



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Government Submission

Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for the Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory (the Inquiry)

Contributing agency:

Department of Social Services

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Social Services acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

Terms of Reference:

Community safety, support services and job opportunities in the Northern Territory, with particular reference to:

- (a) the preparation for the sunseting of the Stronger Futures legislation;
- (b) community safety and alcohol management;
- (c) job opportunities and Community Development Program reform;
- (d) justice reinvestment community services; and
- (e) any related matters.



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1. Introduction

The Department of Social Services (the department) is making this submission as the department responsible for designing and implementing a range of social policy programs, payments and frameworks that impact safety, support services, and job opportunities in the Northern Territory. These include income support payments, disability, family and early childhood programs, women's safety, and income management, which intersect with policies previously governed under the Stronger Futures legislation.

This submission focuses on items from the terms of reference that are relevant to, or interact with, the department's portfolio responsibilities, specifically:

- children and women's safety
- community development, and
- income support and income management.

1.1. The Department of Social Services - portfolio responsibilities

The department's mission is to improve the wellbeing of individuals and families in Australian communities, which it does through a diverse range of government policies, programs, services and payments.

The department administers services and payments that assist families, children and older people, provide a safety net for those who cannot fully support themselves, enhance the wellbeing of people with high needs, assist those who need help with care, help those with injury, disability or illness to overcome barriers to securing employment, and support a diverse and harmonious society.

2. Inquiry into community safety, support services and job opportunities in the Northern Territory:

2.1. Community safety and alcohol management

2.1.1. The Coordinated Investment Framework and 10 Year Generational Strategy

A key recommendation of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (Royal Commission) was the establishment of a tripartite partnership which includes the Northern Territory Community Sector (including the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector), Australian and Northern Territory governments. This has been realised in the establishment of the Children and Families Tripartite Forum (Tripartite Forum).

The department is one of three Australian Government members of these partnership arrangements. The partnership has established a new way of working where there is increased collaboration and shared leadership between the two tiers of government, the community sector and communities. This approach reflects a commitment by all members of the partnership to embed mechanisms which allow for community voices to be fed into strategic policy, planning, and accountability processes. The partnership aims to increase community safety by supporting wide-ranging, whole-of-government, cross-sectoral reforms in services for children, young people and families in, or at risk of entering, the child protection or youth justice systems in the Northern Territory.



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The partnership has led to the development of a Coordinated Investment Framework (the Framework), which is an agreement between the Northern Territory and Australian governments (the Parties). The Framework outlines the Parties' commitment to working together to plan, fund and deliver services to prevent harm and improve safety and wellbeing outcomes for children in the Northern Territory.

The Framework supports the implementation of the Tripartite Forum's *Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory* (the 10 Year Generational Strategy) by guiding funding arrangements between the Parties to improve coordination and efficiency of government investment in children and families in the Northern Territory.

The Framework outlines how the Parties will work together, with local government, communities and service providers, to implement the policy objectives of both the 10 Year Generational Strategy and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, through targeted and coordinated investment.

The 10 Year Generational Strategy was another key recommendation from the Royal Commission, and is intended to create a standardised framework to drive the development and delivery of services for children and families in the Northern Territory.

The Generational Strategy was developed in 2021, endorsed by the Northern Territory Government in March 2022, and the Australian Government in October 2022. The Generational Strategy commits to ensuring children, young people and families are safe and can access services to enhance their lives. The Generational Strategy reflects a First Nations worldview as a result of the over-representation of First Nations children and families within the child protection and youth justice systems in the Northern Territory. The Generational Strategy outlines a commitment to cultural safety, truth-telling and healing as key tenets of ensuring that children are safe, families are together, and communities are strong.

2.1.2. Safe and Supported

Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (Safe and Supported) sets out Australia's 10-year strategy to make significant and sustained progress in reducing the rates of child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts. Its aim is for all children and young people in Australia to reach their full potential by growing up safe and supported, free from harm and neglect. Safe and Supported was launched in December 2021, following the expiration of the previous National Framework (the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*).

Safe and Supported builds on the previous National Framework and was informed by extensive consultations led by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) and Families Australia, as well as an evaluation of the previous National Framework led by PricewaterhouseCoopers and regular meetings of Community Services Ministers.

Safe and Supported focuses on priority groups that are experiencing disadvantage and/or vulnerability and are over-represented in child protection systems, including:

- children and families with multiple and complex needs
- First Nations children and young people experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable
- children and young people and/or parents/carers with disability experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable, and
- children and young people who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, including children in out-of-home care and young people leaving out-of-home care and transitioning to adulthood.



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The four focus areas of Safe and Supported are:

- a national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage
- addressing the over-representation of First Nations children in child protection systems
- improving information sharing, data development and analysis, and
- strengthening the child and family sector and workforce capability.

Safe and Supported strongly focuses on addressing the increasing numbers of First Nations children in child protection systems. At 30 June 2021, of the 970 children in out-of-home care in the Northern Territory, roughly 91% were First Nations children. 34.5 per 1,000 First Nations children were in out-of-home care in the Northern Territory. This is in comparison to 2.5 per 1,000 non-Indigenous children.

Safe and Supported is the key Australian Government initiative for achieving Target 12 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which aims to reduce the rate of over-representation of First Nations children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031.

Safe and Supported will be delivered by two 5-year action plans – a First Action Plan and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan. The action plans include an outcomes framework, a story of change, and governance arrangements, and detail what will be implemented in the first five years of Safe and Supported.

Consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the action plans have been developed in partnership between Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group (Leadership Group), and in consultation with the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. The action plans were endorsed in-principle by Community Services Ministers and the Leadership Group on 14 October 2022, and are expected to be publicly launched in December 2022.

The First Action Plan focuses on children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and/or are vulnerable, and includes actions and activities relating to:

- early supports, and addressing the social determinants of child protection intervention
- a coordinated data and research approach
- building a sustainable and skilled children and families services workforce including carers
- listening to living experience and embedding the voice of the child in program and policy design in the context of Safe and Supported implementation
- improving lifetime outcomes for children and young people in and leaving out-of-home care
- improved support for carers, and
- effective and timely responses for children and young people, parents and carers living with disability.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan focuses on First Nations children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and/or are vulnerable and includes actions and activities relating to:

- enabling self-determination, including through the delegation of authority from governments to First Nations peoples in child protection systems
- growing the proportion of services delivered by First Nations community-controlled organisations through targeted investment strategies
- supporting First Nations-led evidence and data, including to support data sovereignty
- building a sustainable First Nations workforce



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- working to implement all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including through the development of national standards
- improving access to legal services for First Nations children and families engaged with child protection systems
- improving advocacy roles within jurisdictions to improve accountability of governments to First Nations peoples, and
- working with relevant portfolios to address the social determinants of child safety and wellbeing for First Nations children, young people and families.

These actions align with and support the priorities and commitments of the Northern Territory 10 Year Generational Strategy. Crucially, this work will empower communities in the Northern Territory to develop their own solutions to the challenges they face by fostering and strengthening regional and community partnerships and First Nations leadership.

Safe and Supported has also been developed to coordinate and align with other relevant national initiatives, such as the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030*, the new *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*, and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy*.

2.1.3. Stronger Places, Stronger People

The Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative forms part of the department's response to the Royal Commission's recommendations that the Australian and Northern Territory governments invest in place-based approaches. Stronger Places, Stronger People supports the foundation of a community-led collective impact approach in the Barkly region through the Barkly Backbone and governance arrangements that have a focus on implementation of the Barkly Regional Deal.

The Barkly Backbone team is a sector-neutral, local project team that facilitates local planning, inclusive engagement, evidence and data collection, measurement and evaluation, collaborative decision-making, governance, and local action. The team is accountable to the Barkly Governance Table.

The Barkly Backbone fosters community engagement, including through the Aboriginal Alliance, and enables community voices to provide advice on lived experience, local priorities and community led activities to the Barkly Governance Table. This approach allows three levels of government, the Aboriginal Alliance and community partners to make decisions together based on a holistic understanding of community strengths, challenges and localised service delivery issues.

Priorities that are currently under consideration by community and the Governance Table include:

- youth-focused infrastructure and supporting youth participation in the design of diversionary programs, services and activities;
- strengthening the focus on community safety, including improvements to local data collection to understand community need; and,
- supporting community-led discussions on strategies aimed at improving community safety and interweaving those issues into Barkly Regional Deal Priorities.



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2.1.4. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes a strong commitment to the safety of First Nations peoples and communities, with the department being the Australian Government lead for those targets specifically aimed at addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and reducing the rate of family violence and abuse against First Nations women and children. The department is also the lead Commonwealth department for the housing target, and the cross-cutting priority of disability.

- Outcome 12: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not over-represented in the child protection system, includes Target 12 (out-of-home care) to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent, by 2031.
- Outcome 13: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe, includes Target 13 (family violence) to reduce the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50% by 2031, as progress towards zero.
- Outcome 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need, includes Target 9a to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent, by 2031.

Each of these Outcomes and targets are important for contributing to the safety of First Nations peoples and communities.

Four measures announced in August 2021 as part of the 2021-22 Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan are the responsibility of the department. Three measures are aimed at addressing Outcome 12 (out-of-home care), and one measure at addressing Outcome 12 and Outcome 13 (family violence).

The department is partnering with jurisdictions and First Nations stakeholders to develop and implement actions to achieve these targets.

Investment of \$98.5 million by the Australian Government across the four measures includes:

- \$49 million over five years to improve multidisciplinary responses to First Nations families with multiple and complex needs, by redesigning service models (Target 12).
- \$7.7 million over three years to develop the cultural awareness and trauma responsiveness of the department funded Indigenous and non-Indigenous child and family sector workforce (Target 12).
- \$3.2 million over two years to identify the strengths, needs, barriers and opportunities of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) in delivering the department's Families and Children Activity programs, and increase their involvement (Target 12).
- \$38.6 million over three years to fund projects, co-developed with ACCOs, that contribute to Targets 12 and 13, and focus on building the evidence base for the impacts of services in communities.

The delivery of these measures may contribute to support services in the Northern Territory (noting that target locations for each measure have not been finalised and may not include the Northern Territory in every instance).



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For Outcome 9, a combined \$1.1 billion investment with the Northern Territory government under the National Partnership for Remote Housing Northern Territory (NPRHNT), will be administered through the National Indigenous Australian's Agency from 2018-2023. In addition, the NPRHNT was granted an extension for one-year until June 2024 in the 2022-23 October Budget. The Government will negotiate a new remote housing agreement with the Northern Territory at the completion of the one-year extension.

2.1.5. Women's Safety

On 17 October 2022, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments released the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (National Plan)¹. The National Plan has a specific focus on addressing the disproportionate rates of violence against First Nations women. The National Plan supports measures designed to achieve the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Target 13 (family violence).

The Australian Government established the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence (Advisory Council) in June 2021, which comprises 16 highly-respected First Nations community and sector leaders representing a wide range of language and cultural groups from across all states and territories and the Torres Strait, and two Special Advisors. The Advisory Council provides advice to the government on the development and implementation of the National Plan and is leading the development of the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan (Action Plan) under the National Plan. The Action Plan is a key mechanism for government efforts to meet Target 13 (family violence) of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The National Plan commits to improving and building capacity in mainstream government institutions, services and responses in line with Priority Reform Three (Transforming Government Organisations) of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, so that these are culturally safe and can better meet the needs of First Nations peoples and communities. The National Plan also simultaneously supports building the community controlled sector to enable community-driven, strengths-based, localised approaches to prevent violence against First Nations peoples in line with Priority Reform Two (Building the Community-Controlled Sector).

The Advisory Council is developing the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under the National Plan in genuine partnership with government and in consultation with First Nations Elders, organisations and communities across Australia. The Action Plan will focus on addressing immediate safety needs of First Nations families and communities and laying the foundations for long-term structural and policy change. The actions within the plan will be community-led, healing informed and will draw upon the strength and endurance of First Nations lore and culture.

The Government has also committed to delivering a future standalone First Nations National Plan to address the complex and sensitive factors driving violence against First Nations women and children.

The Government is providing \$15.5 million to the Northern Territory under the National Partnership on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses 2021-23 (FDSV National Partnership). This includes recently announced additional funding of \$10.7 million in 2022-23. The Northern Territory will receive 5.7 per cent of the total \$270.7 million FDSV National Partnership funding over two years.

¹ [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#)



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Funding will be used for services such as helplines, specialist support services for children, perpetrator interventions and men's behaviour change programs.

2.2. Related matters

2.2.1. Income Management

Income Management quarantines between 50 and 90 per cent of income support payments and provides participants with face to face support from Services Australia. Income managed funds are unable to be spent on alcohol, gambling, tobacco, pornography, and other related products and are unable to be withdrawn as cash.

Income Management participants are provided with a BasicsCard to access their income managed funds. As at 30 September 2022, there are 22,349 Income Management participants in the Northern Territory.

The Government funds services to deliver support to people in these locations, including:

- Money Support Hubs, which offer financial literacy, counselling and advice (i.e. on internet banking, setting up a bank account, gaining an ATM card and using banking facilities);
- Emergency Relief providers offer free assistance to help people meet immediate basic needs in times of financial crisis, for example through food, clothing, vouchers (e.g. fuel and pharmaceutical), contributions to utility bills, budgeting assistance and referrals to other support services.
- Digital Connectivity support to improve financial and digital literacy skills and capabilities.

This also includes funding for improved mobile and internet connectivity in remote communities.

As part of the Government's broader commitments around cashless welfare programs, the Government will be consulting with affected communities and First Nations leaders on the reform of Income Management (IM), including a voluntary program for those people who want it.

2.2.2. Income Support

The department is responsible for policies and programs that deliver a sustainable social security system to support people who need assistance. This includes responsibility for working age payments such as JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance. These payments are designed to support Australians who are unable to support themselves while they look for a job or have a temporary injury or incapacity.

In the Northern Territory, there are 20,509 JobSeeker Payment or Youth Allowance (other) recipients.

Addressing barriers to employment for recipients of working age payments is a priority of the Government to ensure everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the dignity of work. The department has a number of policies and programs in place to address barriers to work, including as a result of outcomes from the Jobs and Skills Summit held on 1 and 2 September 2022.

The Summit is being followed by an Employment White Paper² that will analyse labour force participation, labour supply and improving employment opportunities. As part of this, the White Paper will consider reducing barriers and disincentives to work, including the role of childcare, social security settings and employment services, and improving labour market outcomes for those who face challenges in employment. Target groups will include First Nations people, those who live in rural and remote areas, younger and older Australians, people with disability, and those who may experience discrimination.

² [Employment White Paper | Treasury.gov.au](https://www.treasury.gov.au/employment-white-paper)