonment of a primary income earner can create

significant financial hardship, housing insecurity and additional pressures for remaining family members. These examples demonstrate the importance of understanding the cumulative and interconnected impacts of decisions made across different systems on vulnerable children and families.

The Need to Strengthen Support for Informal Carers

Greater consideration should also be given to the role of informal kinship and family carers. Informal carers frequently step up to provide care for children and prevent their entry into Out of Home Care, yet many are unable to access financial assistance or practical support unless formal statutory orders are in place. Strengthening supports for informal carers presents an important opportunity to keep children connected to family and community, reduce reliance on the statutory system, improve reunification prospects and provide families with greater stability during times of crisis. Recognising and supporting this caregiving arrangement should form part of broader efforts to create a more coordinated, preventative and family centred system response.

Greater investment in and support for foster and kinship carers

Recent findings from the Australian Institute of Family Studies[12] review of payments and supports for foster, kinship and permanent carers reinforce the importance of strengthening support for family-based care arrangements. The review found that current payments and supports are inadequate and difficult to access. These issues have major implications for carer recruitment, retention and placement stability and issues in these areas can be directly attributed to the growth of children living in residential care facilities. The report identified opportunities to improve access to supports for family-based carers including the Additional Child Care Subsidy and highlighted the need for greater support for kinship and informal carers who frequently experience financial disadvantage despite playing a significant role in preventing children from entering Out of Home Care. Strengthening supports for carers, particularly those caring for children with disability, complex needs or trauma, will be critical to maintaining stable family-based placements and achieving better outcomes for children and young people.

Recommendations:

17. Adopt a whole of government systems approach with a focus on identifying and addressing unintended consequences across housing, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services, ensuring government policies and practices work together to improve outcomes

[12] Smart, J., Strawa, C., Quillinan, S., Fisher, S., & Thomas-Richards, B. (2025). *Review of payments for foster, kinship and permanent carers: Final report*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/review-payments-foster-kinship-and-permanent-carers

for children, young people and families rather than creating additional barriers to safety, stability and reunification.

18. Provide greater investment in and support for foster, kinship and informal carers to ensure children and young people can access stable family-based care that supports their needs and their wellbeing.

    - Ensure appropriate and fair support for carers: Increase financial and practical supports for foster, kinship and informal carers, including the development of nationally consistent support arrangements for informal carers to strengthen care within family environments, improve placement stability and prevent unnecessary entry into Out of Home Care.

    - Address paid parental leave and work-related demands; and retain practical support for high-needs placements, including respite, youth workers and allied health.

    - Ensure needs-based entitlements are available and base children's access to benefits and services on their needs when in care — not on the carer's income or means test.

    - Provide automatic access to at least 12 therapeutic visits when a child enters care, with additional visits based on need. Review support before the initial allocation runs out to avoid gaps. Also ensure timely access after a substantiated allegation or significant change in wellbeing.

    - Provide timely, affordable access to services such as speech and occupational therapy, including for children whose needs are not met by NDIS or Thriving Kids, such as provision of priority access and bulk billing where possible, without adding administrative burdens for carers.

    - Treat family preservation, kinship care, foster care and residential care as connected parts of a continuum, with access to stronger support at each stage to help avoid unnecessary escalation to residential care.

    - Design and operationalise a child-held electronic credential, such as an E-Wallet, for every child entering out-of-home care, retained until at least age 25, including where they leave care before turning 18;

    - Undertake an implementation planning study for a nationally consistent Health Access Card or equivalent mechanism for children and young people entering out-

of-home care, retained until at least age 21, to support timely and continuous access to health services, and

- Broaden recognition of kinship carers and consider the policy and legislative asks raised by Kinship Care Alliance.

System Navigation

Supporting families to navigate complex service systems is a critical component of ensuring they receive the right support at the right time. Families are often required to engage with multiple services across different sectors, each with their own eligibility requirements, referral pathways and processes, creating a system that can be difficult to understand and navigate. While broader systems reform is needed, improving systems navigation within existing service structures presents an immediate opportunity to strengthen support for children, young people and families.

Navigating multiple systems can also be highly time consuming and overwhelming, particularly for families already experiencing stress, crisis or vulnerability. Families may be required to meet obligations across several government departments and services simultaneously, often repeating the same information, attending multiple appointments and providing the same documentation to different agencies. In some cases, requirements can overlap or duplicate one another reducing families' capacity to focus on addressing the challenges they are experiencing.

Providing families with practical assistance to understand available supports, connect with the right services and maintain engagement can reduce barriers to access and improve outcomes. Relationship based approaches are particularly important, recognising that trusted workers can play a key role in helping families navigate complex systems, coordinate supports, advocate across services and remain connected to assistance. A stronger focus on a streamlined system navigation would help ensure families receive coordinated, timely and accessible support rather than being left to navigate fragmented systems on their own.

Recommendations:

19. Improve system navigation and reduce administrative burden for families by streamlining service pathways, information requirements and engagement processes across government departments and services. Families should not be required to repeatedly provide the same information, attend multiple assessments or navigate duplicative processes to access support.

20. Establish dedicated system navigation supports for families experiencing vulnerability, including lived experience peer support workers who can coordinate services, advocate across systems and assist families to navigate complex government and community service pathways.

Organisational Flexibility and Adaptability

Organisational flexibility is important in ensuring service systems remain responsive to the changing needs of children, young people, families and communities. Community needs can evolve significantly over the life of a funding agreement or tender period, yet services are often constrained by rigid funding requirements, program parameters and contractual obligations. Greater flexibility would enable organisations to adapt their service responses, address emerging issues and respond to gaps in support as they arise.

Funding and commissioning approaches that support collaboration rather than rigid program delivery is also required. Opportunities for organisations to partner with one another, share resources and co-design responses with communities can strengthen service delivery and improve outcomes for families. Enabling services to adapt and innovate in response to changing community needs would support a more responsive, place-based and family centred system while ensuring resources are directed towards addressing local priorities and needs.

Recommendation:

21. Increase flexibility within funding and commissioning arrangements to enable organisations to adapt services in response to changing community needs, emerging service gaps and local priorities. Funding agreements should incorporate resourcing to support collaboration, innovation and place-based responses rather than restricting services to rigid program parameters and activities.

Information Sharing protocols

Effective collaboration between services and government agencies relies on clear and consistent information sharing arrangements. There is a need to review existing information-sharing protocols, particularly in situations where concerns are cumulative rather than immediate. While information sharing in cases of imminent risk is generally well understood, uncertainty can arise when practitioners are aware of ongoing concerns but are unsure of their authority to request, disclose or receive information. Differing interpretations of information sharing requirements across government departments and services can create inconsistent practice and act as a barrier to coordinated responses. Greater clarity, consistency and shared understanding of information sharing obligations would support more effective collaboration, reduce duplication and assist services to respond earlier and more holistically to the needs of children, young people and families.

Recommendation:

22. Review and strengthen information-sharing frameworks across child and family services, health, education, disability, housing, justice and family and domestic violence services to improve consistency, clarify practitioner responsibilities and support earlier, coordinated responses to cumulative concerns affecting children, young people and families.

Disability Sector Reform and Service Transitions

Significant reforms occurring across the disability sector, including changes to the NDIS and the transition to Thriving Kids, highlight the importance of strong coordination between child protection, disability and support services. Particular attention should be given to children and young people in Out of Home Care do not fall through service gaps during these transitions. Responsibility for supporting children with disability and complex needs should be shared across both state and federal governments, recognising that many of the challenges experienced by children, carers and families occur at the intersection of multiple service systems. Forthis reason, the Australian government should fund the development of navigation services for children in all forms of care, including informal care, for those with any form of disability, including mental health concerns.

Recommendation:

23. Ensure disability sector reforms including NDIS and Thriving Kids implementation incorporate clear shared accountability between Commonwealth and state governments for children and young people in informal and Out of Home Care, with mechanisms to prevent service gaps and ensure continuity of support for children with disability and complex needs. This includes the development of navigation services.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

What.actions.would.best.support.Aboriginal.and.Torres.Strait.Islander.children.and.families.to.stay.safe?thrive.and.remain.connected.to.family?community?culture.and.Country?

CAFFSA supports the priorities identified by the SA Peak for Aboriginal Children and Families, Wakwakurna Kanyini and SNAICC in relation to the Second Action Plans and defers to these organisations on the detailed actions required. Members of CAFFSA's Aboriginal Leadership Network also offered the following considerations and recommendations.

Maintaining Connections to Family, Kin, Community, Culture and Country

Where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child has been removed from their family, active and ongoing efforts are required to maintain and strengthen their connections to family, kin, community, culture and Country. Contact arrangements should extend beyond parents and immediate family members to include siblings, grandparents, aunties, uncles, kinship networks and other significant relationships that contribute to a child's sense of identity, belonging and cultural connectedness. Maintaining these relationships should be viewed as a core component of a child's wellbeing and cultural development rather than an additional consideration.

Supporting connection also requires providing children and young people with opportunities to participate in cultural events, community activities and experiences that strengthen their connection to Country and culture. These connections become particularly important as young people transition to adulthood. Young people leaving care are often expected to reconnect with family members, communities and cultural networks that they have had limited contact with during their time in care. Maintaining family and cultural connections throughout a child's care experience can help ensure that even where relationships with parents are disrupted, children continue to know and have meaningful relationships with their extended family, kinship networks, community and culture. This supports stronger identity formation, a sense of belonging and ongoing cultural connection into adulthood.

Considerations Prior to the Removal of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child

Wherever possible, efforts should focus on supporting children to remain safely connected to these relationships and cultural foundations, consistent with the intent of the ATSICPP. This includes efforts from all federally funded programs and services.

Decisions regarding the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be informed by a thorough understanding of the broader and lifelong impacts of separation from family, kin, culture, community and Country. While child safety must be upheld, there is a need to ensure that sufficient consideration is given to the trauma associated with removal and the significant cultural, relational and spiritual losses that can result. Removal affects far more than the relationship between a child and their parents. It can disrupt kinship networks, cultural identity, connection to Country, sense of belonging, attachment relationships and community ties that are central to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's wellbeing and development.

Consideration should also be given to the long-term implications of placement decisions. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed in non-Aboriginal care, there is a risk that they may grow up without a strong understanding of their culture, community and identity as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. Understanding and respecting Aboriginal child-rearing practices, kinship systems and cultural protocols is therefore essential when assessing safety concerns and determining appropriate responses. Systems and practitioners should consciously consider the full impact of removal, recognising that an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is not only being removed from their parents, but from family, kin, culture, community and Country. For these reasons, efforts should focus on supporting children to remain safely connected to these relationships and cultural foundations wherever possible, consistent with the intent of the ATSICPP.

Full Implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to stay safe, thrive and remain connected to family, kin, community, culture and Country requires the consistent and full implementation of the ATSICPP to the practice standard of Active Efforts across all aspects of service delivery, governance and decision-making. The ATSICPP comprises five interconnected elements including Prevention, Partnership, Participation, Placement and

Connection. These elements should not be viewed solely as considerations once a child enters care but as a framework for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families throughout their interaction with service systems.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the principles of Partnership and Participation. Aboriginal families, communities and cultural decision makers should be actively involved in assessments, safety planning and case planning processes from the earliest possible stage. Effective implementation requires services to understand that decision making authority within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may extend beyond parents and can include Elders, grandparents and other culturally recognised family members. Identifying and engaging those who hold cultural authority within a child's family and community is essential to developing culturally informed responses that build on family strengths and support self-determination.

Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and cultural decision makers must be central to all service responses. Embedding the full ATSICPP to the standard of Active Efforts provides an important opportunity to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system, while strengthening children's connections to family, kin, community, culture and Country.

System Reform

Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families will require reform that extends beyond frontline practice and addresses the policies, structures, funding arrangements and governance systems that shape service delivery. While there is support across the sector for self-determination, Aboriginal-led service delivery, delegated authority and Closing the Gap commitments, significant uncertainty remains regarding how these reforms will be implemented in practice. Key concepts such as proportionate funding, service transition arrangements, outcomes based contracting and future funding allocations are not consistently understood across the sector within South Australia, highlighting the need for strong leadership, clearer communication and more coordinated implementation planning.

There is a need for the government to articulate a clear vision for reform, supported by consistent messaging and meaningful engagement with both ACCOs and mainstream providers. While some guidance has been provided regarding recommissioning processes, expressions of interest and future transition arrangements, greater clarity is required to ensure organisations have a shared understanding of expectations, priorities and implementation pathways. Reform processes must also recognise that meaningful transition takes time and requires sustained planning, capacity building and collaboration across the sector.

Meaningful systems reform should focus on addressing the underlying barriers that contribute to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems. While frontline workers often have a strong understanding of family needs and can readily identify what is and is not working, many are constrained by organisational processes, policy settings and system requirements. Lasting change is therefore most likely to occur when

reforms address governance structures, policy frameworks, funding models and decision-making processes, enabling more effective and culturally responsive practice to flow through to service delivery.

There is a strong need to support Aboriginal leadership, cultural authority and self-determination throughout all levels of the system. This includes continuing efforts to build the capacity of the ACCO sector in preparation for delegated authority arrangements and increasing Aboriginal-led decision-making. However, responsibility for achieving reform cannot rest solely with Aboriginal organisations. Closing the Gap exists because of deeply embedded systemic inequities and meaningful change will require Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations, governments, peak bodies and communities working together towards shared goals. Stronger strategic partnerships across the sector are critical to achieving this vision. A more unified sector position would strengthen advocacy efforts, build understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and priorities and help articulate a collective voice regarding what is needed to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children connected to family, kin, community, culture and Country. Fragmented advocacy and disconnected reform activities risk diluting the impact of change efforts. Coordinated advocacy, consistent messaging and collaboration across peak bodies, ACCOs and mainstream organisations have the potential to create stronger influence and greater momentum for reform.

Funding, contractual and accountability arrangements must align with stated policy objectives. While governments have expressed a commitment to increasing the role of ACCOs and strengthening Aboriginal-led service delivery, existing contracts and key performance indicators often continue to incentivise mainstream organisations to deliver services directly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Reform will require governments to rethink funding and performance indicators, so they actively support self-determination and Aboriginal-led responses. For example, consideration could be given to measuring mainstream organisations on how effectively they partner with, connect to and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to engage with ACCOs and Aboriginal-led services rather than focusing primarily on direct service delivery outcomes.

Any transition process must also be locally informed and culturally responsive. Communities differ significantly in their governance structures, cultural authority arrangements, priorities and service capacity. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Transition planning should be guided by local cultural authority, community priorities and the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families within each region. Allowing sufficient time for consultation, relationship building, planning and implementation will support more sustainable outcomes and avoid unintended consequences.

System reform should be grounded in listening, relationship building and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, ACCOs and communities. Decisions should be made with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rather than for them. Strengthening connections to family, kin, culture, community and Country, providing support

early, recognising cultural authority and embedding self-determination throughout systems and decision-making processes are essential foundations of genuine reform. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to thrive requires more than safety alone. It requires creating the conditions for building strong identity, cultural connections, health, education, opportunity, belonging and self-determination throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Recognising and Respecting Cultural Authority

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to stay safe, thrive and remain connected to family, kin, community, culture and Country requires the recognition and embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Authority across policy, governance, decision-making and service delivery. Cultural Authority recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the holders of cultural knowledge, decision making authority and community responsibility within their own cultural contexts. While many services and systems aim to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, cultural authority is not always adequately recognised, valued or embedded in practice.

Genuine respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Authority requires acknowledging the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Elders, community leaders, families and ACCOs to lead and inform decisions that affect their communities. This includes recognising Aboriginal-led bodies, such as South Australia's Peak Body Wakwakurna Kanyini, as key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in matters relating to the safety, wellbeing and future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Family-led decision making and culturally informed responses should be central to assessment, planning and service delivery processes, ensuring that families and communities are empowered to determine the best outcomes for their children while maintaining connections to culture, community and Country.

Embedding Cultural Authority also requires the delegation of appropriate decision-making authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, communities and organisations. Delegated authority is an important mechanism for advancing self-determination and ensuring supports are culturally responsive, locally informed and aligned with the strengths, aspirations and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When Cultural Authority is recognised and embedded effectively, organisations are better positioned to deliver support that is culturally safe, meaningful and effective while strengthening children's connections to family, kin, community, culture and Country. Aboriginal-led decision making and shared authority should therefore be recognised as foundational elements of efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Decolonising Systems, Policy and Practice

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to stay safe, thrive and remain connected to family, kin, community, culture and Country requires a commitment to decolonising systems, policies and practice. Decolonising practice involves intentionally

recognising and challenging attitudes, structures and ways of working that have been shaped by colonisation and continue to influence service responses today. This includes critically examining issues of power, privilege, bias and historical disadvantage, while actively valuing and elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, cultures, leadership, lived experience and ways of knowing, being and doing.

Decolonising practice extends beyond consultation and requires genuine partnership, self-determination, cultural authority and shared decision-making. Services, policies and programs should be designed and delivered in ways that are culturally safe, responsive and guided by the strengths, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. This includes recognising the expertise held within families, communities and ACCOs and ensuring Aboriginal-led solutions are central to decision making and service design. Embedding these approaches across systems and services is essential to addressing the legacy of colonisation, strengthening cultural connections and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Recommendations:

24. CAFFSA supports the priorities identified by Wakwakurna Kanyini and SNAICC in relation to the Second Action Plans and defers to these organisations on the detailed actions required. Members of CAFFSA's Aboriginal Leadership Network also offered the following recommendations:

    Ensure relevant federally funded services and programs enact and S/T jurisdictions are supported to enact:

    - Strengthened implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) through Active Efforts across the entire child and family service system including prevention, early intervention, family support and statutory services. This should ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, communities and cultural decision-makers are meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them, with accountability mechanisms that measure and monitor implementation of all five elements of the ATSICPP.

    - Implementation of long-term, Aboriginal-led system reform that strengthens self-determination, delegated authority and cultural governance, while redesigning funding, contracting and accountability frameworks to support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as preferred providers of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

    - Recognition and embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Authority across policy, governance, commissioning, service delivery and decision-making processes, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, Elders, communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled

Organisations have a meaningful role in decisions that affect them. This should include supporting delegated authority arrangements, Aboriginal-led decision-making and the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak and representative bodies as key partners in the design, implementation and oversight of child and family service systems.

- Embedding decolonising approaches across child and family service systems by promoting self-determination, cultural authority, shared decision-making and Aboriginal-led solutions.

Workforce capability and cultural safety

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Funding and Workforce Stability

Strengthening the child and family sector workforce requires greater investment in workforce stability, sustainable funding arrangements and funding models that reflect the realities of service delivery. While recent industrial reforms have increased access to permanent employment contracts, funding indexation often fails to keep pace with award wage increases. This creates financial pressures for organisations, resulting in workforce uncertainty, concerns about program sustainability and in some cases, consideration of workforce reductions. Greater certainty in funding including funding adjustments that automatically align with award increases would assist organisations to meet workforce costs, retain skilled practitioners and maintain service continuity.

Workforce stability is particularly important given the significant investment required to recruit, train, develop and retain experienced staff. However, organisations continue to face challenges in retaining workers due to funding insecurity, increasing workloads and escalating service expectations. Contractual requirements, licensing obligations and performance measures have continued to expand over recent years often without corresponding increases in funding or remuneration. As a result, practitioners are often managing higher workloads and increasing levels of complexity while organisations have limited resources to support staff and respond to growing demand. This can contribute to staff burnout, turnover and difficulties retaining experienced workers across the sector.

Funding and performance frameworks should also recognise the realities of relationship-based practice. Building trust and engagement with children, young people and families, particularly those who have had negative experiences with service systems, can take considerable time. In some cases practitioners may spend months establishing relationships before meaningful intervention can begin. However, existing key performance indicators and contractual measures do not always account for this work particularly within programs that operate over relatively short

intervention periods. This can create situations where services are penalised for not achieving performance targets despite undertaking the intensive engagement required to achieve sustainable outcomes. Strengthening workforce capability will require funding and accountability frameworks that value relationship building, engagement and long-term outcomes rather than focusing primarily on short-term outputs.

There is also a need to review the growing administrative and compliance burden placed on service providers. Increasing reporting, licensing and compliance requirements can consume significant organisational resources and reduce the time practitioners are able to spend working directly with children and families. The sector has become increasingly focused on measuring outputs, activity levels and compliance requirements rather than outcomes and the quality of support being delivered. Streamlining reporting obligations, improving the use of data already provided to funding departments and ensuring accountability mechanisms focus on meaningful outcomes would enable practitioners and organisations to devote more time to direct service delivery and support for families. Ultimately, a sustainable and capable workforce will require funding, contracting and performance frameworks that recognise the complexity of the work, support workforce wellbeing and retention and enable organisations to deliver high quality, relationship-based services.

Recommendations:

25. Australian, state and territory governments develop a national workforce strategy to assess workforce demand and projected need, skills, qualifications and training, recruitment and retention, and the particular requirements for regional and remote and peer workforces. Ensure the strategy incorporates:
    - A broad definition of workforce**,** including government and agency staff, foster and kinship carers, and professionals working alongside children in education, health, disability services, youth justice, police and courts.
    - Established core competencies to ensure baseline capability in disability and developmental delay, mental health, trauma, and cultural safety, with expectations able to respond to children's differing needs.
    - Embedded key training in all relevant professional qualifications and recognises and supports carer training, including child development, abuse and neglect, trauma identification, FASD and other disability-related training, education and developmentally appropriate responses.

26. Improve safeguarding consistency by pursuing national consistency in working-with-children checks and reportable-conduct arrangements. Implementation may need to be staged, and fair, timely appeal processes and the effects of allegations on carers' livelihoods and placements will require attention.
27. Ensure national contracts provide adequate indexation, funding certainty and realistic performance frameworks that reflect the time required for relationship-based, trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice. Funding arrangements should facilitate

workforce retention and service continuity and incorporate a greater focus on outcomes rather than compliance and activity reporting.

A Skilled and Supported Workforce

Strengthening workforce capability requires a focus on both practitioner skills and the environments in which practitioners work. Workforce capability extends beyond qualifications and technical knowledge to include the confidence, judgement and practical skills needed to engage effectively with children, young people and families. Families themselves identify the importance of practitioners who can build trust, have honest conversations and work alongside them through difficult circumstances.

Practitioners need to be equipped and supported to undertake challenging conversations in a relational, respectful and strengths based way. This includes creating practice environments that support workers to navigate complexity, uncertainty and risk without immediately defaulting to statutory responses. While mandatory reporting remains an important legal responsibility, reporting should not become a substitute for meaningful engagement and support. Rather, indicators of concern should be viewed as prompts for further inquiry, relationship building and understanding the family's circumstances. For example, an empty lunchbox should prompt a conversation rather than immediate assumptions about neglect or risk with a mandatory notification made. This reflects the principle of Active Efforts where workers actively engage with families to understand context, build trust and provide support before concerns escalate.

Workforce development should therefore support practitioners to approach concerns with curiosity, empathy and a commitment to understanding the broader context before reaching conclusions.

While mandatory reporting remains an important legal responsibility, it should not replace active support, engagement and relationship building with families. Concerns about a child should prompt efforts to understand the family's circumstances, strengths and support needs rather than defaulting immediately to a reporting response. Strengthening workforce capability requires supporting practitioners to balance their statutory responsibilities with approaches that prioritise engagement, Active Efforts and early intervention wherever appropriate. Workers need the confidence and support to remain engaged with families, sit with uncertainty and focus on helping rather than solely identifying and reporting risk.

Strong supervision and reflective practice structures are also essential. Practitioners regularly encounter complex situations involving competing responsibilities, uncertainty and high stakes decision making. Clinical supervision, reflective practice, professional consultation and structured debriefing opportunities support professional judgement, workforce wellbeing and continuous learning. These mechanisms help practitioners safely manage risk, maintain relationship based practice and share responsibility for difficult decisions.

Time is another critical factor. Building trust with families, repairing relationships and supporting people who have experienced trauma requires patience, consistency and sustained

engagement. In many cases, meaningful intervention cannot occur until workers have addressed fears, misconceptions and previous negative experiences of services. Current service and performance frameworks do not always recognise the time required for this relational work as previously touched on. Strengthening workforce capability therefore requires funding, performance and accountability systems that value relationship building, trust, engagement and long term outcomes, recognising that high quality, trauma informed and culturally responsive practice cannot be rushed.

Recommendation:

28. Strengthen workforce capability to provide relationship based, trauma informed and culturally responsive practice, through investment in clinical supervision, reflective practice, professional development and workforce support. Workforce development initiatives should equip practitioners to engage families through Active Efforts, balance mandatory reporting obligations with meaningful support and engagement and build the confidence required to navigate complex conversations and decision-making.

Program and Service Design

A skilled and effective workforce must be supported by programs and service models that are designed to meet the needs of the children, families and communities they serve. Strengthening workforce capability therefore requires a commitment to co-design, ensuring that children, young people, families and communities are actively involved in shaping the services intended to support them. Effective programs and services should be built on strong foundations, with a clear understanding of their purpose, intended outcomes and the needs they are seeking to address. Central to this is ensuring the voices of children, young people, families and communities are embedded throughout all stages of program design, implementation and evaluation.

Program and service design should be informed by an understanding of what safety, wellbeing and thriving mean within different communities recognising local strengths, priorities, emerging challenges and community concerns. Ongoing engagement with communities is essential to ensure services remain relevant, responsive and aligned to local needs. Programs and policies should be co-designed with communities from the earliest planning stages through to implementation, review and continuous improvement.

As communities, priorities and social contexts continue to evolve, service systems must also be flexible and adaptable enough to respond to changing circumstances. Ongoing consultation, feedback mechanisms and genuine co-design processes are critical to ensuring services remain culturally responsive, community informed and effective in improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

Recommendation:

29. Promote co-design and continuous community engagement across child and family services, ensuring programs and policies are developed, implemented and reviewed in

partnership with children, young people, families and communities, with mechanisms to adapt services in response to changing needs and local priorities.

Allyship and Sector Partnerships

Strengthening workforce capability also requires stronger partnerships between ACCOs and mainstream services. One approach is the use of structured allyship models which provide opportunities for organisations to work together to address workforce challenges, identify professional development needs and strengthen culturally responsive practice. Rather than assuming what workers, families or communities require, allyship approaches encourage ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, staff and communities to identify priorities, barriers, strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Allyship can support the development of shared understanding, stronger relationships and greater collaboration across the sector particularly in areas such as workforce development, training, research and practice improvement. Furthermore, allyship moves beyond informal partnerships by creating intentional opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations to learn from one another, challenge assumptions and work collectively towards better outcomes for children and families. Embedding allyship approaches across the sector can strengthen cultural responsiveness, support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and contribute to broader reform efforts by ensuring workforce development is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, expertise and lived experience.

Recommendation:

30. Promote structured allyship approaches between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and non-Aboriginal staff from mainstream services to strengthen workforce capability, cultural responsiveness and sector collaboration. Allyship models should support shared learning, professional development, research, practice improvement and ongoing dialogue informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, expertise and lived experience.

Children and young people's perspective and participation

What.guidance?resources?practice.tools.or.other.supports.would.help.organisations.better.implement.approaches.that.strengthen.children.and.young.people's.safety?wellbeing?voice.and.participation?

Genuine Participation

Strengthening children and young people's safety, wellbeing, voice and participation requires approaches that support genuine and meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives. The voices of children and young people should remain central to assessment, planning, service delivery and decision-making processes, with care taken to ensure their views are heard,

respected and authentically represented. This includes identifying priorities, shaping service concepts and informing service specifications before funding decisions and tender processes are finalised. Participation should extend beyond consultation and provide children and young people with real opportunities to contribute to service design and the development of supports. It is important that children's perspectives, experiences, strengths, aspirations and identities are not filtered, interpreted or reshaped to align with organisational priorities or system requirements. Embedding meaningful participation supports self-determination, strengthens engagement and ensures responses are more closely aligned with the needs and priorities of children and young people themselves. Children and young people should be recognised as active participants in decisions about their lives, with their voices viewed as an essential component of safe, effective and person-centred practice.

Consideration should also be given to existing resources and guidance that support meaningful participation and co-design. The work of the CREATE Foundation provides a valuable national evidence base and practical tools for engaging children and young people with lived experience of care and should be considered when developing future guidance, resources and participation frameworks.

31. Embed genuine participatory approaches across child and family services by ensuring children and young people are actively involved in assessment, planning, service design, decision-making and evaluation processes. Participation frameworks should support children's voices to be heard, respected and authentically represented and draw on established best practice guidance such as those developed by the CREATE Foundation.

Co-Design and Commissioning Processes

While many organisations have established processes to seek feedback from children and young people, genuine participation can be limited by the way programs and services are commissioned. Government tender processes often specify the service model, outputs and deliverables before meaningful engagement with children and young people has occurred. As a result, programs can be designed to meet commissioning requirements rather than being shaped by the experiences, priorities and aspirations of the children and young people they are intended to support.

Meaningful participation requires children and young people to be involved from the outset, before key decisions have been made. Co-design should inform the development of service concepts, program models and commissioning approaches rather than being used to validate decisions that have already been determined. Genuine co-design involves working alongside children and young people throughout planning, design, implementation and review processes, with clear feedback loops demonstrating how their contributions have influenced decision making. Participation should also be place based and responsive to the specific cohorts involved.

There is value in supporting children and young people to participate safely and effectively through training, mentoring, preparation and debriefing processes. Existing resources developed

by the CREATE Foundation provide practical tools, guidance and examples of best practice participation, co-design and co-production approaches that can support organisations to strengthen children and young people's involvement in service and system design.

Recommendation:

32. Require government departments and organisations to demonstrate feedback loop mechanisms to demonstrate that children and young people's views have informed decisions, policies, programs and services. Commissioning frameworks should also require these mechanisms to demonstrate children and young people's views have influenced service design and proposed delivery.

Closing the Feedback Loop

Meaningful participation requires more than seeking feedback from children and young people. It also requires accountability, transparency and clear feedback loops that demonstrate how their views have influenced decisions, policies, practice or service design. When children and young people are repeatedly asked to share their experiences without seeing tangible outcomes or receiving information about how their contributions have been used, participation can become frustrating and they can consequently disengage. Over time, this can reduce trust in consultation processes and create consultation fatigue where young people question the value of continuing to participate.

Poorly implemented participation processes can also be harmful, particularly when children and young people are asked to repeatedly share difficult or personal experiences without seeing meaningful change occur. In some cases, this can be retraumatising and may reduce willingness to engage in future consultations. Government departments and organisations should therefore ensure participation processes include clear communication about decision making, ongoing updates and opportunities for participants to see the outcomes of their involvement.

Closing the feedback loop should be considered a core component of genuine participation and co-design. Children and young people need to understand how their voices have been heard, what actions have resulted from their contributions and where suggestions could not be implemented and why. This helps build trust, strengthens engagement and supports ongoing participation in service, policy and system reform processes. Genuine co-design also requires children and young people to be involved from the earliest stages of planning and development rather than being consulted after key decisions have already been made. Participation should not be limited to one off consultations or engagement activities that occur after key decisions have already been made. Children and young people should be involved throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and services, with genuine opportunities to influence decisions and outcomes. This requires moving beyond tokenistic consultation and ensuring that participation is accompanied by meaningful action and accountability.

Listening to Children and Young People's Voices

Meaningful participation requires careful consideration of whose voices are being heard and represented in the development of policies, programs and services. Current approaches often focus on children and young people who have entered service systems or Out of Home Care. While these perspectives are critically important, there is also value in hearing from children and young people who are living safely and thriving within their families, communities, cultures and support networks. Understanding the experiences of children who feel connected, supported and valued can provide important insights into the factors that promote safety, wellbeing, resilience and belonging, helping to inform preventative approaches rather than solely responding once difficulties have emerged.

Children's voices should be understood within the context of their relationships, family structures, kinship networks, culture, community and Country, recognising that their experiences and identities are shaped by the environments in which they live. Aboriginal children and young people in particular are recognised as valued contributors within their families and communities whose perspectives can provide important insights into what supports safety, wellbeing and cultural connection. This reflects the intent of the ATSICPP, particularly the elements of Prevention, Partnership and Participation. Too often, these principles are considered only after a child has entered the child protection or Out of Home Care system. Greater attention should be given to hearing and responding to children's voices earlier, using their experiences and perspectives to inform approaches that strengthen families, maintain connections to culture and community and prevent statutory involvement wherever possible.

There is also a need to focus not only on truth telling but on truth listening, ensuring organisations, practitioners and decision-makers actively listen to, value and act upon what children and young people are saying. Genuine participation is achieved when children's voices influence decision making, shape service responses and contribute to the development of systems that better support children, young people and families.

Recommendation:

33. Create opportunities for children and young people's voices to meaningfully inform prevention, early intervention, service design and policy development.

Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) provides a practical example of how meaningful participation can be embedded within decision making processes affecting children and young people. Through FGC's, children's views, experiences, aspirations and preferences are actively sought and incorporated into the development of family plans, ensuring that decisions are informed by what matters most to the child. Children's participation is documented throughout the process and contributes directly to agreed actions and outcomes. FGCs demonstrate how the principles of participation and partnership can be translated into practice, ensuring children's voices are not only heard but reflected in planning and decision making. Government department and organisations seeking to strengthen child participation approaches could draw on the expertise of child advocates involved in the FGC processes, who can provide valuable insights into

effective methods for gathering, documenting and responding to children's views in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate way.

Accountability, data and measuring progress

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Accountability and Leadership

Improving outcomes for children, young people and families requires stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments made through the Second Action Plan translates into measurable change in practice. While significant reform activity continues across the sector, there remains a need for clearer reporting and performance frameworks that demonstrate whether intended outcomes are being achieved.

The ATSICPP is an important example of a framework that should be more consistently monitored, measured and reported against. Incorporating implementation of the ATSICPP into performance and accountability frameworks across relevant services and systems at the Federal as well as the State and Territory level is essential. However, accountability should extend beyond demonstrating compliance. Government departments and organisations should be able to evidence how the principles of Prevention, Partnership, Participation, Placement and Connection have been actively applied in decision making and service delivery and how these efforts have contributed to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Active Efforts should be a meaningful measure of performance. Accountability frameworks should focus not only on whether policies, plans or principles have been referenced but on whether government departments and organisations can demonstrate tangible actions and measurable improvements in outcomes including children's connections to family, kin, community, culture and Country, increased cultural safety, and stronger self-determination.

Extending accountability beyond frontline practice to organisational leadership and governance structures is also required. Executives, boards and senior decision makers should share responsibility for achieving outcomes and demonstrating progress. Stronger reporting, transparency and oversight mechanisms would provide greater confidence that reform commitments are resulting in meaningful change.

At a national level, consideration should also be given to strengthening leadership and accountability for children's wellbeing across government. Responsibility for issues affecting children and young people is currently spread across multiple portfolios and departments, which can contribute to fragmented policy responses and unclear accountability. Establishing a dedicated National Minister for Children would provide clearer leadership, centralised responsibility and stronger coordination housing, health and mental health, child and family,

disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services, helping to drive more consistent and accountable action on behalf of children and young people.

Recommendations:

34. Strengthen accountability and leadership across all levels of government and service systems by establishing performance and reporting frameworks that measure outcomes, as well as measuring the mechanisms to achieve those outcomes, such as Active Efforts and full implementation of the ATSICPP. Accountability should extend from frontline practice through to organisational leadership, governance structures and government decision-makers.

35. Establish a dedicated National Minister for Children to provide clear leadership, centralised accountability and cross-portfolio coordination for issues affecting children and young people. A dedicated ministerial portfolio would support a more integrated national approach across housing, health and mental health, child and family, disability, early childhood, education, employment, justice and social services, ensuring children and young people's safety and wellbeing remains a visible and accountable government priority.

Measuring What Matters

Understanding whether the Second Action Plan is improving outcomes requires measures of success that are informed by the experiences, perspectives and aspirations of children, young people and families themselves. Too often systems determine what progress looks like without directly asking those receiving support how they define success or whether they believe their circumstances have improved. Children, young people and families should play a central role in identifying meaningful indicators of progress, ensuring that evaluation frameworks reflect the outcomes that matter most to them.

While quantitative data remains important, numerical measures alone cannot capture the complexity of children's and families' experiences. Every statistic represents an individual story, context and journey that may be lost when outcomes are viewed solely through performance data. For example, a child entering care may be reported as a negative outcome within a reporting framework, however in some circumstances a temporary care arrangement may be necessary to support family healing, safety and eventual reunification. Measures of success should therefore capture family journeys, context and long-term outcomes rather than relying exclusively on numerical indicators. Strengthening the collection and use of qualitative feedback from children, young people and families, alongside improving data literacy, data quality and reporting systems across the sector, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of whether reforms are leading to meaningful and lasting change.

Recommendation:

36. Develop outcome measurement frameworks that are informed by children, young people and families and incorporate both quantitative and qualitative measures of success. Evaluation and reporting should capture lived experience, family journeys and contexts and long-term outcomes, ensuring progress is measured by what matters most to children, young people and families rather than relying solely on activity, compliance or performance data.

Aboriginal Data Sovereignty

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families requires greater attention to Aboriginal data sovereignty and community ownership of data. Consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should have access to meaningful local data and greater control over how information relating to Aboriginal children, families and communities is collected, used, shared and reported. Data sovereignty is an important mechanism for supporting self-determination, enabling communities to identify local priorities, inform planning, monitor progress and hold systems accountable for outcomes.

Concerns regarding the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems continue to persist despite sustained advocacy, inquiries and reform efforts. Strengthening data sovereignty presents an opportunity to improve transparency and accountability by ensuring communities have access to timely, relevant and locally meaningful data about the issues affecting them. Improved approaches to data collection, sharing and governance can support more informed decision making, stronger community-led responses and a more accurate understanding of whether policies and reforms are resulting in measurable improvements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Recommendation:

37. Strengthen Aboriginal data sovereignty by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to access, govern and use local data to inform decision-making, accountability and service improvement consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four.

Using Data to Drive Improvement

Access to timely, accurate and shared data would strengthen efforts to monitor progress and improve outcomes for children, young people and families. Consideration should be given to the development of a shared, real time data dashboard that provides governments, services and communities with accessible and up to date information on key outcomes and indicators. Such a system could improve transparency, support evidence informed decision making, strengthen accountability and assist in identifying emerging trends and issues. A shared data platform would also create a common evidence base across governments, organisations and service providers, supporting more coordinated responses and enabling progress against the Second Action Plan.

38. Develop a shared national data and reporting framework linking jurisdictional and Commonwealth data, such as South Australia's BEBOLD platform to strengthen transparency, accountability and evidence-informed decision-making across governments, services and communities.

Conclusion

The feedback provided through this consultation demonstrates a clear need to strengthen prevention, early intervention and family support systems to ensure children, young people and families receive the right support at the right time. Members consistently emphasised the importance of accessible and culturally responsive services, meaningful collaboration across systems, genuine participation of children and families in decision making, stronger support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and increased investment in early supports preventing situations from escalating prompting statutory intervention. There is a strong view that lasting change will require broader systems reform, improved accountability and a greater focus on outcomes rather than processes. Through the Second Action Plan, there is an opportunity to build a more coordinated, family centred and prevention focused system that supports children and young people to remain safe within their families, communities and cultures, while ensuring governments and service systems are responsive to the voices and experiences of those they serve.

CAFFSA is pleased to provide this submission which reflects the knowledge, expertise and practice experience of member and partner organisations across the child and family services sector. We welcome ongoing engagement throughout the development and implementation of the Second Action Plan and would be pleased to provide any additional information or clarification required.

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