



Children in Care Collective



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Measuring the impact of the Children in Care Collective

The Children in Care Collective was formed in 2016 by a group of out-of-home care service providers and leading experts in working with children with complex needs from across Australia. The aim of the Collective is to share information and work collaboratively and proactively on issues concerning these children. The voice of the young person is paramount to the work of the Collective.

The members of the Collective provide expertise and valuable practitioner knowledge in the field of out-of-home care, adding value to the system through dialogue and problem solving. The Collective uses evidence based practice, drawing on the lessons learnt by each agency and engaging with relevant academics. The Collective meets every two months and, in each meeting, discusses practice topics and some of the difficult systemic practice issues faced by the sector.



In 2018, the Collective developed a framework that links its goals with actions and measurable outcomes. As measuring influence or social change is difficult, the Collective decided that it would initially use feedback from participants in its forums and surveys of member agencies to inform its understanding of the extent to which it is achieving its goals. In this issue of the Bulletin, the Collective presents key points from that feedback.

In November 2018 the Collective hosted a forum on children with harmful sexual behaviours in care. About 70 per cent of the 34 participants representing 18 agencies filled out evaluation forms following the event. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

All those who rated the overall assessment of the event agreed that it was inspiring or at least highly relevant and informative. All the feedback indicated that the knowledge and information gained from participation in the event met expectations to a high degree and would be useful in working with children with harmful sexual behaviours. The aspects of the forum that people found most useful or interesting were the strong themes around collaboration and systems theory, current research and the data components of presentations, and the sharing of good practice. Suggestions for how the forum could have been made more effective included tighter focus on practical steps for

addressing harmful sexual behaviour and information on requisite qualities and skills for specialist teams. The most common suggestions were for more people to attend and for additional time, especially for discussion.

Members of the Collective were surveyed early in 2019 to establish their views on the usefulness and impact of the work of the Collective. Overall, the response was very positive.

Those who responded found the bi-monthly meetings useful and informative. One respondent noted that, in the first full year of the Collective's operation, 'there was far more purpose, structure and depth to the topics, actions and discussions'. The forums hosted by the Collective were viewed as excellent opportunities for shared dialogue: 'There are not many forums at this level which bring together senior executives to explore, debate and advocate'.

Members who responded to the survey all shared information about the work of the Collective with their staff, most commonly by emailing the Bulletin or through talking about practice priorities and improvements in staff meetings. On the question of whether the Collective has had an impact on the understanding and improved practice in their agency in relation to its identified policy priorities, the results were a bit more mixed. While respondents felt there had been a 'tangible' impact on support for children in care with harmful sexual behaviours and 'establishing a professional paid out-of-home care workforce', on most issues impact was seen to be only slight or negligible.

The workplan for the Collective in 2019 takes into account the feedback on its forums and from its members and aims to improve the impact and focus of its work as it continues to develop in maturity and experience.

Children in Care Collective Workplan for 2019

The Collective has decided that it needs to continue working on its existing policy priorities in 2019.

Ongoing work is being done with the Institute of Open Adoption Studies to develop surveys of families caring for children they have adopted or who are under guardianship orders (including with kinship carers) to identify post-placement supports for the wellbeing of the children.

The Collective is considering how to best support Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in New South Wales to build capacity to care for the Aboriginal children who are returned to their care from non-Aboriginal agencies. Reviewing each member agency's Reconciliation Action Plan to identify what agencies can offer by way of support is an identified first step for this year.

Following on from its forum in November 2018, the Collective is working on a forum to be held in July, with Professor Simon Hackett from Durham University in England where he is Professor of Child Abuse and Neglect in the Department of Sociology. More details of this event will be made available. Members of the Collective will also review its invitation list in light of the feedback from last year's forum.

Work also continues, including with the Australian Tax Office, on how to appropriately reimburse carers of children with complex needs. Commonly, these carers face higher expenses than covered by the standard carer allowances and while there have been individual tax rulings for specific programs, the Collective is focused on negotiating a sector-wide agreement on non-taxable reimbursement of carers of

children with high or complex needs.

The Collective's goal of building practice capability in member agencies is primarily being addressed in bi-monthly meetings with discussion of practice topics being led by experts from various fields and organisations. These discussions will be written up in each Bulletin. This edition includes a summary of discussions on social impact investment in New South Wales and the challenges of program fidelity.

The Collective will partner with others to improve outcomes in the out-of-home care service system by continuing to advocate for the implementation of specific recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (see Bulletin 3, September 2018 for details of the recommendations selected by the Collective) and to offer its services to assist in implementation. In addition, the Collective is establishing a collaborative connection with the National Therapeutic Residential Care Alliance.

A second forum in 2019 is in early stages of development. This will be a forum for children and young people to give voice to their concerns and ideas about improving the health and wellbeing of children in out-of-home care, knowing as we do that children in care generally experience poorer long-term health outcomes than children in the general population. It will further the Collective's goal of creating a positive voice as an advocate on policy issues for children and young people with complex needs. The Collective will also seek to work more closely with agencies such as CREATE who work directly to give voice to children in care.

Models of care for an Australian context

A major challenge for out-of-home care service providers is funding the right kind of support for children and young people in care with complex needs – to meet their immediate needs and to support each individual achieving the best possible life outcome. The Collective is committed to supporting reform within the existing service system with a view to ensuring service models are suitable to support children with complex needs and have the flexibility to be adapted or developed within an Australian context.

The work that the Collective is doing to increase non-taxable allowances for carers of children with complex needs is directly aligned to this goal.

Currently in New South Wales, as part of Their Futures Matter, significant funding is directed to the implementation of evidence-based programs developed in the USA in urban environments: MST-CAN (Multisystemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect) and FFT-CW (Functional Family Therapy Child Welfare) are models of care delivered by members of the Collective. At the April meeting of the Collective, members discussed the value of these models and the challenges of implementing them in Australia. A particular focus of the discussion was the work involved in ensuring the service delivery within the models is culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse families while still maintaining program fidelity. Other implementation challenges that were discussed were the need to take into account geography (long distances and remote locations), staffing practices (backfilling positions when staff take leave entitlements) and managing the relationships with various government departments. There was general

agreement that some good results were being achieved within these programs but that the lack of flexibility in the models sometimes inhibited their appropriateness for Australian families. Collective members were pleased to have the opportunity to share their experiences of the challenges and the successes and learn from each other.

At its February meeting, the Collective welcomed a discussion with Ben Gales, Executive Director, Economic Strategy Division, NSW Treasury, about the work of the Office of Social Impact Investment - a joint team of the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet and the NSW Treasury. Some of the main points Ben made were as follows:

- Social impact investment (SII) – from government’s point of view – is about developing innovative solutions to complex problems.
- Outcomes for clients are typically those that will also result in avoided future service costs for government. This is what pays for the investment and the return to investors.
- Innovative means unproven: if the effectiveness of the project/program was evident, it would be funded via fee for service or commissioning. SII shifts some of the financial risk to investors while service providers are able to evolve and innovate to deliver outcomes for clients.
- While how outcomes are achieved is important, SII aims to unshackle the constraints of program fidelity compared with traditional commissioning. This enables service providers to do things differently when what is needed to achieve outcomes becomes clear.

- Proxy measures are employed although long term outcomes for clients are being tracked.
- Lessons learned:
 - It takes a long time to develop projects which excludes many proposals, although this is now more streamlined than it was for the first two social investment bonds in New South Wales.
 - Co-development is a more collaborative process than traditional commissioning.
 - Robust measurement is essential although there is a tension between the expense of measurement for smaller programs and the need for evidence that a program can be scaled.

Ben was clear that flexibility and an outcomes focus are key to social impact investment, but it requires work to maintain this focus – something learned from the development of the first social investment bond.

The presentation led to an enthusiastic



discussion about whether there is a role for the Collective in reshaping the narrative about SII and in identifying gaps in current service delivery. Ben advised that the Office of Social Impact team can run workshops on how to put together impact investment proposals and measurement frameworks, i.e. a discussion and feedback about whether an idea can become a proposal. The possibility of developing models in, and specifically for, the Australian context that provide innovative services while increasing the evidence base offers another option for the delivery of care and support to children and young people in care with complex needs.

Submission to the NSW Children’s Guardian

In March 2019, the Children in Care Collective made a submission to the NSW Office of the Children’s Guardian’s Discussion Paper on Regulating Child Safe Organisations.

The Collective’s submission endorsed the proposed principle-based approach to regulating child safe organisations in New South Wales. The Office of the Children’s Guardian (OCG) is focusing on implementing the child safe standards recommended by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual

Abuse. The Collective noted that New South Wales, together with all other state and territory governments, has recently endorsed National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (National Principles). These National Principles provide a broader framework that embeds all elements of child safety and wellbeing in organisations that engage with children. The Collective supports the implementation and regulation of the National Principles, which encompass the child safe standards, as an opportunity to encourage all institutions to be

child-safe as well as contributing to a nationally consistent framework.

Based on its members' experience of good practice, the Collective made a number of practical suggestions aimed at developing aspects of

the approach outlined in the discussion paper. The Collective's full submission is available on its website at <http://childrenincarecollective.com.au/joint-positions/>.

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- Stretch a Family
- Settlement Services International
- Australian Catholic University, Institute of Child Protection Studies