

Protecting Children is Everyone's Business

National Framework for Protecting
Australia's Children 2009–2020

An initiative of the Council of Australian Governments

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Foreword

Australia's children deserve a safe, healthy and happy childhood.

Our children must be able to grow up nourished and supported in loving and caring environments. They must have time to be children with all the wonder, happiness and innocence that childhood should bring.

Over recent years the reported levels of child neglect and abuse in Australia have increased at an alarming rate. Child abuse and neglect has become an issue of national concern. Meanwhile, statutory child protection systems are struggling under the load.

Protecting children is everyone's responsibility. Parents, communities, governments and business all have a role to play.

Australia needs a shared agenda for change, with national leadership and a common goal.

All Australian governments have endorsed the first National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 and are committed to implementing the initial actions it contains. It is a long-term, national approach to help protect all Australian children.

The National Framework represents an unprecedented level of collaboration between Australian, State and Territory governments and non-government organisations to protect children. Placing children's interests firmly at the centre of everything we do.

Reducing child abuse and neglect is not an easy task and it will take time. The National Framework provides the foundation for national reform.

Endorsed at the Council of Australian Governments meeting on 30 April 2009 by:

The Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Prime Minister of Australia

The Hon Nathan Rees MP, Premier of New South Wales

The Hon John Brumby MP, Premier of Victoria

The Hon Anna Bligh MP, Premier of Queensland

The Hon Mike Rann MP, Premier of South Australia

The Hon Colin Barnett MLA, Premier of Western Australia

The Hon David Bartlett MP, Premier of Tasmania

Jon Stanhope MLA, Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory

The Hon Paul Henderson MLA, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory

Why we need to work together to protect Australia's children

All children¹ have the right to be safe and to receive loving care and support. Children also have a right to receive the services they need to enable them to succeed in life. Parents have the primary responsibility for raising their children, and ensuring that these rights are upheld.

We recognise that the best way to protect children is to prevent child abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place. To do this, we need to build capacity and strength in our families and communities, across the nation.

The vast majority of parents - supported by the community and the broad range of government supports and services available to all families - have the capacity to raise happy and healthy children. But some families need more help. And in some cases, statutory child protection responses will be required.

The investment by governments and the non-government sector into family support and child protection services is significant, yet our separate efforts still fail many children and young people (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009).² We need a unified approach that recognises that the protection of children is not simply a matter for the statutory child protection systems.

Protecting children is everyone's responsibility.

Families, communities, governments, business and services all have a role. And we need to work together.

What is the problem?

In 2007-08, there were 55,120 reports of child abuse and neglect substantiated by child protection services.

For the first time since national data collection there was a reduction in child abuse substantiations from the previous year (2006-07). This is a promising indication that substantial increases in family support may be effective at preventing child abuse and neglect. Data in future years will tell us if this trend continues.

Despite this, the rate has more than doubled over the past 10 years and the number of children subject to child abuse and neglect remains unacceptably high. Indigenous children also remain significantly over-represented. Indigenous children are six times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation than other children (AIHW 2009).

Some of the increases over time are a result of changing social values and better knowledge about the safety and wellbeing of children. Child protection services were originally established in response to serious physical abuse. Now, in response to changing community expectations, they address physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and domestic violence. These changes have been a major driver of increased demand on child protection services (Bromfield & Holzer 2008).

Emotional abuse and neglect are now the most commonly substantiated types of child maltreatment, followed by physical abuse (AIHW 2009). However, research shows that many children experience sexual abuse, and that it is often undetected or not reported to authorities (ABS 2006; Morrison 2006).

As a community we have been shocked and concerned to hear of children who were not identified or adequately protected by welfare systems – for some, their suffering was not known until after their deaths. Systems and procedures such as mandatory reporting requirements have been developed to try to better identify those children who have experienced or are at-risk of abuse or neglect. For many people concerned about a child or family, their first (and perhaps only) response is to make a report to child protection services (Bromfield & Holzer 2008).

1 Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the Convention, the term 'child' is defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. This National Framework follows that definition.

2 The estimated total recurrent expenditure on child protection and out-of-home care services was \$2 billion in 2007-08, an increase of 13.5 per cent on the previous financial year.

Substantial numbers of children and their families now come to the attention of child protection services. In 2007-08, there were 317,526 reports to child protection services in Australia. The vast majority of these reports were not substantiated – meaning the report was assessed and a child protection response was *not* required at that time. In these cases, other forms of support would have been a more appropriate response.

The numbers of children being removed from their parents has also more than doubled over the past decade. At 30 June 2008, there were 31,166 young people in out-of-home care (AIHW 2009). Children in out-of-home care experience significantly poorer long-term outcomes, particularly where the child did not experience stable care placements (Cashmore & Paxman 2006). Each year in a small number of terrible cases, children die as a result of child abuse and/or neglect.

The exact numbers are difficult to ascertain due to reporting limitations.

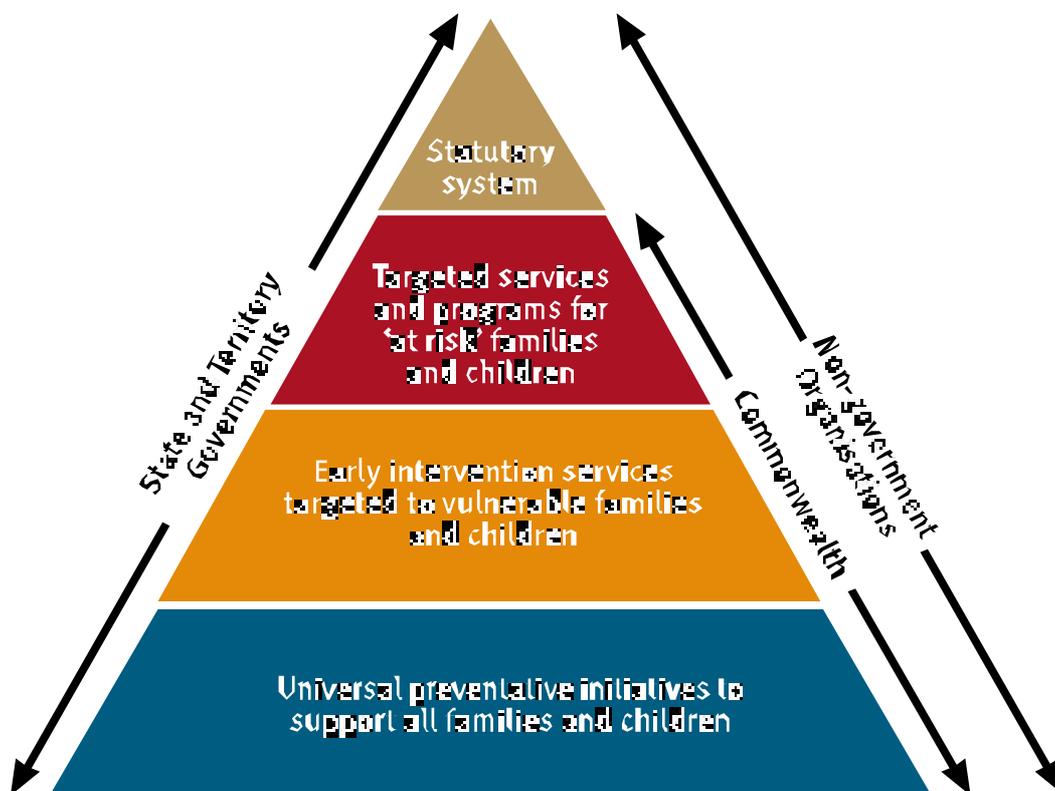
What needs to change?

Australia needs to move from seeing ‘protecting children’ merely as a response to abuse and neglect to one of promoting the safety and wellbeing of children. Leading researchers and practitioners – both in Australia and overseas – have suggested that applying a public health model to care and protection will deliver better outcomes for our children and young people and their families (Holzer 2007; O’Donnell, Scott, & Stanley 2008; Scott 2006; ARACY 2007). The components of such a system are illustrated in Figure 1.

Under a public health model, priority is placed on having universal supports available for all families (for example, health and education). More intensive (secondary) prevention interventions are provided to those families that need additional assistance with a focus on early intervention. Tertiary child protection services are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families and governments.

Just as a health system is more than hospitals so a system for the protection of children is more than a statutory child protection service.

Figure 1 – A system for protecting children



In reality, Australia's child welfare service systems more closely resemble an hourglass than a pyramid. As demands on child protection services have grown, child protection services have grown to meet that demand. Child protection services cannot provide a response to all vulnerable children and their families.

A public health model offers a different approach with a greater emphasis on assisting families early enough to prevent abuse and neglect occurring. It seeks to involve other professionals, families and the wider community – enhancing the variety of systems that can be used to protect children and recognising that protecting children is everyone's responsibility (Higgins & Katz 2008).

Ultimately, the aim of a public health approach is to reduce the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and to provide the most appropriate response to vulnerable families and those in which abuse or neglect has already occurred.

A national approach for protecting Australia's children

Australia needs a shared agenda for change, with national leadership and a common goal.

Recognising that the safety and wellbeing of children is the responsibility of all levels of government, the Australian Government has led the development of the National Framework, working closely with States and Territories.

Similar challenges are being faced across the nation. State and Territory governments currently spend in excess of \$2 billion annually on child protection alone, with average annual increases of more than 12 per cent.

State and Territory governments are currently implementing reforms to their statutory child protection systems - all focused on early intervention. But for these reforms to be truly effective, they need to be coordinated with Australian Government programs, policies and payments - a large part of the early intervention response.

The National Framework will deliver a more integrated response but does not change the responsibilities of governments. States and Territories retain responsibility for statutory child protection, as the Australian Government retains responsibility for providing income support payments. The National Framework also recognises the significant existing efforts and reforms which are being undertaken by governments across Australia in protecting children and supporting families. A summary of existing effort and reforms underway in each State and Territory is at **Appendix A**.

It does however, involve a commitment from all parties to focus our own efforts on protecting children, and to work together better in areas of shared responsibility. It also involves a commitment to better link the many supports and services we provide – avoiding duplication, coordinating planning and implementation and better sharing of information and innovation. Naturally, the span of activity required to support these outcomes means that new efforts will build on and link with existing initiatives to achieve the best possible outcomes.

A National Framework provides an opportunity to drive improvements across all systems and all jurisdictions. National leadership will provide the momentum for key national projects – such as data, research, information sharing and national consistency in critical areas. A National Framework also provides a mechanism for engaging the non-government sector and the broader community on a national level.

National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* consists of high-level and supporting outcomes, strategies to be delivered through a series of three-year action plans and indicators of change that can be used to monitor the success of the National Framework.

The actions and strategies that governments and others will agree to take under this National Framework are all aimed to achieve the following high-level outcome:

Australia's children and young people are safe and well.

As a measure of this outcome, governments and the non-government sector have set the following target:

A substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia over time.³

To demonstrate progress towards achieving the target the following measures have been identified:

- Trends in key national indicators of children's health, development and wellbeing
- Trends in hospital admissions and emergency department visits for neglect and injuries to children under three years
- Trends in substantiated child protection cases
- Trends in the number of children in out-of-home care.

Supporting outcomes, strategies and indicators of change

The six supporting outcomes are:

1. Children live in safe and supportive families and communities
2. Children and families access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early
3. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed
4. Children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing
5. Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities
6. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is prevented and survivors receive adequate support.

The supporting outcomes and strategies help to focus effort and actions under the National Framework in order to reach the high-level outcome. Indicators of change are provided to measure the extent to which governments and non-government organisations are achieving the supporting outcomes. Given the inherent difficulties in isolating the impact of specific actions on broader social outcomes, a broad suite of indicators have been identified which, when viewed collectively, will be reported annually and provide a basis for measuring progress over the life (12 years) of the National Framework.

³ It is acknowledged that measuring a reduction in child abuse and neglect is difficult, as Australia currently does not have robust data on incidence/prevalence. Even if such data existed, it may not be sensitive to change over a short period.

Principles to guide our actions

Children have a right to be safe, valued and cared for. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia has a responsibility to protect children, provide the services necessary for them to develop and achieve positive outcomes, and enable them to participate in the wider community.

In line with Australia's obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention, the National Framework is underpinned by the following principles:

- All children have a right to grow up in an environment free from neglect and abuse. Their best interests are paramount in all decisions affecting them.
- Children and their families have a right to participate in decisions affecting them.
- Improving the safety and wellbeing of children is a national priority.
- The safety and wellbeing of children is primarily the responsibility of their families, who should be supported by their communities and governments.
- Australian society values, supports and works in partnership with parents, families and others in fulfilling their caring responsibilities for children.
- Children's rights are upheld by systems and institutions.
- Policies and interventions are evidence based.

The National Framework also recognises the importance of promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families across all outcome areas.

Everyone has a role to play

Under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, protecting children is everyone's responsibility. Some of the key groups and their involvement in the National Framework are described below.

Parents and families care for and protect their children and engage in decision making that has an impact on them and their children.

Children and young people participate in decisions affecting them.

Communities support and protect all their members, and support families to raise their children, particularly vulnerable families.

Non-government organisations deliver services (including on behalf of governments), contribute to the development of policy, programs and the evidence base and actively promote child safety, protection, rights and wellbeing.

The **business and corporate sector** supports parents to raise their children through family-friendly policies. They may also support programs and initiatives to directly assist children and families, including direct financial assistance, pro bono activities of their staff and professional support to community organisations.

Local governments deliver a range of services to vulnerable families, including youth and family centres and local infrastructure, and play a pivotal role in engaging vulnerable children and their families in those services.

State and Territory governments deliver a range of universal services and early intervention initiatives to prevent child abuse and neglect, and fund and coordinate many services by the non-government sector. They are responsible for the statutory child protection systems, including the support provided to children and young people in out-of-home care. Other responsibilities include:

- providing therapeutic and support services for families, children and young people at-risk of abuse or neglect
- conducting research into child protection
- delivering health and education services, including maternal and child health services, schools, and specialist services for at-risk children and young people and their families
- providing police and justice systems, including court services to hear child/youth care and protection matters.

The **Australian Government** delivers universal support and services to help families raise their children, along with a range of targeted early intervention services to families and children. ⁴

The foundation of the Australian Government's support is the provision of income and family support payments to provide both a broad social safety net and specifically support families in their parenting role. This includes pensions, family payments, childcare benefit and tax rebates. The Australian Government provides a range of services available for all Australian families such as Medicare, employment services, child and parenting support services, family relationship services and the family law system. In addition, the Australian Government provides support for key services through the States and Territories such as hospitals, schools, housing and disability services.

The Australian Government also offers more targeted services for vulnerable individuals and families, including mental health, substance abuse, intensive parenting services, intensive employment assistance, and allowances for young people leaving care to help with the transition to independent living. The Australian Government also funds and delivers a range of services for families at higher risk of disadvantage including those in Indigenous communities.

4 Families include foster, grandparent and kinship families

Supporting outcome 1:

Children live in safe and supportive families and communities

Communities are child-friendly. Families care for children, value their wellbeing and participation and are supported in their caring role.

Reducing vulnerability of families and protecting children from abuse and neglect begins with developing a shared understanding of, and responsibility for, tackling the problem of child abuse and neglect.

Businesses and the broader community can play a part in supporting families through child and family-friendly policies and practices. It is important to educate and engage the community to influence attitudes and beliefs about abuse and neglect but also more broadly about children and their needs. Informing communities about parenting and children's development can also promote understanding about the ways in which community members can better support families.

Upholding children's right to participate in decisions that affect them is a key signal of valuing and supporting children. In the context of child welfare, this is particularly relevant in judicial proceedings in care and protection, juvenile justice and family court matters, and in child protection and out-of-home care services.

Supporting outcome 1

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
1.1 Strengthen the capacity of families to support children	Continue to establish and support family and children's centres such as: - Child and Family Centres (ACT) - Early Years Service Centres (QLD) - Children's Centres (SA) - 30 Child and Family Centres (TAS) - Early Learning and Care Centres (WA) - 46 Children's Services Hubs (VIC)	Ongoing States & Territories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Community attitudes towards and value of children (TBD, survey) •Children's perception of their value within the community (TBD, survey) •Measure of children's and young people's participation in administrative and judicial proceedings that affect them (TBD)
	Combine and refocus community programs within the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to enhance support for families and parenting	2009-10 Commonwealth	
	Continue to improve family support services such as: - bringing together secondary services consistent with WA's <i>Strategic Framework for Supporting Individuals and Families At-risk</i>	Ongoing All jurisdictions	
1.2 Educate and engage the community about child abuse and neglect and strategies for protecting children	Support community organisations to deliver cost-effective, community-based initiatives, including information and awareness campaigns, for example funding for National Child Protection Week and a survey of community attitudes to protecting children	Ongoing Commonwealth with NAPCAN	
1.3 Develop and implement effective mechanisms for involving children and young people in decisions affecting their lives	Explore the potential role for a National Children's Commissioner including the relationship with State and Territory Children's Commissioners	Advice to Government in late 2009 Commonwealth in consultation with States & Territories	
	Identify and implement approaches through the <i>Supporting Children After Separation</i> Program, to assist children from separating families to deal with issues arising from the breakdown of their parents' relationship and to participate in decisions that affect them	Ongoing Commonwealth	
	Finalise, print and distribute an information booklet for children entering foster care	2009 Commonwealth with the Australian Childhood Foundation	
	Continue to improve the experience of court processes for children, such as: - Victoria's work with court stakeholders to improve practices and processes in state and federal jurisdictions involved with children - NSW's legislative amendments to encourage alternative dispute resolution and the roll-out of the Magellan project - WA's trialling of court diversion conferencing	Ongoing States & Territories	
	Support participation of children in decision making such as: - Models developed by the SA Guardian for Children and Young Persons	Ongoing States & Territories	

Supporting outcome 2:

Children and families access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early

All children and families receive appropriate support and services to create the conditions for safety and care. When required, early intervention and specialist services are available to meet additional needs of vulnerable families, to ensure children's safety and wellbeing.

The basic assumption of a public health approach to protecting children is that by providing the right services at the right time vulnerable families can be supported, child abuse and neglect can be prevented, and the effects of trauma and harm can be reduced.

Providing the right supports at the right time will also ultimately reduce demand on State and Territory child protection systems, allowing them to improve their capacity to perform specific statutory functions and better support children at-risk.

National and international research shows that:

- families have strengths that can be built upon to keep children safe and well
- families may require advice and support, particularly in times of change
- provision of services early in a child's life and/or early in the life of a problem can improve long term outcomes for children and reduce negative impacts
- a focus on early intervention and prevention is more cost-effective in the long-term than responding to crises, or treating the impacts of abuse and neglect (Stronger Families Learning Exchange 2002).

Disadvantage and vulnerability can be concentrated in particular communities. Evidence from Australia (such as implications from the national evaluation of the *Stronger Families and Community Strategy*) suggests that area-based interventions can have positive impacts on vulnerable children and families. Effective elements include:

- an explicit focus on the coordination and collaboration of services by one organisation that is given responsibility and resources to be a leader in this area in the community
- increased service provision and capacity to work with families previously disengaged from early childhood services and those from groups traditionally considered 'hard to reach'.

Supporting outcome 2

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
2.1 Implement an integrated approach to service design, planning and delivery for children and families across the lifecycle and spectrum of need	Expand the <i>Communities for Children</i> program to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - realign existing sites to enhance integration and target the most disadvantaged communities - establish new demonstration sites to test models of integrated service delivery and provide more intensive assistance to children at-risk 	Realign existing sites 2009-10 New sites established by July 2010 Commonwealth in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of pregnant women who receive perinatal care (TBD) • Number of at-risk children and families accessing support services (TBD) • Rate per 100,000 babies born with low birth weight • Proportion of communities with improved measures against the Australian Early Development Index • Proportion of disadvantaged 3 year olds in early childhood education • Proportion of children aged 4 to 14 years with mental health problems
	Implement integrated and co-located child and family service models including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 35 Indigenous Child and Family Centres (Commonwealth) - <i>Brighter Futures</i> early intervention program (NSW) - SCAN multi-agency teams (QLD) - integrated child and family case management system (SA) - coordination service for pregnant women and their families (ACT) - <i>Best Beginnings</i> program (WA) - 6 multidisciplinary Autism Early Learning and Care Centres (Commonwealth) - Child and Family Services Alliances (VIC) 	Ongoing All jurisdictions and NGOs	
2.2 Develop new information sharing provisions between Commonwealth agencies, State and Territory agencies and NGOs dealing with vulnerable families	Develop a nationally consistent approach to working with children checks and child safe organisations across jurisdictions	In place by December 2009 All jurisdictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of child protection notifications
	Extend the national protocol for sharing information on children at-risk to other Commonwealth agencies starting with Medicare Australia and the Child Support Agency	2009-10 Commonwealth in partnership with States & Territories	
	Investigate options for improving information sharing between NGOs and government agencies in secondary prevention through the <i>Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support Taskforce</i> (see 3.5)	Options by December 2009 Commonwealth and ARACY in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	
2.3 Ensure consistency of support and services for all children and families	Implement a national approach to early childhood education and care including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - universal access to quality early childhood education and care in the year prior to schooling by 2013 - National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care and the Early Years Learning Framework - National Early Years Workforce Strategy 	Ongoing Through the COAG Early Childhood Agenda	

Supporting outcome 2 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
	Support the development of quality assurance processes for registered community based child and family services; and out-of-home care services, such as the Victorian model	States & Territories	
	Enhance national consistency in child and family health services through: - progressing the development of a national framework for child and family health services through the Australian Health Ministers' Conference - the healthy kids check through the MBS for 4 year olds to help ensure children are healthy and ready for school	2009-11 All jurisdictions	
	Implement the National Perinatal Depression Plan including a national universal screening program	Commonwealth	
	Increase funding for disadvantaged schools with a focus on improving student wellbeing	Ongoing Through the Low SES School Communities National Partnership	
2.4 Enhance services and supports for children and families to target the most vulnerable and protect children 'at-risk'	Refocus services under the Commonwealth's Family Support Program to target vulnerable families and children at-risk	From 2009-10 Commonwealth	
	Expand and/or target State and Territory family support programs for vulnerable families and children at-risk such as: - Victoria's continued roll-out of <i>Child FIRST</i> - NSW's <i>Keep Them Safe</i> initiatives including new Child Wellbeing Units and expanding <i>Brighter Futures</i> .	Ongoing States & Territories	
	Evaluate income management trials in WA, NT and Cape York	2009-10 Commonwealth in consultation with relevant jurisdictions	
	Comprehensive evaluation of family law reforms designed to strengthen family relationships, including: - research into the characteristics of shared care parenting arrangements that work in the best interests of the child - research on the impact of family violence on relationship breakdown	Findings by end of 2009 Commonwealth	
	Expand access to mental health programs for children including: - funding for Headspace (the National Youth Mental Health Foundation) - the ongoing implementation of <i>KidsMatters</i> and <i>MindMatters</i>	2009-10 to 2012-13 Commonwealth	

Supporting outcome 2 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
2.5 Provide priority access to services for children who are at serious risk of abuse and neglect	Enhance access to childcare services for children at serious risk of harm by increasing awareness and availability of services and supports in the childcare sector, organisations working with vulnerable children and child protection agencies	From July 2009 Commonwealth	
	Develop alternative pathways for children who are at serious risk and those at lower risk, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establishment of Child Wellbeing Units in a range of NSW government agencies - establishment of regional intake and referral services in NSW - introduction of Gateway services to provide single entry points in TAS - availability of Child FIRST community intake centres in 24 locations across Victoria 	Ongoing States & Territories	

Supporting outcome 3:

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed

Major parental risk factors that are associated with child abuse and neglect are addressed in individuals and reduced in communities. A particular focus is sustained on key risk factors of mental health, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

Key to preventing child abuse and neglect is addressing the known risk factors. Many of the factors that research has shown to be associated with abuse and neglect are behaviours or characteristics of parents, which can then be the target of both population-based strategies and specific interventions.

The problems most commonly associated with the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and identified in families involved with child protection services are:

- domestic violence
- parental alcohol and drug abuse
- parental mental health problems.

Often, families in which parents experience these problems face broader challenges of exclusion and disadvantage (Allen Consulting Group 2003; Leek, Seneque, & Ward 2004; Wood 2008). Other known risk factors for abuse and neglect include:

- poverty and social isolation
- unstable family accommodation and homelessness
- poor child and maternal health
- childhood disability, mental health and/or behavioural problems
- young people disconnected from their families, schools and communities
- past experiences of trauma (Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer 1997; Frederick & Goddard 2007; National Child Protection Clearinghouse 2008).

Many families also experience more than one of these risk factors (Jeffreys, Hirte, Rogers & Wilson 2009; Wood 2008).

Adult treatment or support services - particularly those addressing domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health issues, as well as housing, gambling, disability, employment and income support services - need to be more child-focused, and responsive to the needs of families (Scott 2009).

These factors can also be the longer-term outcomes for children who have suffered abuse and neglect, contributing to intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. Disadvantage can be concentrated in neighbourhoods or geographic areas. Efforts to build and strengthen communities and address economic and social disadvantage are important elements in an overall approach to ensuring children's safety and wellbeing.

Supporting outcome 3

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
3.1 Enhance alcohol and substance abuse initiatives to provide additional support to families	Implement the <i>National Binge Drinking Strategy</i>	Ongoing Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rate per 1,000 children living in households where there is adult abuse of alcohol and/or other drugs (TBD, previous survey) •Rate per 1,000 children accessing assistance through homelessness services (accompanied & unaccompanied) •Number of children living in jobless families (TBD) •Rate per 1,000 children living in households where family violence occurs (TBD) •Proportion of parents with a mental illness who are accessing mental health services (TBD)
	Redesign the <i>Strengthening Families Program</i> to implement a more focused model incorporating parenting support for vulnerable families where children are at-risk of harm	Ongoing Commonwealth	
	Implement community based healthy lifestyle interventions in disadvantaged communities including addressing alcohol abuse	Ongoing Commonwealth to lead through the COAG National Preventative Health Partnership	
3.2 Enhance programs which reduce family violence	Progress priority actions in areas of Commonwealth responsibility in <i>Time for Action: The National Plan for Australia to reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021</i> from the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children	From May 2009 Commonwealth through COAG	
	Expand models of integrated support to enable women and children experiencing domestic and family violence to remain at home safely	2009 onwards Through the National Partnership on Homelessness	
3.3 Increase services and support for people with mental illness	Develop a <i>National Suicide Prevention Strategy</i>	Commonwealth	
	Further roll out the <i>Personal Helpers and Mentors Program</i> with a focus on disadvantaged communities and vulnerable groups	2009 – 2011 Commonwealth	
	Enhance support for children or parents with disabilities, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evolve therapeutic and behaviour support services to support specialist disability assessments with complex needs (QLD) - develop a Statement of Principles for working with children with a disability and their families (VIC) - implement a new assessment tool for Carer Payment (child) to support more carers of children with disabilities (Commonwealth) - measures to support early intervention for children with autism (Commonwealth) - develop safeguards for children including strengthening availability of disability support services for children and their families (NSW) 	Ongoing All jurisdictions	

Supporting outcome 3 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
3.4 Expand housing and homelessness services for families and children at-risk	Increase availability of affordable and social housing through the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Affordable Housing Agreement - investment in social housing under the <i>Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan</i> 	By December 2010 Commonwealth in partnership with States & Territories	
	Targeted support to assist children and families who are homeless including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - additional services for up to 2,250 families at-risk of homelessness through the <i>HOME Advice Program</i> - additional specialist support to children who are homeless including closer links between homelessness and child protection services - early intervention and prevention services for up to an additional 9,000 young people aged 12 to 18 years at-risk of homelessness to remain connected with families (where appropriate), education, training and employment 	Ongoing Through the National Partnership on Homelessness	
3.5 Increase capacity and capability of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adult focused services to identify and respond to the needs of children at-risk - child-focused services to identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable families - the broader system to identify children at-risk 	Establish professional development resources on the risk factors for, and impacts of, child abuse and neglect to be provided to child and adult focused services and professions (including joint training across professional groups and organisations)	Training resources to be developed by December 2010 Commonwealth to lead in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	
	Convene an expert taskforce to develop options for shared tools and approaches for assessment and referral across services and professional groups to better identify children at-risk of harm: the <i>Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support Taskforce</i>	Establish Taskforce May 2009, with options by end of 2009 Commonwealth and ARACY in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	
	Support the development and distribution of a resources guide to schools and early childhood services about responding to the needs of traumatised children	2009 Commonwealth with the Australian Childhood Foundation	
	Build on and extend initiatives to support the workforce, such as <i>WA's Foster Care Team Development</i> initiatives	Ongoing States & Territories	

Supporting outcome 4:

Children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing

Children and young people who have been abused (or are at-risk of abuse) receive timely, appropriate, high-quality child protection and other support services to secure their safety and promote their long-term wellbeing.

Efforts to reduce the occurrence of child abuse and neglect are important. It is equally important that those children who have experienced abuse and neglect are provided high-quality services and interventions, as they are among the most vulnerable in our community.

To secure children's safety and wellbeing in the short and long term they need high-quality child protection services that are evidence based, child-focused, attend to children's developmental needs and help children to overcome the effects of trauma, abuse and neglect (Bromfield 2008). There is a need for further research and evaluation to ensure that services and interventions provided actually work to improve outcomes for children and families (Bromfield & Arney 2008).

Out-of-home care is viewed as an intervention of last resort, and the preference is always for children to be reunited with their natural parents if possible. Many children can be safely reunited with their families when their families receive appropriate supports and interventions. Research highlights the need for children to have stable and secure placements, whether that be with their natural parents or in out-of-home care. The quality of relationships with carers is also critical. A sense of security, stability, continuity and social support are strong predictors of better outcomes for young people's long-term outcomes after leaving care (Cashmore & Paxman 2006).

Young people leaving care are at great risk of experiencing negative life outcomes (Bromfield & Osborn 2007). Care leavers can be better supported if they are equipped with improved employment and independent living skills and more social and emotional skills while in care, and the state continues to act as a 'good' parent in the first few years after they leave care (Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Maunders, Liddell, Liddell, & Green 1999; Mendes & Moslehuddin 2006).

While the need for foster carers has been rising, there has been some evidence of decreasing numbers of individuals willing to foster (McHugh 2002; Siminski, Chalmers & McHugh 2005). The attraction and retention of an appropriately skilled and qualified workforce – including statutory and non-government service workers, as well as voluntary carers – is a high priority.

Supporting outcome 4

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
4.1 Enhance access to appropriate support services for recovery where abuse or neglect has occurred	Target the <i>Personal Helpers and Mentors Program</i> where appropriate for people who have experienced abuse or neglect	2009-10 Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proportion of investigations finalised by time taken to complete investigation Proportion of children on guardianship and custody orders achieving national reading and numeracy benchmarks
	Support community-based recovery programs for people who have experienced abuse or neglect such as Adults Surviving child Abuse (ASCA) therapy programs for survivors of childhood abuse	2009 Commonwealth	
4.2 Support grandparent, foster and kinship carers to provide safe and stable care	Provide specialist supported playgroups for grandparent and kinship carers to enhance peer support and provide developmental opportunities	2009-10 Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School retention rates (Years 10 & 12) of young people in out-of-home care or under guardianship (TBD) Retention rate of foster carers and child protection workers (TBD) Number of out-of-home carers, by type of carer
	Continue to explore options through CDSMAC working group for improving financial and non-financial support to grandparent, kinship and foster carers such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SA's <i>Time for Kids</i> grandparent respite and support WA's <i>Foster Care Partnership Policy</i>, centred on the child 	2009-10 All jurisdictions	
	Increase the focus of support and services available for grandparent and kinship carers through Indigenous Child and Family Centres	From 2009-10 Commonwealth	
	Support programs for grandparent, kinship and foster carers, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victoria's implementation of the new <i>Kinship Care</i> program model NSW's initiatives to better support carers including providing a resource manual to carers and establishing Regional Foster Care Advisory Groups QLD's <i>Foster and Kinship Carer Strategy</i> includes a support line, caring allowance, flexible respite options and training 	Ongoing States & Territories	
	Continue to explore options through the Australian Health Ministers' Conference in relation to the healthcare needs of children entering and in out-of-home care	Report by end of 2009 All jurisdictions	
	Enhanced support for grandparent and kinship carers as a specified target group under the <i>Communities for Children</i> program	2009-10 Commonwealth	

Supporting outcome 4 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
4.3 Improve support for young people leaving care	Increase support through NGOs for young people leaving care to establish their independence	Ongoing from July 2009 Commonwealth in partnership with NGOs	
	Continue and improve State and Territory initiatives targeting young people as they leave care, such as: - NT's <i>Leaving Care</i> options package - ACT's <i>Time to Fly</i> leaving care kit	Ongoing States & Territories	
	Implement policy of 'no exits into homelessness' from statutory care	Ongoing Through the National Partnership on Homelessness	
4.4 Support enhanced national consistency and continuous improvement in child protection services	Develop and introduce ambitious National Standards for Out-of-home Care which: - focus on key areas that directly impact on the outcomes and experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care - allow for mutual recognition of existing State and Territory quality assurance standards and processes that meet the requirements of the National Standards - include the development of an agreed evidence tool to verify, review and monitor progress against agreed national standards	To CDSMC for approval by June 2010 Commonwealth, States & Territories in collaboration	
	Support child protection services to maintain continuous improvement, such as: - SA's reshaping of the child protection system towards relationship based practice - TAS's reform of out-of-home care services - ACT's development of out-of-home care standards - WA's child protection and family support reforms - VIC's <i>Every Child Every Chance</i> reforms	Ongoing States & Territories	
	Support the Australian New Zealand Child Death Review Committee to develop more consistent data to help better understand the circumstances of child deaths and how these could be prevented	By 2010 Commonwealth to lead in partnership with States & Territories	
	Improve our understanding of children in the child protection and care system by: - developing and implementing a system for the collection and analysis of confidential unit record data across homelessness, juvenile justice and child protection records - reviewing existing data definitions for child protection to improve national reporting	By 2011 Commonwealth to lead in partnership with States & Territories	
	Support a National Research Agenda for Child Protection	2009-10 to 2013-14 Commonwealth to lead in partnership with States & Territories	

Supporting outcome 5:

Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities

Indigenous children are supported and safe in strong, thriving families and communities to reduce the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems. For those Indigenous children in child protection systems, culturally appropriate care and support is provided to enhance their wellbeing.

Preventing child abuse and neglect and improving responses to those children who have experienced maltreatment are priorities for all Australian children. However, those who are particularly disadvantaged require additional responses. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly over-represented in all parts of the child protection system.

Indigenous communities experience intergenerational cycles of adversity and trauma, leading to entrenched social problems including poverty, high levels of violence, psychological distress, destructive behaviours, and individual, family and community dysfunction. These problems are also associated with heightened rates of abuse and neglect (Atkinson 2002; Berlyn & Bromfield 2009; Robertson 2000). Addressing Indigenous disadvantage is critical to addressing the factors that put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at-risk of abuse and neglect.

Child abuse and neglect can be prevented by addressing disadvantage (for example, overcrowded and inadequate housing); recognising and promoting family, community and cultural strengths that protect children; and developing community-wide strategies to address specific risk factors where they occur in high concentration, such as alcohol misuse and family violence. It is critical that approaches to address Indigenous disadvantage and the underlying causes of abuse and neglect are holistic and culturally sensitive, and empower families and communities to develop and take responsibility for community-identified solutions (Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce 2006; Anderson & Wild 2007; Atkinson 2002; Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry 2002; Robertson 2000; Silburn, et al. 2006).

The best interests and safety of a child are paramount. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children cannot remain safely in the care of their parents or community, timely and culturally appropriate responses for their care, protection and nurture are needed.

Maintaining connection to family, community and culture is essential within a framework that respects the physical, mental and emotional security of the child. This is particularly important in light of the historical experiences that Aboriginal families have had with child protection agencies.

In order to provide culturally appropriate responses, strategies developed under the National Framework need to be based on partnerships between Indigenous families and communities, and between Indigenous agencies, mainstream service providers and governments. Strategies should build on existing strengths, match expectations with appropriate supports, and recognise the importance of Indigenous-led and managed solutions (Higgins 2005).

Supporting outcome 5

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
5.1 Expand access to Indigenous and mainstream services for families and children	Expand Indigenous Parenting Support Services to additional sites	Commence 2009-10 Complete by 2011 Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rate per 1,000 Indigenous children with substantiated cases compared to other children
	Link 35 Indigenous Child and Family Centres with the range of family and community programs for at-risk children Improve access to child and maternal health services for Indigenous families	By 2011 Through COAG Indigenous Early Childhood Development Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rate per 1,000 Indigenous children in out-of-home care compared with other children Proportion of Indigenous children placed in accordance with the Indigenous Child Placement Principles
	Support SNAICC to develop resources and materials to support and promote child and family services within Indigenous communities	Over 3 years to 2011 Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proportion of Indigenous 3 to 4 year olds participating in quality early childhood education, development and child care services
	Continue to focus new activities in the <i>Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Program</i> and <i>Indigenous Family Violence Regional Activities Program</i> on child protection issues	Ongoing Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rate of hospitalisations for Injury and poisoning for Indigenous children aged 0 to 4 years
5.2 Promote the development of safe and strong Indigenous communities	Ongoing support and strengthening of the Northern Territory Emergency Response including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the Family Support Package which provides Remote Aboriginal Family and Community workers, Mobile Child Protection Team and 22 safe houses in the Northern Territory - law and order measures including specialist AFP officers in the child abuse taskforce as part of additional AFP positions 	Ongoing Commonwealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ratio of Indigenous out-of-home care placement through mainstream or Indigenous services
	Continued support for Indigenous community building activities, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the <i>Aboriginal Life Story Book</i> to provide Aboriginal children and young people with opportunities to explore their culture and develop a sense of connectedness to family, kin and community (NSW) - Child Wise's <i>Speak Up</i> project targeting Indigenous communities (Commonwealth) - supporting SNAICC to run workshops in Indigenous community organisations (Commonwealth) - Continue services and support for families in Cape York (Commonwealth) 	Ongoing All jurisdictions	

Supporting outcome 5 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
<p>5.3 Ensure that Indigenous children receive culturally appropriate protection services and care</p>	<p>Develop and expand the Indigenous child protection and welfare workforce, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fostering Aboriginal controlled services to deliver support to Aboriginal families (NT) 	<p>Ongoing States & Territories</p>	
	<p>Improve child protection service delivery for Indigenous families and children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - working with Aboriginal organisations to increase capacity and play an enhanced role in out-of-home care and other service options (NSW & SA) - integrating Indigenous perspectives in the learning agenda to build capacity of organisations (WA) - implementing initiatives to improve safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children in the child protection system (WA) - planning, with Aboriginal organisations, the transfer of some or all guardianship responsibilities for Aboriginal children (VIC) - ensuring the involvement of authorised Aboriginal agencies in all decisions about placements for Aboriginal children (VIC) - implementing strategies under <i>Keep Them Safe</i> including working with Aboriginal communities to develop capacity of services (NSW) - establishing <i>Safe Houses</i> within remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (QLD) - providing <i>Indigenous Alcohol Diversion Program</i> to provide treatment for parents of children at-risk (QLD) 	<p>Ongoing States & Territories</p>	
	<p>Strengthen the application of, and compliance with, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle</p>	<p>Ongoing States & Territories</p>	

Supporting outcome 6:

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is prevented and survivors receive adequate support

Children are protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse through targeted prevention strategies, and survivors are supported by the community, and through specific therapeutic and legal responses.

Strategies and services designed to support vulnerable families are important in preventing maltreatment – especially neglect, emotional and physical abuse. However, child sexual abuse may require a different response.

Perpetrators may come from inside or outside the family. Sexual abuse can also occur in a range of settings, including the family home, friendship networks, schools, churches, community organisations, and online. Legal responses to sexual abuse require the involvement of police and criminal justice processes alongside child protection services; family law processes may also be underway (Higgins 2007).

It is estimated that fewer than 30 per cent of all sexual assaults on children are reported and that the reporting rate is even lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Stanley, Tomison & Pocock 2003). Sexual abuse specific strategies are needed both to increase detection of child sexual abuse and to prevent child sexual abuse across a range of settings.

The vast majority of child sexual abuse perpetrators are family members or someone well known to the child or young person (Healey 2003). There is also increased reporting of children and young people with sexually abusive behaviours and of sibling sexual abuse (Neave, Friedman, Langan, & Little 2004). Risk factors for child sexual abuse are exposure to family violence, other types of abuse and neglect, pornography, highly sexualised environments and inadequate supervision (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer & Higgins 2006).

Raising awareness and knowledge in children and the broader community about risks can foster protective behaviours and may help to increase detection of abuse. The importance of educating young people about healthy relationships is increasingly being recognised. Raising awareness about the role of the internet as a mechanism for the sexual abuse or exploitation of children and young people is also a central focus.

Organisations, businesses and institutions can also play an important role in protecting children through the development of policies and procedures to create child-safe organisations (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Irenyi et al. 2006).

Supporting outcome 6

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
6.1 Raise awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including online exploitation	Implement cyber-safety initiatives including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - education and filtering including search warning mechanisms (Commonwealth) - <i>Who's Chatting to Your Kids</i> information produced by police (QLD) 	Ongoing All jurisdictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rate per 100,000 children aged 0–4, 5–9, 10–14, and 15–19 reported with sexually transmitted diseases •Number of individuals and organisations prosecuted for sexually exploiting children (TBD) •Number and rate of children with substantiations related to sexual abuse
	Increase support for community-based strategies to raise awareness in children, families and the community about child sexual abuse such as, Braveheart's White Balloon Day	May–July 2009 Commonwealth	
	Continue to introduce strategies to prevent sexual exploitation, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - through a new statutory pathway, intervene earlier with young people who exhibit sexually abusive behaviour to help prevent ongoing and more serious sexual offences (VIC) - Interagency Plan to tackle Child Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities (NSW) 	Ongoing States & Territories	
6.2 Enhance prevention strategies for child sexual abuse	Implement a national framework for inter-jurisdictional exchange of criminal history for people working with children	Trial to conclude December 2009 with Implementation to follow Through the COAG Exchange of Criminal History Information About People Working with Children Project Implementation Committee	
	Investigate best practice therapeutic programs for children displaying sexually abusive behaviours, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collaboration between government agencies and therapeutic treatment service providers to build a state-wide therapeutic treatment service system to implement the relevant provisions of the <i>Children, Youth and Families Act 2005</i> (VIC) - <i>New Street</i> program for adolescents aged 10-17 years who display sexually abusive behaviours (NSW) 	From July 2009 States & Territories with Commonwealth support for research	

Supporting outcome 6 continued

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
6.3 Strengthen law enforcement and judicial processes in response to child sexual abuse and exploitation	Extend work in the detection, investigation and prosecution of online sexual exploitation	By 2011-12 Commonwealth	
6.4 Ensure survivors of sexual abuse have access to effective treatment and appropriate support	Support workshops for adult survivors of sexual abuse, parents and spouses	2009 Commonwealth with Heartfelt House	
	Review service delivery options and approaches for survivors to align with best practice such as: - Victoria's new Therapeutic Treatment Board - WA's expanded network of Child Sexual Abuse Therapeutic Services	Ongoing States & Territories	

Implementing the National Framework

The National Framework is a 12-year overarching strategic framework for reform (2009-2012), supported by rolling three-year action plans identifying specific actions, responsibilities and timeframes for implementation.

The task of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all Australian children is a long and difficult one. The action plans provide a staged approach to achieving the necessary reforms identified within the National Framework. They also allow governments to address current and emerging priorities, as resources permit. The Australian, State and Territory governments and non-government agencies are committed to working together to develop actions under these triennial plans, implementing key actions and reporting on progress.

Governance arrangements

A focus on broader early intervention and prevention across a range of areas which impact on the safety and wellbeing of children requires a move away from the traditional 'single agency' approach for the ongoing management and monitoring of the National Framework. The National Framework will require integrated governance arrangements that cut across government boundaries and include the non-government sector in order to plan and implement actions.

The *Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference* is responsible for the implementation of the National Framework. It will report annually to the Council of Australian Governments on progress on the first years action plan and provide further action plans for consideration.

In addition, a *Ministerial Forum on Protecting Australia's Children* will be convened to bring together Ministers with responsibilities under the National Framework. This Ministerial Forum, hosted by the *Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference*, will also invite contributions from non-government representatives, such as State and Territory Children's Commissioners and children and young people.

The *Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference* will continue to be supported by the officials' forum - the *Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Committee* (CDSMAC) to manage the National Framework.

A tripartite *National Framework Advisory Committee* will be established to advise on the operation of the National Framework. This tripartite Committee will comprise CDSMAC officials with nominees from other sectors (such as health, education and justice) and non-government representatives (such as leading academics, practitioners and peak organisations). Children and young people are critical stakeholders who will need to be involved in this Committee through a relevant representative organisation.

Supporting the formal governance mechanisms will be a series of working groups, with members drawn from government and non-government organisations as appropriate. They will be asked to assist with the development and implementation of specific action areas or items.

Implementation Plan

With the release of the National Framework the Australian, State and Territory governments will work together to develop an Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan will focus on the actions agreed to for the first three years and will outline their scope, resourcing and timing.

The Implementation Plan will be developed within three months and considered by the *Community and Disability Services Ministerial Advisory Committee* at its August meeting.

The Implementation Plan will be a key tool in measuring progress of the National Framework. All jurisdictions and stakeholders will be able to monitor progress against activities and milestones outlined in the Implementation Plan. A set of performance indicators will be developed as part of the Implementation Plan, providing another opportunity to monitor progress and outcomes. Reporting processes for the National

Framework will provide an opportunity to streamline existing reporting processes to ensure greater levels of transparency.

As part of the Implementation Plan the options for a periodic information symposium will be explored.

Evaluation

At the conclusion of the first three year period (2012) the *Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference* will seek an evaluation of the National Framework. Central to this evaluation will be the collection and analysis of data against the outputs and performance indicators identified in the Implementation Plan, as well as the progress and performance against each of the attached State and Territory action items.

The evaluation process will also draw from data collected and analysed in associated portfolio areas, such as early childhood, housing and health.

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Appendix A

Current initiatives and reforms

The process followed by child protection agencies to deal with concerns about children involves:

- receiving reports of concern from mandated reporters or members of the public (notifications)
- gathering information to determine if an investigation is necessary and conducting an assessment of the risk to the child and the needs of the child
- determining whether the report is substantiated (i.e. the child has been abused/neglected or is at-risk of harm)
- determining whether the safety concerns for the child can be dealt with through referral to a family support service, or whether the risk is so high that the child must be removed from the family and placed in care.

These actions are defined in legislation and policy. Certain legislative principles are common to all:

- The child's best interests are paramount. Interests of the parent/s or carers cannot override this principle; nor can the Aboriginal placement principle.
- The Aboriginal placement principle requires that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children who are removed from home will be placed with their own family, community or other Indigenous carer. This is achieved in 74 per cent of placements nationally.

In the last decade all State and Territory care and protection systems have undergone major reviews. In most, but not all case reviews have been triggered by revelations of severe abuse and/or death of children in State care. There are a number of reforms which are common to all systems:

- the safety and wellbeing of children is a shared community responsibility
- collaborative interagency partnerships and, in some instances, priority service to children and young people in the care and protection system
- expanded role for non-government providers of family support and out-of-home care services
- strengthened requirements for the recruitment and training of foster and kinship carers
- charters of rights for children and young people in care
- children and families empowered to participate in decision making
- Children's Commissioner and/or Children's Guardian positions created to advocate for children within systems, monitor the performance of child protection agencies and, in some cases, monitor the performance of the out-of-home care system
- significantly increased investments in services available to vulnerable families and children at-risk
- specific services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients established
- new service delivery models established so many children at-risk can be diverted from statutory intervention.⁵

Today, while many of the challenges have been tackled. A number remain these include:

- reducing the incidence of abuse and neglect of children and young people across Australia
- working with Indigenous communities to address the complex causes of child abuse and neglect⁶
- recruiting/retaining people with specialised skills demanded in government, non-government and carer workforces
- providing more therapeutic residential facilities for severely affected children and young people who require

intensive, sustained interventions

- building local evidence of the extent of child abuse and neglect within Australia and what works to prevent it - for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations
- developing service standards so that any child or young person entering the child protection system, or care, receives quality care
- removing barriers to improved information sharing and comparable national data collections
- creating a strong and responsive network of services (universal, secondary and tertiary) that are accessible, inclusive and non-stigmatising
- improving the care options available and increasing the stability of placements
- building capacity in families, communities and services
- providing much more support in the transition to independent living for young people leaving care at age 18.

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* will align with existing initiatives and reforms. Some of the current Australian, State and Territory key reforms and initiatives are described. Further mapping and alignment will take part throughout the life of the National Framework.

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Agency Functions

The functions of the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services cover care and protection of children at-risk of harm, youth justice, early intervention services, out-of-home care services, Indigenous policy and programs, adoption, children's services, therapy services for children, disability services, women's policy, disaster recovery, multicultural policy and public housing (including services to homeless people).

Care and protection services are delivered from a centralised location which operates intake, assessment using a differential response model, substantiation and referral functions. Two regional Child and Family Centres offer midwifery baby health clinics, targeted playgroup, parenting skills development programs, and case management for vulnerable families. Outposted child protection officers, located in the two Child and Family Centres, work collaboratively with the government and non-government sector to provide early intervention services. The Department funds a number of home care agencies and sets standards and regulates their operations.

The Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) and the non-government sector provide an Integrated Family Support Project (IFSP). The IFSP is a joint initiative between the ACT Government, Commonwealth Government and the non-government sector across the ACT targeting children under 8 years and their families who have multiple and emerging difficulties. The aim of the project is to divert families from the statutory system and prevent re-entry using a case coordination framework.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

- Children's Plan Services
 - The Early Intervention and Prevention Unit established.
 - Established new Child and Family Centres to provide universal and targeted services
 - Established the Indigenous Integrated Service Delivery Program
 - In partnership with SIDS and Kids, developed easy to read messages and pamphlets on 'safe sleeping' have been developed
 - Therapy ACT
- Service development for children by
 - Establishing Early Learning Centres and Child and Family Centres
 - Child Protection Reform
 - Established the IMPACT Program to provide a coordinated service for pregnant women, their partners and their children under two years of age
 - Established the Integrated Family Support Project for families at-risk of entering the statutory system
 - Reformed Child Protection legislation
 - Reforming Out-of-home Care Program including a new framework which articulates contemporary service models
 - Information exchange and established Care Teams.
 - New Out-of-home Care Standards developed.
 - A 'Time to Fly' leaving care kit developed
 - Legislative requirements for day care planning
 - Child Protection Protocols in cooperation with other government agencies
- *Sharing Responsibility: A Framework for Service Collaboration for the Care, Protection and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in the ACT* outlines the responsibilities of the ACT Government and their approach to working together for the care and protection of children and young people in the Territory.
 - Supervision Framework with Supervision Standards developed to support clinical staff in their roles as practitioners
- A compliance framework that will include the development of a compliancy auditing and quality assurance

process with the development of compliancy monitoring tools and applications

- A newly developed and implemented Case Management Framework to provide more integrated and collaborative responses within the government and non-government sector
- The development of a Neglect Policy to better support staff in identifying and dealing with this form of abuse
- Establish a vulnerable Families Project focussing on care co-ordination, referral pathways and information exchange
- Protocols for the Interstate Transfer of Care and Protection Orders Protocol
- A complex case review panel to provide a forum for care and protection caseworkers to present and discuss cases with significant complexity with a panel of professionals.

Reforms since 2000

A review of child protection services in the ACT in 2004 led to the Government adopting and implementing a 3 year reform program from August 2004, in which the primary goals were:

- to improve the quality standards for care and protection services and immediately expand services targeted at children and young people most at-risk of entering the care and protection system; and
- to develop a continuum of early intervention and prevention services from birth to 18 years.

Practical measures to achieve these goals have included:

- DHCS' second wave of overseas recruits to Care and Protection positions was undertaken in 2008 resulting in a full compliment of staff being achieved in Care and Protection Services
- strengthening accountability measures including the development of a complimentary auditing and quality assurance process
- establishing new and better partnerships between government and non-government agencies
- expanding community education and awareness of child safety and wellbeing
- improving training for foster carers
- developing specific responses to meet needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including establishing a specific functional unit with the department
- establishing the office of Commissioner for Children and Young People and promoting the participation of children and young people in decision making
- exchange of staff between ACT Health and DHCS
- introducing an interagency agreement for service provision to clients with high level, complex needs
- reviewing *Children and Young People legislation* in 2005 and again in 2008. The first review introduced the concept of child or young person at-risk of abuse and neglect; clarified who mandatory reporters are; protection and release of information; principles to safeguard culture and community connections for Indigenous children and young people. The second review led to the development of the new *Children and Young People Act 2008* and introduced significant reform to the law relating to children and young people in the ACT, particularly in the areas of care and protection including in-utero reporting, youth justice, the regulation of childcare services and employment.

Reforms for the Future

- Legislation provides for new OOHC standards – these are currently being developed.
- Continuing with work to improve interactions between care and protection and the legal system, including the Court
- Case Management Framework supporting improved work practices
- Common Assessment Framework is being piloted and will provide a common method of assessment that can be used across all agencies
- Compliance Framework for the *Children and Young People Act 2008* is currently being developed

NEW SOUTH WALES

Agency Functions

The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) functions cover care and protection of children at-risk of harm, early intervention services, out-of-home care services, adoption, children's services, disaster recovery, and services to homeless people. DoCS' services are available through 7 regional offices and 86 community services centres across the state.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

Following the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, the NSW Government response, *Keep Them Safe: a shared approach to child wellbeing 2009-2014* was released on 3 March 2009. Keep Them Safe is a five-year action plan that aims to build a stronger, more effective child protection system in NSW.

A key objective of *Keep Them Safe* is to create an integrated system that supports vulnerable children, young people and their families. This includes the establishment of new reporting and referral arrangements to allow families to access appropriate services from government agencies and non-government services without having to come in contact with the statutory child protection system. The establishment of alternative service pathways is a similar approach to that adopted by some other jurisdictions, including Victoria.

Key reforms contained within the NSW Government action plan include:

- Establishing Child Wellbeing Units in NSW Health, NSW Police, the Departments of Education and Training, Housing, Ageing, Disability and Home Care and Juvenile Justice, to advise mandatory reporters within these agencies on the new statutory reporting threshold of "risk of significant harm" and to assist in responding to matters which do not meet this criteria
- Expanded services and a focus on prevention and early intervention, including:
 - expanding the Brighter Futures early intervention program to support vulnerable families with children aged 0-8 by providing access to a range of services, including quality child care, case management, parenting program and home visiting. Consideration will also be given to extending Brighter Futures to 9-14 year olds, including priority access for Aboriginal children and their families, following examination of the evidence base
 - extending intensive family preservation services to support families whose children are at-risk of entering out-of-home care
 - continuing to trial Sustained Health Home Visiting, with further expansion to be considered in 2010, which employs specialist child and family health nurses to work intensively with high needs families in pregnancy and during the first two years of a child's life
 - employing additional Home School Liaison Officers to work with families where there are concerns about non-attendance at school
- A new partnership with, and an enhanced role for, the non government sector, including:
 - funding NGOs and/or local councils to establish new Regional Intake and Referral services. These organisations will work with the Child Wellbeing Units to improve access to services for children and families. Three initial Regional Intake and Referral services will be established in 2009
 - enhancing the role of the NGO sector in the delivery of OOHC and the Brighter Futures early intervention program
 - investing in capacity building and reform of funding arrangements. In particular, the Government will work with Aboriginal communities and organisations to support communities to address the unacceptable overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system. Priority work will be undertaken with Aboriginal organisations to build their capacity to play an enhanced role in the provision of out-of-home care and other services.

Reforms since 2000

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* was implemented in stages from 2000, and reviewed in 2005-2006.

- *Brighter Futures early intervention program, introduced in 2002*, is a voluntary program providing targeted, tailored support to vulnerable families with children aged under nine years, or who are expecting a child
- *Aboriginal Intensive Family Based Service* is a unique strengths-based service targeting high risk children. The program provided support to 175 children in 2007-08
- *Families NSW* brings relevant government agencies together to provide support to families raising children up to 8 years of age. DoCS provided \$5.2 m over 4 years to roll out the Triple P parenting course to all parents with children 3-8 years. First courses began in September 2008. 1200 health, welfare and education professionals will be accredited in use of this program by 2011
- *Preschool Investment and Reform Plan* \$85 m additional funding for DoCS will provide expansion of the preschool program throughout the children's services sector, 10,500 additional children will attend preschool for 2 days a week in the year before they start school
- *Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy*, jointly funded by DoCS and NSW Health, was implemented across the State. The strategy is aimed at improving the health of Aboriginal mothers and their newborn babies by providing accessible, culturally appropriate maternity care programs for women and their families. Since its introduction in 2000, the AMIHS has achieved remarkable outcomes such as halving the rate of premature birth and perinatal mortality, improving breast-feeding and increasing access to antenatal care early in pregnancy
- *Collaboration* is promoted through the following interagency plans and processes
 - Joint Investigation Response Teams (JIRT) with DoCS, police and health, who investigate cases of child abuse that may constitute criminal offences. 3,000 such cases were referred in 2007/08
 - a new policy trialled in 2008 to improve collaboration between DoCS and NSW Health, to support at-risk pregnant women. A joint evaluation is scheduled for 2009. Both agencies have *funded statewide expansion of the NSW Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health strategy*
 - *NSW Interagency Guidelines for Child Protection Intervention 2006* (first introduced in 1991) were updated and evaluated
 - *Interagency Plan To Tackle Child Sexual Assault In Aboriginal Communities 2006-2011* contains 88 actions to prevent child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities and improve the way services are planned, coordinated and delivered to victims and their families, with a budget of more than \$52.9m over four years

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Agency Functions

The Department of Health and Families includes the Northern Territory Families and Children's Division (NTFC), the responsible agency in the Northern Territory (NT) for child protection, out-of-home care, family and parenting support, support for individuals and families in crisis including those who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, women's policy, victims of domestic or family violence or sexual assault, youth services including youth diversion services and adoption. Mandatory reporting is universal in the Northern Territory. This contrasts with all but one other jurisdiction, where only specified categories of employees are required by law to report child abuse.

The *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* provides the legal framework for care and protection services, screening for child related employment, employment of children, prevention of child deaths and regulation of children's services, and establishes a Child Death Review Committee and the post of Children's Commissioner. The Act requires decisions to be made in the best interests of the child, and describes the considerations that apply in making such a decision. The Act requires children to be treated with respect and to participate in decisions affecting them. Specific provisions relate to the treatment and placement of Aboriginal children. The Act provides for access to support for young people leaving care up to age 25.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

- Child Abuse Taskforce including Aboriginal Community Resource workers
- Co-located NTFC child protection workers in Indigenous Targeted Family Support Service organisations
- Mobile Response Teams able to be deployed as needed to relevant communities
- Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers
- Structured Decision Making tools and systems
- Secure Care initiatives for high-risk young people
- Linked up for Safe Children initiative to coordinate local solutions across the government and non government sector using a place-based framework
- Family Group Conferencing with an emphasis on providing a culturally secure approach to developing plans for the wellbeing of children at-risk
- Child Protection research partnership with the Menzies School of Health Research
- A Practice Advisor initiative to support case work practice
- A network of Safe Houses established in key communities

Reforms since 2000

The child protection system in the NT has undergone significant change since 2003 when the Caring for Our Children reform agenda was announced. Two critical elements of this reform agenda were the introduction of new legislation and the development of different responses to vulnerable children and families through the implementation of a Differential Response Framework.

In 2006 the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (the Inquiry) was established by the Northern Territory Government. The Inquiry's subsequent report⁷ - the *Little Children are Sacred* report - supported legislative and systemic reforms in the NT as critical child protection measures. Report recommendations focused on the priority action areas including:

- Education (getting children to school is vital; at school they are safe) and education campaigns to raise awareness of child sexual abuse and how to respond to it
- Reducing alcohol consumption
- Improving family support services
- Empowering Aboriginal communities
- Creating a position of Commissioner for Children and Young People

In response, the NT Government developed a generational plan of action (*Closing the Gap*) to combat Indigenous disadvantage, with funding of \$286.43 million over 5 years for initiatives across child protection; family violence; policing; justice; alcohol & drugs; health; housing; education; jobs; & culture. Since 2007, the Australian Government Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and the Northern Territory Government's responses through *Closing the Gap* have contributed to the strength and direction of reforms in the child protection system.

Major provisions of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* (CPCA) were introduced in late 2008. This legislation makes provision for the development of many new initiatives including:

- A Children's Commissioner
- *Working with Children* checks for all people working in child-related employment
- Mediation / family group conferencing
- Child Safety Review Teams
- Leaving Care support

In addition the CPCA provides the legislative basis for increased interagency collaboration in child protection by supporting the sharing of information between agencies and the development of different responses to child protection reports. The NT Differential Response Framework (the Framework) envisages low risk high needs families being referred to support agencies rather than being the subject of forensic child protection investigation. The Framework is being rolled out in a number of NT centres through the funding and establishing of Targeted Family Support Services (TFSS) to respond to the needs of these families.

The development of Aboriginal Child Protection and Family Support Services by Aboriginal agencies is a key focus in the NT's reforms and in particular the Northern Territory Government has focused on supporting Aboriginal agencies to develop TFSS's. Additionally, Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers are being based in a number of major remote Aboriginal communities. NTFC is undertaking a place-based approach to the development and delivery of services for families in remote communities and is planning to engage with communities to ensure that new services meet the needs of the community and that NTFC funded services are linked up with services in the areas of child care and health.

Forensic responses have been strengthened through the establishment and ongoing development of co-located NTFC/ Police teams, mobile response teams, and increasing resources within child protection offices including stronger risk management and decision making frameworks for child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) through the introduction of a suite of assessment and decision making tools

More therapeutic responses and a greater range of options for children in OOHC are being developed through the provision of Specialist Care placements, therapeutic services to children in care and the development of secure care options in line with the OOHC Strategic Plan.

QUEENSLAND

Agency Functions

The Department of Communities includes Child Safety Services which provides statutory child protection services delivered under the *Child Protection Act 1999*, foster and kinship care and adoption services and has 49 metropolitan and regional Child Safety Service Centres.

The Department of Communities includes Community Services which has responsibility for delivering early intervention and family support services.

Major recent and planned reforms

- 'One Chance at Childhood' initiative, a specialist program to secure safety and stability for babies and toddlers in the child protections system
- Establishment of Safe Houses in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide on-community placement and support services for children and families subject to statutory child protection
- Establishment of Therapeutic Residential Services to provide an intensive therapeutic environment to support young people to recover from the impact of physical, psychological and emotional trauma and pain experienced from abuse and neglect
- Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) system to provide a multi-agency response to the protective needs of children within the tertiary child protection system
- Establishment of Early Years Centres providing a 'one-stop-shop' where early childhood education and care, family support and health services are available for families expecting a child or with children aged up to eight years
- Referral for Active Intervention Services for families at-risk of entering statutory child protection services
- Evolve Therapeutic and Behaviour Support Services for children with complex and extreme emotional and behavioural issues

Reforms since 2000

- The Queensland Government has undertaken significant reform of its tertiary child protection system in recent years. Children in care now have education and health plans and a range of new services to support the wellbeing of children in care
- Foster carers are supported with increased allowances, enhanced foster carer training, an after hours carer helpline and a carer handbook setting out carer rights and entitlements
- Referral for Active Intervention services provide intense family support for families of children at-risk of entering out-of-home care
- Indigenous recognised entities are funded to provide support and advice about child protection decisions and placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- The Child Safety Practice Manual, Structured Decision Making tools and the statewide Integrated Client Management System have enhanced the quality of child protection practice and the capacity of child protection staff to manage their cases
- A range of specialist positions support quality practice, including court coordinators, recordkeeping officers, early childhood experts, family group meeting coordinators and therapeutic and behavioural support professionals
- The Queensland child protection system is more accountable, overseen by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian and the external child death case review committee
- Child protection officers today receive enhanced training, incentives and support to attract and retain staff particularly in rural and remote areas.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Agency functions

The SA Department for Families and Communities (DFC) is responsible for child protection, family support, out-of-home care, young offenders, adoption, refugee children, support to families in poverty, and disaster recovery. Services are delivered through 18 district centres across three regions.

The safety and wellbeing of children is considered a shared community responsibility. Accordingly, government continues to work towards greater collaboration between government agencies (particularly health, education and police), with the non-government sector and with families.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

- New targeted early intervention initiatives
- New family preservation and reunification initiatives;
- A new integrated child and family case management system
- New models for out-of-home care
- Reshaping the child protection system towards relationship based practice
- Children's Centres that bring together health, education, community and family services for families and their children from 0-8 years
- Whole of Government protocol for sharing information where a child is at-risk
- New responses to drug and alcohol related concerns for the care and protection of children
- The *Keeping Them Safe – in Our Care* strategy will continue in 2008-09 with more community based services to support families who are subject to child protection notifications, to stabilise the family situation and enhance parenting capacity; and to develop intensive family preservation services for families with children at high risk of entry to alternative care, and to return those children who are in alternative care to the safe care of their family.

Reforms since 2000

In 2002, the government commissioned Robyn Layton, QC, to conduct a *Review of Child Protection in South Australia*.

The Government responded to the recommendations of the *Review* with *Keeping Them Safe: the South Australian Government's child protection reform program*. The reform agenda prioritises children's safety and wellbeing and promotes greater collaboration between government agencies, with the non-government sector and with families. The program included amendments to the *Children's Protection Act 1993* that were proclaimed in 2006 that:

- prioritise the care and protection of children as the first consideration in all planning and decision making
- provide a stronger commitment to make sure that children and their families have access to support services
- build community capacity to protect children through the establishment of child safe environments
- establish common standards across all sectors for criminal history checking;
- extend mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse
- establish the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young Persons to promote the best interests of children under guardianship of the Minister
- establish the Council for the Care of Children to review the operations of legislation, and report to and advise the Minister on all matters affecting the safety of children
- establish the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee to review the circumstances and causes of deaths and serious injuries to children and makes recommendations to Government.

In 2005 South Australia established *Rapid Response: Whole of Government Services – a Framework and*

Action Plan with the aim of ensuring that children and young people under the guardianship of the Minister for Families and Communities receive the supports and services available to those with strong family networks through priority access to government funded services. Part of the focus of *Rapid Response* is the provision of transition planning from care, including the provision of post Guardianship supports and services.

In 2008 \$192m was committed over 4 years to the *Keeping Them Safe – In Our Care strategy*. It emphasises early intervention, early years services, whole child within family context, and ‘joined up’ government responses. Reforms through the Stronger Families Safer Children program emphasise strengthening families and keeping them together wherever possible; tackling problems and building capacity in families; and providing stable, high-quality care; individualised and integrated care plans; taking better care of children with complex needs; training carers and keeping them informed; better remunerating carers; and helping grandparent carers access services for children.

Policies, procedures, practice frameworks and practice guidelines are undergoing considerable review and development across all aspects of the care and protection process to support the substantial reforms.

Aboriginal-specific initiatives include:

- embedding the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in legislation and policy
- a dedicated Aboriginal service providing advice and assistance on abuse and neglect of Aboriginal children
- a specialist metropolitan-based team of Aboriginal service providers delivering targeted youth work services
- the *Aboriginal Culture and Identity Program* which supports preservation of family and cultural ties for Aboriginal children and young people who are under the Minister’s guardianship.

In April 2008 SA Parliament received the *Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry Report (Mullighan report)* on abuse of children in care from Commissioner The Hon EP Mullighan QC. The Government responded initially with services for survivors of abuse and neglect and made compensation available to adult victims. Commissioner Mullighan also investigated allegations of child sexual abuse on the APY lands. The Government is progressing responses to Commissioner Mullighan’s recommendations including proposals for legislative reform.

TASMANIA

Agency Functions

The responsibilities of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) cover a broad range of services including both acute and primary health care as well as mental health and drug and alcohol services, and human services. Human Services comprise Housing Tasmania and Disability, Child, Youth and Family Services which are delivered through 4 area offices. As part of a staged reform process commencing in 2009 some human services will be delivered by the non-government sector. Ongoing partnership arrangements between the Department and service providers will ensure that services are coordinated with a client focus and quality assured.

The Tasmanian Government both provides and funds a range of services to ensure that children and families are supported, particular in the early years. These are delivered through the universal Child Health and Parenting Services (DHHS); the Department of Education (Launching into Learning); and an array of non-government organisations. Tasmania recognises the need to strengthen parenting capacity and family functioning, as well as the importance of early intervention and the need to monitor any potential for cumulative harm in family circumstances that are less than ideal.

As well as this, the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997* mandates that all adults have a responsibility to report suspected abuse or neglect of a child; and certain “prescribed persons”, such as health sector staff, teachers, people who work with children, must report concerns or face a penalty. The legislation describes the safety and wellbeing of children as a shared community responsibility; has a focus on taking on the viewpoint of the child; and includes principles of the *best interests of the child* and *Aboriginal placement*.

This legislation is complemented by the “Safe at Home” Program, an integrated whole of Government response to family violence in Tasmania. “Safe at Home” is enabled by the provisions of the *Family Violence Act 2004*. In 2008 the Tasmanian Safe at Home Program was the National Winner of the Australian Crime and Prevention Award.

The Tasmanian Commissioner for Children examines legislation, policy and practices that affect the health, welfare, care, protection and development of all children to help ensure they operate in the best interests of the child. “Children” includes all children and young people under the age of 18 years.

A series of recent reviews revealed a system with limited capacity to respond to the needs of children, young people and families. Services were not reflecting current research findings about early brain development and the need for a focus on prevention and early intervention to alleviate the stress on the tertiary system. As a result, Tasmania wanted to adopt well researched, outcome-focused service models from other jurisdictions.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

- establishing Community Gateway Services to provide a single community entry point in each area which will enable children and families to ask for support (and other professionals to refer them for support) through the Community Gateways without reference to the child protection system
- establishing integrated family support services in each of the four areas in Tasmania
- the establishment of 30 child and family centres across Tasmania, with construction on the first 8 to begin in 2009
- reforming out-of-home care services and disability services including funding to have these services provided by the non-government sector
- staged implementation of a new Child Protection Information System (CPIS) from 2008. The new system has given Child Protection Services an increased capacity to manage the entry, allocation and approval of notifications and investigations
- integrating local services
- the introduction of the Tasmanian Child Protection Practice Framework based on New Zealand research and practice.

Reforms since 2000

The primary aims of Tasmania's reforms have been to meet the needs of children, young people and their families; to identify and support children and young people at the highest risk of abuse or neglect; to be culturally responsive and strengths and evidence based; and to build a more responsive system through greater use of non-government family services.

Four regional service centres have been created to replace the centralised intake. Each service centre is required to develop a network of service supports building on existing resources (health services, schools, police etc.). Over time these service centres and networks will integrate with the Community Gateways providing a community intake point for children and young people at-risk. A co-located child protection worker will assist with this process.

The aim of the coordinated children and family services is to:

- focus on early intervention and prevention
- create system capacity to respond to needs of vulnerable families
- monitor cumulative harm
- provide therapeutic services where required
- use coordinated planning for intervention and integrated responses.

Because of the overall focus outlined above, Child Protection Services is able to target the more serious cases of abuse and neglect. Further, in 2008 Child Protection Services adopted a "response model" which reorientates staff into three teams: intake, response and case management. Intake has been decentralised to each area and intake teams work with senior child protection staff to determine which cases require a child protection response, while the response team is required to conduct an assessment of the risk to children in a way that is timely (completed within four weeks).

A five-year reform plan for out-of-home care services commenced in 2008 and includes:

- providing a greater range of placement options
- improving stability of placement for children and young people in care including the option of "transfer of guardianship" to an approved stable carer
- improving support to carers
- better coordination and matching of child to carer within the placement process
- a move in the future to recruitment, training and accrediting carers being undertaken by the non-government sector
- the development and implementation of individual care plans for each child or young person in care.

VICTORIA

Agency Functions

The Victorian Government has a progressive and ambitious reform agenda for Victorian child and family services. Developed in close partnership with the Victorian Community Service Organisations, the *Every Child Every Chance* reforms have focused on putting children and young people first, the goal being to ensure that vulnerable children and young people thrive, learn and grow and are respected and valued to become effective adults. The reforms are underpinned by a commitment to best practice. They have been informed by contemporary national and international research and innovative approaches to strengthening vulnerable families, protecting children and young people and promoting vulnerable children's healthy development, safety and wellbeing – learning that has been tailored to Victorian circumstances and needs.

Victoria's approach recognises that all children need capable, nurturing parents and a caring child and family friendly community. The reforms emphasise the importance of supporting parents to play this role. Where parents experience stresses that impact on their care of children, Victoria's first goal is always to work supportively with them to keep families together. If children cannot live safely at home, work is undertaken intensively with their parents to address problems, build resilience and enable a child to return home safely as quickly as possible. Where this is not possible, the goal is to ensure that children experience stable and high-quality alternative care. Victoria's approach recognises that the protection of children cannot be separated from policies and programs to improve children's lives as a whole.

Major Recent and Planned Reforms

Enshrining children's best interests at the heart of all decision making

- The Victorian legislation builds a shared responsibility for protecting children and young people, but also proactively promotes their development and longer term wellbeing. Harm needs to be better understood so as to encompass accumulated harm, as well as acute crisis, or a single serious incident. The new best interests principles provides a common framework for everyone working under the Victorian legislation.

Building an integrated service system that is more localised, better coordinated and is responsive to family needs

- The problems facing vulnerable families have become more complex in recent times. Substance abuse and family violence have become the most common characteristics of families in contact with child protection. Where children and young people are at-risk of harm, their families are often grappling with one or more issues from amongst long-term poverty, social exclusion, relationship breakdown, family violence, substance abuse, mental illness or disability. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Services need to be tailored to local conditions and needs
- There is no evidence that relying on child protection as the primary service to protect vulnerable children and families makes a sufficient lasting difference. Victoria's approach is based on building a flexible and graduated range of service responses. Major system reform is necessary to bring earlier intervention and child protection sectors together, and link them to early childhood services to form a coordinated system
- From April 2007, Child FIRST (Child and Family Information Referral and Support Teams) were introduced to provide an identifiable entry point to services needed to support children, young people and families where there are concerns for the wellbeing of a child or young person. Child FIRST is now in place across all of Victoria, covering 24 catchments.

Reforms to assist Aboriginal children and families

- The recognition of the positive value of Aboriginal culture is reflected in the Best Interest Principles governing all decision making in Victoria
- The Victorian legislation permits the transfer of guardianship responsibilities from DHS to an Aboriginal Head of an Aboriginal organisation
- Measures are underway to build the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to provide child and family welfare services, including out-of-home care, for Aboriginal families

Children in out-of-home care – improving children’s stability

- A critical theme of Victoria’s reforms is improving vulnerable children and young people’s stability in care and wellbeing, recognising scientific knowledge about the lasting impact of early experiences on the development of young children’s brains. This is reflected in a focus on stability planning to address how a child will receive continuous, stable care away from home and the use of specified time frames. Despite reducing the number of new entrants into out-of-home care, Victoria’s Out-of-home Care system is faced with a number of new and emerging challenges into the future.

A new response to children aged 10-15 exhibiting sexually abusive behaviour

- Recognition of the inability of the criminal justice system to provide a reliable pathway into treatment for young people who exhibit sexually abusive behaviour, led to a new legislative basis for providing a therapeutic intervention earlier to help prevent ongoing and more serious sexual offences.

The Victorian reforms have so far contributed to a 7.2% drop in substantiated abuse between 1999/00 and 2006/07 while substantiation rates have risen 143% nationally.

Reforms since 2000

The continued progress of Victoria’s broad reforms include:

- enshrining children and young people’s best interests at the heart of all decision making and service delivery
- encouraging the participation of children, young people and their families in the decision-making processes that affect their lives
- building a more integrated service system across the universal, secondary and tertiary tiers of child, youth and family services – a service system that is localised, better coordinated and that is responsive to family needs
- boosting earlier intervention and prevention through the use of community-based intake, assessment and referral when families first show signs of difficulty, and targeting family support services at the most vulnerable groups and communities
- improving children’s stability, especially in the critical early childhood years
- strengthening the cultural responsiveness of services so that community services are inclusive of children and young people from Aboriginal and other cultural backgrounds;
- keeping Aboriginal children and young people better connected to their culture and community when in care
- ensuring that all child, youth and family services are accountable and of high-quality.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Agency Functions

The Department for Child Protection's mission is "to provide for the protection of and care for children and young people, and to support at-risk individuals and families in resolving crises". The Department has the central role in providing for the protection and care of children and young people throughout Western Australia, which is best achieved in partnership with other Government agencies and the community services sector.

Section 21(1)a of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* describes the functions of the Chief Executive Officer of the Department for Child Protection as including "to consider and initiate, or assist in, the provision of social services to children, other individuals, families and communities". Directing and encouraging children and families to engage in social services to best address their problems is one of the primary objects of the legislation.

As part of, and in addition to, its statutory functions, the Department for Child Protection provides core service funding to the community services sector to respond to the issues and challenges faced by vulnerable children, families and individuals. This partnership enables a wide range of services and programs to be delivered throughout the State.

The 2007 Ford Review examined the key functions and systems of the former Department for Community Development, resulting in a significant focus on child protection reform in Western Australia. The Ford Review made 79 recommendations to address deficits in the child protection system, and each has been addressed through a comprehensive reform program.

Following the Ford Review, the following three service areas were defined by the Department for Child Protection:

1. Supporting children and young people in the CEO's care.
2. Protecting children and young people from abuse.
3. Supporting individuals and families at-risk or in crisis.

These areas reflect the priority that the Department has placed on its protection and care responsibilities through the direct provision of tertiary services. It is important to recognise as well that it also has responsibility in supporting individuals and families at-risk or in crisis through the delivery or contracting of secondary services.

The Department works across government and the community services sector to prevent child abuse and neglect. This is achieved through interagency collaboration and promoting joint responsibility with key stakeholders for responding to concerns about children's safety and wellbeing.

Major Recent Reforms

The Department is adopting and implementing Signs of Safety framework as the basis of consistent, evidence-based child protection practice across all Departmental child protection services. *Signs of Safety* seeks to create a more constructive culture around child protection organisation and practice. Central to this approach is the use of specific practice tools and processes where child protection and other professionals and family members can engage to address situations of child abuse and neglect.

Child protection practice policy and field worker guidelines are being streamlined and revised to reduce unnecessary processes and be more accessible and relevant for front line practitioners.

On 1 January 2009, mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse by teachers, doctors, nurses, midwives and police officers came into effect.

The Department's Foster Care Partnership was developed in partnership with the Foster Care Association. It encompasses a partnership model and associated practice guidelines. The model is centred first on the child, and second, highlights the critical role of the foster family team in providing daily protection and nurture to the foster child. The third element of the model is the surrounding, encompassing role of the Department care team supporting the foster placement.

The introduction of health and education plans for children in care is underway. All children who enter care will be screened for physical, developmental and educational difficulties. Once their needs have been assessed, a plan to address these needs will be put into place and monitored on a regular basis.

A Strategic Framework and State Plan for Supporting Individuals and Families At-risk is being developed, to bring together the significant range of secondary services that the Department and other government agencies directly provide or fund through the community services sector. A framework that spans current and future directions will help to improve the planning and provision of services, and remain responsive to the community's needs.

A family and domestic violence co-location model places Senior Field Workers (Family and Domestic Violence) with the Police Service to improve screening, information sharing and expedite responses.

A range of initiatives to improve the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system are being implemented. This includes the creation of Consultants' Aboriginal Services to assist caseworkers to work more effectively with Aboriginal families, and integrating Aboriginal perspectives through the Department's learning framework.

Educational resources and guidelines to promote information sharing between as provided for under S23 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* are being introduced together with a simple model for local Interagency Child Safety Teams.

Reforms since 2000

Organisational Arrangements

- The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* has been enacted.
- A new portfolio advisory structure has been established comprising:
 - Ministerial Advisory Council on Child Protection
 - Child Safety Directors Group (interagency)
 - Community Sector Advisory Group
 - CREATE Advisory Group (young people)
 - Aboriginal Reference Group
- The State Government appointed the first Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Aboriginal Services

- Initiatives to strengthen responses to Aboriginal families and communities have been implemented, including securing an on-going commitment to the Strong Families interagency case management program, Community Child Protection Workers in remote areas, Youth and Family Engagement Workers and the Best Beginnings early childhood intervention program.
- A multi-agency approach to dealing with sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities has been implemented.

Care standards

- Processes to investigate and respond to allegations of abuse in care have been implemented.
- The *Better Care Better Services* (Standards for Children and Young People in Protection and Care) have been implemented by the newly established Standards Monitoring Unit.

Interagency Developments

- The childFIRST Assessment and Interview Team has been expanded, and provides a joint response between the Department for Child Protection and the WA Police.
- A tripartite protocol has been signed by the Departments of Health, Child Protection and Police regarding the reporting of sexually transmitted infections in children.

Workforce

- A comprehensive workforce development plan has been developed to comprising attraction and retention strategies; role and position redesign; and enhanced quality assurance systems.

