

## **NATIONAL COALITION ON CHILD SAFETY AND WELLBEING**

### **ANNUAL MEETING – 1 JUNE 2023**

(Held via Microsoft Teams)

#### **Summary**

Approximately 100 members and stakeholders - representing approximately 50 organisations and research bodies - attended the annual meeting. The meeting was facilitated by Jamie Crosby, CEO Families Australia and Convenor of the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing (National Coalition).

A copy of the agenda is at **Attachment A**. A list of participating organisations is at **Attachment B**.

Presenters included Professor Ben Mathews, from the Queensland University of Technology, and Professor Daryl Higgins from the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University; and Chris Collett, First Assistant Secretary, Children and Families Division, Attorney-General's Department.

In addition to questions and answer discussion following each presentation, participants were encouraged to post comments and questions to the 'chat function' throughout the course of the meeting. A summary is at **Attachment C**.

#### **Agenda Item 1: Acknowledgements and Overview (Jamie Crosby CEO, Families Australia, Convenor of the National Coalition Steering Group)**

Mr Crosby commenced the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country across the multiple Traditional Lands and Sea Country on which members and stakeholders were based.

#### **Agenda Item 2: Australian Child Maltreatment Study 2019-23: Findings and implications** Professor Ben Mathews and Professor Daryl Higgins

Professor Mathews started by observing that while many of the findings of the ACMS are disturbing, it is important to also see the findings can provide some positive impetus and can help to advance, build on and calibrate work that has been happening in Australia over the past decade, including the frameworks in our national plan. He acknowledged the enormous amount of pain and suffering involved in child maltreatment in this country, but stated the focus of this presentation will be on some of the positive findings that can be drawn and also on the constructive findings that can be drawn about areas for priority prevention in future. A discussion of key findings of the ACMS then ensued. To read the ACMS see [here](#).

At the end of the presentation Professor Higgins provided some key recommendations including:

- A national coordinated approach to better prevention and responses, noting that a public health approach is the best way of addressing, at the population level, exposures to harm.
- Backed up with broad societal level changes that address some of the social determinants that underpin what allows children to be exposed to these kinds of harms. This should involve collaboration across different sectors across the community, including providing better supports to parents. Professor Higgins noted his personal view that there is a need for substantially more investment in provision of evidence-based parenting supports across the community.

- There is a need for a paradigm shift in recognising the harm of emotional abuse, but secondly, in driving a primary prevention approach to addressing it. This again links back to provision of supports for parents.
- Prevention education needs to occur, not only into schools, but for families so they can equip children with the skills and knowledge to prevent harm, not just from adults, but also from other children and young people (noting the latter is one of the biggest areas of child sexual abuse).

Lastly, Professor Higgins discussed the implications noting:

- The broadest implication is better supports for children and their parents, particularly those who are at risk. This includes being trauma-informed, culturally aware, child-focused.
- Data from the multi-type maltreatment risk reveals that children may become more vulnerable during periods where their parents are struggling (e.g. separation, divorce or when parents themselves experience domestic and family violence, mental health challenges, substance misuse, or economic hardship). Therefore, there is a need to be able to increase the intensity of supports in a timely manner to address some of those adversities, so children aren't placed at risk.
- This requires better coordination across our primary prevention strategies, which are currently quite disparate, in terms of the different actions, different targets and where the investment is coming from.
- Furthermore, there is a need to consider other prevention strategies such as for mental health issues, suicide prevention, etc. How does the role of preventing and reducing risk of exposure to child maltreatment contribute to that?
- The second area is better support for adult survivors. We know that many of your agencies are also involved in provision of services to adults. We need to be thinking about addressing the past trauma that many adults have experienced noting that 62% of our sample had experienced one or more forms of abuse and neglect. This means being aware that these traumatic experiences may contribute to health or mental health presentations.
- Finally, there is a call to action in terms of primary prevention. That means attitude change across the community. It means giving access to evidence-based supports to improve parenting skills. In terms of addressing the kind of sexual revolution that we need to have in order to drive a prevention strategy around sexual abuse, we need to be looking at what has been learnt from Child Safe organisational strategies leading to a reduction in harm from sexual abuse in institutional contexts. How can we roll that out more broadly? How can we think about the supports parents have to be able to identify risks and to be able to equip their children and young people with knowledge and skills and their ability to be able to respond?
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**Agenda Item 3: Update from the Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth) on child safety and wellbeing initiatives (Chris Collett, First Assistant Secretary, Children and Families Division, Attorney-General's Department)**

Mr Collett began by outlining the three core areas of focus within the Attorney-General's Department's Children and Families Division – child safety, family law and family safety – and gave an overview of some of the responsibilities and issues within them. He then unpacked some of the department's specific priorities.

**National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse**

Mr Collett said the royal commission was a seminal moment for Australia in shining a light on this incredibly important issue. The recommendations that came from it and the response at government levels and in the community are important to ensure the conversation continues and we keep doing better in protection our children and learning from experiences in the past.

The national office is responsible for coordination and many measures under the national strategy, including education and awareness. Specific responses include:

- The department is developing a range of public national awareness-raising campaign materials for Australian adults aimed at changing perceptions and behaviour relating to child sexual abuse. This will include helping people recognise and respond to warning signs that a child or young person might be at risk of sexual abuse.
  - The campaign has undertaken research in the community to better understand the knowledge, attributes and beliefs that exist across the country. The key findings indicate the majority of participants believe that keeping children safe from sexual abuse is incredibly important, but most are not actively engaging on the topic and don't feel like they understand the issues.
  - The campaign is moving from a research phase now into a creative development phase, which will involve focus group testing.
  - The research indicates that a fear-based approach would be inadequate and won't change community behaviour. It simply encourages many people to minimise or deflect the issue, because it's so very uncomfortable.
  - The campaign is anticipated to launch in late 2023 and the department wants to see that becoming a long-term multi-phase campaign in the public domain.
  
- In the child safety space, the department has been working on the development of a **national support service for non-offending family members and friends of child sexual abuse perpetrators**. The project is in its final scoping phase.
  - Once operational, it's expected there will be a national hotline and tailored support.
  - The service will provide support and advocacy for non-offending family members, both initially and on an ongoing basis.
  - This work with law enforcement to build a better trauma-informed approach to dealing with non-offending family members will enable the ability to then make and receive warm referrals between related support services and enforcement agencies.
  
- The department is developing a **national framework to understand and respond to children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours** and how we prevent these behaviours from occurring. This work includes:
  - Establishing nationally consistent terminology and language.
  - Developing national principles to provide guidance to government and non-government organisations, professionals, practitioners etc. to understand sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people.
  - The work is informed by the National Strategies Advisory Group and the National Clinical Reference Group.
  
- In the offender prevention and intervention space, the department is developing a **national prevention service** for adults who have sexual thoughts about children and young people.
  - This goes to quintessential prevention, interrupting adults before these behaviours and criminal behaviours manifest. The aim of the service is to protect children by intervening early.
  - It's in direct response to a royal commission recommendation that Australia should look at similar services to the UK-based [Stop It Now](#).
  - The service will primarily provide confidential advice and guidance to help people learn to manage unwanted feelings and stop problematic or harmful behaviour before it occurs.
  
- The government has committed funding for a second wave of the **Australian Child Maltreatment Study**, a key element of which is improving the evidence base on the prevalence, nature, causes and impacts of child sexual abuse. The government is looking at the findings of the ACMS and how it applies that evidence base to ongoing policy work and how it drives, informs and lifts policy in the future.

### Family Law reform:

- Mr Collett stated the Family Law Act needs to apply to the small number of cases determined by a judge in family court (about 3% of cases), and also to the vast majority of families whose decisions made around parenting post-separation occur either within the family, or with the assistance of a counsellor, dispute resolution practitioner or lawyer.
- A series of reforms to the family law system are under way. Two bills were introduced to Parliament in March to amend the Act and deal with a range of childhood recommendations from several major reviews including the 2019 Australian Law Reform Commission review of the family law system.
- **The Family Law Amendment Bill 2023** is focused primarily on increasing the clarity of legislation and reducing its complexity, includes work to significantly simplify the factors that must be considered when determining the best interests of children, and repeals the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility.
  - There is a separate provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to ensure there is appropriate consideration given to the opportunities for the child to connect to and remain connected to family, to community, to culture and to Country.
  - There are amendments to improve the ways in which independent children's lawyers and family report writers engage with children.
- **The Family Law Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill 2023** is centred on improving how the Family Court interacts with statutory child protection and state police, and particularly the family violence commands of state police to ensure more effective information flow and enable decision-makers to have the best available information.
- Both bills have passed the House of Representatives and have been referred to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, as is usual practice. The report on the information sharing bill is due on 14 June and the family law amendment bill on 24 August.

### Other priorities:

- Preparing for an upcoming review of the Families Relationships Services Program.
- Finalising the national principles to address coercive control.
- While acknowledging that it is outside the purview of the National Coalition, Mr Collett flagged the department's work to combat the abuse of older Australians, including looking at the development of the next national plan to respond to the abuse of older Australians and examining issues such as enduring powers of attorney.
- There is work in the international family law space, which is relevant to the [Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of Child Abduction](#) to better support women and children involved in international litigation issues.
- Mr Collett raised that department's work to contribute to the **Closing the Gap commitments** is crucial across the children and families space and that it is fundamentally important that the department rethink its approaches to how it engages in this space. There is significant work under the Justice Policy partnership, work on strengthening Australian capacity in the justice reinvestment space, and collaboration with state and territory governments on a range of policy issues, including the minimum age of criminal responsibility. The department also has a central role from a constitutional point of view in the referendum on the Voice.
- The department also feeds into Safe and Supported, led by the Department of Social Services, and contributes to the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.

In his closing remarks, Mr Collett raised the importance of data and evidence to the work of the department, stating that it is important that the work and investment in public policy in service delivery is driven by the best evidence and the best data available.

## **Agenda Items 4-7**

Due to the richness of discussion, and the length of the first two presentations, Mr Crosby stated there was limited time to provide detailed Safe and Supported updates and for a discussion on member engagement.

Mr Crosby announced that four working groups have been established to support the implementation of the action plans under Safe and Supported. His understanding is that the working groups will be co-chaired by representatives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership group, and government representatives swapping about between the Commonwealth and jurisdictional representatives providing four avenues to progress work.

He informed everyone that the National Coalition has representative positions and avenues to participate in those working groups. The Coalition will be reaching out to its membership base for subject experts and subject matter leads to see who might be best placed on behalf of the Coalition to contribute on those consultative mechanisms and contribute to the implementation of various initiatives across the Safe and Supported remit. He then provided broad details of the remit of each working group:

- Accountability and data across government systems and between government systems and the non-government sector
- Workforce development and capacity
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander systems leadership; and
- Working together to support children and families (this includes a range of the broader social determinant discussions and how the collective effort across several fronts will be facilitated and progressed)

A communication will be sent to National Coalition members in the coming weeks to seek interest for representatives to participate in some of the working groups.

He further announced that DSS has foreshadowed a meeting of the [strategic advisory body](#), which is the senior officer level forum and in the case of the National Coalition is represented through Mr Crosby as the Convenor, will have its first meeting under the new governance arrangements. Part of that will be a stocktake of respective progress that the various sectors have undertaken over the past six months or so since its launch.

National Coalition members will be kept up to date on Safe and Supported developments and upcoming meetings through the [National Coalition e-bulletins](#).

Mr Tim Crosier, Branch Manager, Children's Policy Branch, Department of Social Services, added that the four working groups are cross-cutting working groups because they will work across both the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan](#) and the [First Action Plan](#).

Mr Crosier further explained that the strategic advisory body will be one of the key governance forums and an important and interactive forum where the National Coalition will be providing important advice. All four parties on that group will be able to draw on the knowledge and the expertise from the National Coalition. Mr Crosier also thanked the National Coalition for the work and support in terms of the development so far with the monitoring and evaluation strategy, which he reported is on track for the draft to be finalised by the end of this year.

The meeting closed at: 13:03 pm

National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing Annual Meeting 1 June 2023

**ANNUAL MEETING****National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing****1 June 2023****11:30 - 13:00 AEST****Meeting via Microsoft Teams:**

<b>Timing</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Lead</b>
11:30 – 11:40	1	Acknowledgements and overview	Mr Jamie Crosby, CEO, Families Australia
11:40 – 12:00	2	<i>Australian Child Maltreatment Study 2019-23: Findings and implications</i>	<i>Professor Ben Mathews and Professor Daryl Higgins</i>
12:00 – 12:20	3	Update from the Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth) on child safety and wellbeing initiatives	Chris Collett, First Assistant Secretary, Children and Families Division, Attorney-General's Department
12:20 – 12:40	4	<i>Update on Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i>	Mr Jamie Crosby
12:40 – 12:45	6	<i>A short break</i>	
12:45 – 13:00	7	National Coalition member updates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member consultation mechanisms</li> <li>• Safe and Supported Working Groups</li> </ul>	Mr Jamie Crosby, CEO, Families Australia
13:00	8	CLOSE	

## National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing Annual Meeting 1 June 2023

## Participating Organisations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACT Government</li> <li>• Alannah and Madeline Foundation</li> <li>• Anglicare</li> <li>• ARACY</li> <li>• Australian Association of Social Workers</li> <li>• Australian Catholic University</li> <li>• Australian Children’s Education &amp; Care Quality Authority</li> <li>• Australian Government department of Education</li> <li>• Australian Government department of Social Services</li> <li>• Act for Kids</li> <li>• Bravehearts Foundation</li> <li>• Brisbane Catholic Education</li> <li>• Centre for Evidence and Implementation</li> <li>• Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare</li> <li>• Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA</li> <li>• Create Foundation</li> <li>• Emerging Minds</li> <li>• Family and Community services, NSW</li> <li>• Family &amp; Relationship Services Australia</li> <li>• Fams</li> <li>• Flinders University</li> <li>• Griffith University</li> <li>• Goodstart early learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government of South Australia</li> <li>• Key Assets</li> <li>• MacKillop Family Services</li> <li>• Mental Health Australia</li> <li>• National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse</li> <li>• OZ Child</li> <li>• Parkerville</li> <li>• Parenting Research Centre</li> <li>• PeakCare</li> <li>• RAATSICC</li> <li>• Redcross</li> <li>• Salvation Army</li> <li>• Save the Children</li> <li>• SNAICC</li> <li>• Queensland Government Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs</li> <li>• Relationships Australia</li> <li>• Relationships Australia Canberra &amp; Region</li> <li>• Thrive House</li> <li>• Uniting Communities</li> <li>• University of NSW</li> <li>• University of South Australia</li> <li>• University of Sydney <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YMCA NSW</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Yourtown</li> <li>• Youth Law Australia</li> </ul>
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## Annual Meeting of the National Coalition 1 June 2023

### Summary of questions and comments provided through the MS Teams chat function

*[Editorial note: To respect the privacy of workshop participants, questions and comments have been depersonalised]*

#### Selected questions

- Could the increase in reported sexual abuse by other adolescents reflect an increase in understanding of the concepts of sexual abuse and consent among young people? So perhaps young people are now more able to recognise/identify when they have experienced abuse by boyfriends, for example?
- [For ACMS]: Did you examine the intersection between gender and disability in relation to abuse?
- How do you see the importance/relevance of children's rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the various works you are leading?

#### Selected comments

- We need to have integration across prevention strategies, given the likelihood of children's exposure to different types of harm, being addressed through different strategies/portfolios. Given the risk factors for multi-type maltreatment, we need to be attuned to times of risk, particularly when parents are separating or struggling with their own experiences of mental ill health, substance misuse, economic hardship, or family violence.
- We must coordinate across national strategies for action on sexual abuse, child maltreatment and domestic and family violence due to the high likelihood of exposure to multiple harm types. While we have a separate national strategy to address child sexual abuse, the priority need to prevent emotional abuse is an opportunity for Safe and Supported to achieve population level change.
- It's time to hit the airwaves about the impact of CSA.
- From a child protection perspective, I would see supporting parents and supporting survivors as often being one and the same - and an urgent need for therapeutic responses to help adults/parents to heal from their own childhood trauma to help break the cycle.
- In relation to supporting survivors, and particularly given the study evidence re the mental health impacts being present by adolescence, supporting survivors needs to include supporting children and adolescents with trauma treatment.
- Important to be integrating selective prevention and support for children and parents into services designed for adults (e.g. adult mental health, AOD etc). This is a solid call to action for expanded support for a whole of family approach and supporting the joining up of services and systems designed for adults and those designed for children.
- Fantastic presentation and study, thanks Ben and Daryl. This study is a game changer for better prevention and response to child abuse and neglect.
- Agree Brad Morgan - we must integrate prevention and support for children and parents into services designed for adults e.g. adult mental health, AOD, family law, housing, homelessness, family violence, and of course, Centrelink!
- No, we don't have rigorous data about disability, but that's an issue we are now scoping so that any future prevalence studies can address this shortcoming.
- It is hard to get organisations to see that they can in fact support mental health outcomes of children across their life span by responding and supporting parents and families early



in the life of the child early in the life of a worry for a family or early in connection with a service [www.emergingminds.com.au](http://www.emergingminds.com.au)

- The Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare will also be holding a forum on the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study on the 23rd of June at the MCG. The following is the link to register to attend Australian Child Maltreatment Study: A multi-sector response Tickets, Fri 23/06/2023 at 9:30 am | Eventbrite
- The fully online International Congress on Evidence-Based Parenting Support is coming up next week. I know many of you are presenting or attending. In case you haven't seen the information, it's available here: <https://www.pafra.org/congress-2023>