



Children in Care
Collective

Children in Care Collective



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The policy priorities of the Children in Care Collective

The Children in Care Collective is an interagency think-tank established in 2016 to share experience, discuss best practice informed by research, provide advocacy and learn from policy experts in out-of-home care. The members of the Collective are service providers working with children with complex needs. The Collective has a strong focus on issues to do with service provision in NSW, but also has an interest in issues nationally and in other jurisdictions.

The Collective has chosen to focus on a set of specific priorities in order to genuinely increase agency capability beyond anything that could be achieved as an individual agency.

The four critical policy topics identified by the Collective are:

- Post guardianship and adoption support services.
- Returning Aboriginal children to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
- Children in out-of-home care with harmful sexual behaviours.
- Establishing a professional paid out-of-home care workforce.

At its policy forum in March 2018, held in partnership with the Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney (see Bulletin 2 for more details) members of the Collective together with academics, government representatives and service providers worked in small groups to identify challenges in these policy areas and possible strategies to address those challenges. The Collective has continued to work on each of these priorities throughout 2018. This Bulletin summarises this work.

Post guardianship and adoption support services

The NSW permanency reforms are aimed at providing children with stable, secure family-based care. It is well established that children with adverse childhood experiences – as is common for most children in out-of-home care – may face difficult emotional and behavioural challenges. These challenges will not be addressed simply by permanent placements and access to support may be essential not only for a child’s development but also to sustain the placement.

Two key messages from the Collective’s policy forum were:

- permanency needs to be viewed as a process not an outcome – and that work is needed not only to achieve a permanent placement but to sustain it
- there is a need for post-permanency funds that can be accessed when required (‘rainy day’ funds) to enable a flexible and individualised response that matches changing needs over time.

Current NSW policy offers limited provision for post-permanency support and it is timely to clarify more precisely what and when support is needed.



The Collective has been working with the Institute of Open Adoptions Studies at the University of Sydney on developing a survey of families caring for children they have adopted or who are under guardianship orders (including with kinship carers).

Consultations with NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) and ACWA indicate that both agencies are interested in and supportive of the survey proposal.

The current proposal is for an annual survey administered by the Institute that will track their child's overall wellbeing and specific support needs. The survey is at early stages of development but is likely to include questions about the reasons the child was in the care system and a range of standard domains including health, disability, schooling, behaviour, relationships and the child's overall developmental status. There will be a close focus on what support carers need, including for maintaining cultural connections and identity and managing birth family contact.

The survey will build on similar work done overseas and may include measures used in the Pathways of Care research and FACS' Quality Assurance Framework. Once the draft survey is agreed it will have to receive University of Sydney ethics approval before it can be administered.

Survey responses will provide clearer information about what assistance is needed by families to sustain permanent placements, how needs change over time and how best these families can be supported to provide stable and secure homes for children who have been in care.

Returning Aboriginal children to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

There is strong support for the placement of Aboriginal children in care with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations – children who are already in care and those entering the system – to ensure their strong connection to family and culture. This is a NSW Government policy commitment and a number of strategies and plans have been developed and are in various stages of adoption/implementation.

The discussion at the March policy forum focused on strengthening the capacity of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), improving the cultural competence of non-Aboriginal agencies and the need for all out-of-home care service providers to recruit more Aboriginal carers.

Taking up the work at the Sydney Policy Lab event, the Collective held a roundtable discussion in August 2018 on the topic of returning Aboriginal children to the care of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Representatives from AbSec and Link-Up (NSW) joined members of the Collective to discuss



how the Collective could contribute to this important initiative.

AbSec provided a briefing on the current position in New South Wales noting that although the NSW Government has reaffirmed its commitment to the transition of Aboriginal children over a 10-year period ending in 2020-21 much work remains to be done. A robust roundtable discussion followed which canvassed a range of issues including the following:

- how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies could develop more authentic partnership and capacity building
- the need of ACCOs for additional resources and support both to build their own capacity and to assist non-Aboriginal agencies to increase their cultural competence
- the need for service providers to have closer engagement with and connection to local Aboriginal communities.

Of particular concern to those at the roundtable was that there appears to be no sector-wide opportunity to discuss how the reform is progressing, what's working and what is not. Without active engagement with Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), it is hard to develop momentum and ensure agencies are

working collaboratively and consistently.

Members of the Collective agree that the Collective should focus on capacity building in both their own and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, planning for the transition of Aboriginal children and improving cultural support plans.

It is clearly essential that the Collective works in coordination with FACS which, together with AbSec, leads much of the work that is required. The Collective wrote to the Secretary requesting a meeting with FACS representatives to establish the most productive way forward and clarify how best the Collective can contribute to the better support and placement of Aboriginal children in New South Wales.

Establish a professional paid out-of-home care workforce

Carers are critical to achieving the significant government and societal aim of caring for vulnerable children when it is not safe for those children to be raised in their family. To achieve this public policy goal it is essential that Australia maintains a strong and vibrant pool of carers.

The carer role is currently based on an 'altruistic' model – the role of the carer (like that of a parent) is defined by the nature of the role and its statutory obligations rather than a contractual employment model. The carer can make decisions about which children to care for and how they will do this (in collaboration with the agency), they are not paid for leave or superannuation and they do not pay tax on the carer allowance which is designed to offset the costs of raising a child. Generalist foster and kinship carers are the foundation of the out-of-home care system as most children do not

need to be cared for by professionals with high levels of training and monitoring – they need stable, consistent and supportive parenting. We know, however, that the carer population, in general, is ageing and declining in number due to a number of structural and demographic changes and that work is needed to encourage carers to stay in the foster care system.

On the other hand, our expectations of carers have increased – not least due to increasing recognition of the need to respond differently to some children's complex trauma. There is a need to develop a model of professional individualised foster care for children with complex needs.

There are international examples where carers are considered as paid professionals and there are pilot programs testing this approach in Australia – OzChild and Professional

Individualised Care (PIC) for example. While OzChild carers are not required to have any specific qualifications, PIC uses carers with tertiary-level qualifications and experience in human services, such as psychology or social work. This background enables them to respond therapeutically to a child's trauma, high needs behaviour and attachment issues. These carers receive the care allowance and a tax-free reimbursement that recognises the complexity of their roles.

There are both tax and industrial relations

issues that need to be addressed – not on a case by case basis as happens at the moment but as part of a government-supported Australia-wide service system design.

The Children in Care Collective is pursuing discussions with the Australian Tax Office through its Not-for-Profit Stewardship group and is committed to engaging in productive discussions with government about the need to develop new ways to approach caring for children with complex needs.

Improve support for children in out-of-home care with harmful sexual behaviours

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse adopted the term 'children with harmful sexual behaviours' to describe children who display the full spectrum of sexual behaviour problems – from those that are problematic to a child's own development to those that are coercive, sexually aggressive or predatory to others. It includes juvenile sexual offending - behaviour that reaches the criminal threshold for offending.

'Problematic sexual behaviours' is used by the Royal Commission to describe sexual behaviours that fall outside the normal or age-appropriate range for younger children but do not generally involve overt victimisation of another child. The terms 'perpetrator' or 'sex offender' are not used to describe children with harmful sexual behaviours. This follows advice that such labels are damaging and inaccurate for many children, especially those with lower-level sexual behaviour problems and younger children who may engage in inappropriate sexual interactions without hurtful intention or understanding of the harm it causes others.



The Children in Care Collective selected the Royal Commission's recommendations on identifying, assessing and supporting children with harmful sexual behaviours in out-of-home care (recommendations 12.12 and 12.13) as two of the recommendations that it believes are key to improving the care of children and young people with complex needs.

The Collective has also focused on this issue as one of its specific policy priorities.

The group working on this topic at the Sydney Policy Lab event in March covered a wide range of issues including: the evidence for specialised therapeutic services; ways in which NGOs, universities and government can work together; potential strategies for improving practice and how agencies can become child safe organisations. Key themes were the lack of good quality research and evidence to guide

practice and the existence of few resources or training programs for workers and carers. Discussion also focused on the need to engage with the whole family, not just the child, in order to achieve behavioural change and highlighted the importance of all programs and training being grounded in an understanding of child development in the context of a history of childhood trauma.

Some of this discussion was developed further in the Collective's November forum.

Children in Care Collective Forum: children with harmful sexual behaviours in care

In November, the Collective hosted a forum for senior leaders working in and influencing the out-of-home care sector to come together to hear about current thinking and projects and to discuss and debate the need for system and practice improvements to ensure effective responses to children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. PwC generously provided the venue and refreshments for participants representing 18 agencies, including the Department of Family

and Community Services and NSW Health.

Three speakers were followed by a panel discussion. Professor Helen Milroy, who served as a Commissioner, set the scene for the forum by outlining the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Helen identified the elements of a service system that is responsive to victims' and survivors' needs as including:



The panel for the Children in Care Collective Forum: children with harmful sexual behaviours: Dale Tolliday, Clinical Advisor, New Street Services at Sydney Children's Hospitals Network; Dr Robyn Miller, Chief Executive Officer of MacKillop Family Services; Mary McKinnon (facilitator) Executive Director Practice and Quality, Life Without Barriers; Professor Helen Milroy, former Commissioner for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

- understanding how child sexual abuse can affect people and shape their support needs
- providing relevant services as part of a cohesive systems approach
- supporting staff to work safely, efficiently and effectively
- ensuring services are trauma-informed, collaborative, available, accessible, acceptable and high quality
- including Aboriginal healing approaches.

Dale Tolliday, Clinical Advisor at New Street Services, spoke about using evidence to inform treatment, treatment service challenges, issues particularly evident in out-of-home care and the limitations of commercial products that are not developed or adapted for specific contexts. Dale emphasised the need for treatment of harmful sexual behaviours to be developmentally appropriate and approached by way of coordinated multi-agency work in partnership with families. He spoke about the importance of using specialist services and of those ser-

vices working collaboratively with out-of-home care service providers.

Dr Robyn Miller, Chief Executive Officer of MacKillop Family Services, outlined the action research project MacKillop is undertaking in partnership with the University of Melbourne. The objective of the program which is currently being piloted in three houses, is to prevent and intervene early in harmful sexual behaviours and child sexual exploitation with children and young people in residential care settings. Robyn talked about the research which underpinned the development of the project and summarised the three core strategies:

1. Whole of house respectful relationships and sexuality education – workers are trained to recognise and respond to harmful sexual behaviours and child sexual exploitation and children are educated about respectful relationships and sexual health and safety
2. Missing from home strategy – which

Foundations for a stronger future



- Creating the right story
- Within strong relationships
- Understanding context
- Through a cultural lens
- Responsive service system
- Trauma informed and competent care
- Compassionate society
- Once upon a time ...

Image and thoughts courtesy of Professor Helen Milroy

includes establishing practice partnerships between each child or young person and residential care workers (involving social media) to counter grooming and assertively engaging children and young people who are missing from placement

3. Sexual safety response – early identification, safety planning, advocacy and therapeutic treatment for harmful sexual behaviours and proactive support to enable children and young people to escape sexual exploitation.

MacKillop have engaged a sexual health nurse educator specifically for the program, which is being evaluated as it goes.

The panel discussion covered a wide range of

topics from working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to the use of technology to increase the reach of expertise and knowledge. It included a lively review of current efforts at collaboration and the difficulties of establishing collaborative relationships in service systems based on competitive tendering and sometimes working across vast physical distances. The key message from all panelists was that collaboration is not easy to achieve, but it is essential that we share resources and expertise.

The three slide presentations and the summary of the panel session will be available on the Children in Care website at <http://childrenincarecollective.com.au/>

Working with others to improve outcomes in the out-of-home care service system

Extending care until 21 years

The Children in Care Collective is committed to better supporting young people when they leave the out-of-home care system. In November, the Collective signed up to support the NSW Home Stretch call to action.

Home Stretch is a campaign backed by many organisations who believe the out-of-home care system should support vulnerable youth until they are 21 years old, rather than ending formal care arrangements at the age of 18 years. The Collective fully endorses this position.

More information about the NSW Home Stretch campaign can be found at <http://thehomestretch.org.au/about/>

Submission to the Tasmanian Government

The Children in Care Collective made a submission to the Tasmanian Discussion Paper Series: A Future Program for Family Based Care Out of Home Care Foundations Project. The Collective's submission endorsed the conceptual framework for home-based care presented in the Discussion Paper, suggesting that additional factors which should be taken into account are family inclusion and case management/planning that includes the meaningful involvement of carers.

Based on its members' experience of good practice, the Collective made a number of suggestions aimed at developing aspects of the model put forward in the discussion paper.

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Members of the Collective

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- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT
- Anglicare Sydney
- CareSouth
- Key Assets
- Life Without Barriers
- MacKillop Family Services
- Stretch a Family
- Settlement Services International
- Australian Catholic University, Institute of Child Protection Studies

