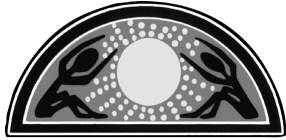




SNAICC
Secretariat of National
Aboriginal and Islander
Child Care

**Submission to Family Support Program
Future Directions Discussion Paper
30 November 2012**

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A strong voice for our children and families

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SNAICC is the national non-government peak body
that advocates on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander children and families.

Introduction

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the future directions of the Australian Government's Family Support Program. SNAICC commends the Australian Government on this program, which provides critical supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC was established as a non-government, not-for-profit organisation in 1981. It is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Further information on SNAICC is available online at www.snaicc.asn.au.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families continue to experience high levels of disadvantage and family breakdown. The causes of disadvantage are multiple and complex, relating to the continuing impacts of colonisation, the inter-generational effects of forced removal of children from their families, and poor socio-economic status. Fifteen years after the *Bringing them Home* report comprehensively detailed the devastating impacts of the Stolen Generations and recommended measures to address the consequences, successive Australian governments have failed to respond adequately to support, heal and strengthen our families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be separated from their families, communities and cultures at an alarming, and persistently increasing, rate. At 30 June 2011 there were 12,358 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous children. The gap in the substantiation rate of child abuse and neglect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continues to escalate, increasing from 7 times the rate for non-Indigenous children in 2009-2010 to almost 8 in 2010-2011. The most common type of substantiated abuse of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was neglect (38%) and the least common was sexual abuse (10%).¹

There is an urgent need for the provision of more adequate supports that build on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in caring for our children. Integrated prevention and early intervention services are critical to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and interrupting the inter-generational transmission of trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's children, 'Protecting Children is Everyone's Business 2009-2020' recognises the need for a systemic shift to preventive measures to achieve a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia. Despite this acknowledgement and response, expenditure on reactive and remedial statutory child protection services of investigation and out of home care continues to increase relative to expenditure on family support and other preventative measures. This must change if the objectives of the National Framework are to be realised.

The National Framework second three year Action Plan provides some clear direction to strengthen the Family Support Program. SNAICC remains concerned however about the significant lack of congruence between the child protection issues impacting Aboriginal and

¹ [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(2011\) Child Protection Australia 2009 – 2010.](#) [Australian Institute of Health and Social Welfare \(2012\) Child Protection Australia, 2010-11.](#)

Torres Strait Islander children, the evidence that resolution of these issues requires participation and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and redress of these issues within the National Framework. Development of the Family Support Program also provides an opportunity to rectify this, providing leadership to ensure that a clear and principled evidence based framework governs the program. This framework would support strategies informed by an understanding of cultural safety and the relationships between trauma, disadvantage and child abuse and neglect.

In this submission SNAICC proposes that different ways of working are needed to address negative trends in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family wellbeing. Specific measures are recommended to ensure that the Family Support Program prioritises services that are appropriate to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

In particular, SNAICC calls for strengthened place based models premised on strong and clear principles that support local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and participation in the development, design and delivery of integrated services responsive to community need. SNAICC also calls for focussed attention on new ways of working in genuine and respectful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design and delivery of child and family services. Genuine partnerships have the potential to build capacity for and empower our families and communities to respond to the many challenges they currently face in caring for our children.

Response to Consultation Questions

3. Who does the family support program support?

3.1 What changes to current placement and design of services would ensure access to the range of services needed by vulnerable children and families?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families overall are less likely to access and engage with child and family services,² and are regularly identified by service providers as 'hard-to-reach'.³ While barriers to service access are connected to the relative disadvantage and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as identified in the *Future Directions Discussion Paper*, research shows that the range of barriers experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is much broader. Barriers include, lack of cultural competence in service provision, distrust of service providers resulting from a history of mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by mainstream service providers, a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by the service provider, and language and communication barriers.⁴ SNAICC identifies that significant attention is needed to service design to ensure that it is appropriate to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

² Flaxman, S., Muir, K., & Oprea, I. (2009). *Occasional Paper No. 23: Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 10.

³ Cortis, N., Katz, I., & Patulny, R. (2009). *Occasional Paper No. 26: Engaging hard-to-reach families and children*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

⁴ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care. (2010a). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care. (2011). *Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services*

Respecting and valuing services that are designed, developed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is central to increasing access, engagement and consequently outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in need of service support. National and international evidence highlights participation and a sense of ownership as key to increasing community and family participation and engagement with services. Evidence also indicates that it improves the quality and responsiveness of services,⁵ and helps to overcome many of the identified barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families accessing services.⁶

SNAICC identifies two other specific focus areas for achieving appropriate and effective service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. They are: genuine partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and mainstream services and government; and developing cultural competence for all services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.⁷ These are both strongly supported in national policy frameworks, including the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*. They are interconnected and interdependent and must be pursued concurrently for effective service development and delivery.⁸

The SNAICC *Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy* has provided a framework for service development that pursues these goals while recognising the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and managed services in responding appropriately to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs.⁹ This policy highlights the critical need for capacity building of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations for service delivery in child and family service provision, a need that has been highlighted recently by the Australian National Audit Office in its 2012 report on *Capacity Development for Indigenous Service Delivery*. This report identifies the current lack of capacity in the Indigenous service sector and described capacity development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service-delivery as a priority not just for effective service delivery, but as a policy objective in itself, in so far as it promotes local governance, leadership and economic participation, building social capital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁰

SNAICC has recently undertaken significant research to detail the principles and practices that enable genuine and respectful service partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and mainstream services and government. Key principles requiring attention in relationships include: respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, knowledge and history; commitment to self-determination and developing long-term relationships; redressing unequal relationships; and shared

⁵ Kitson, R. & Bowes, J (2010) 'Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 85.

⁶ SNAICC (2011) *Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services*, Melbourne, 2.

⁷ SNAICC (2011). *Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services*.

⁸ SNAICC (2012). *Opening Doors through Partnerships*.

⁹ SNAICC (2008). *Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy*.

¹⁰ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO). (2012). *Capacity Development for Indigenous Service Delivery*. Audit Report No. 26, 2011-2012. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Department of Health and Ageing. 17.

responsibility and accountability.¹¹ Significant attention is needed to the processes required for partnership development and their proper resourcing.

SNAICC notes a promising approach that seeks to implement the *SNAICC Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy* in the transition of out-of-home care services to the non-government sector in New South Wales. Promising service placement and design elements could inform the future directions for service development in the Family Support Program. They include:

- A strong partnership between the state government, Aboriginal child welfare peak body, and mainstream child welfare peak body in high-level service development.
- A plan to transition all out-of-home care service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies.
- State-wide identification of existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service capacity and capacity gaps.
- Long-term plans to develop capacity for Aboriginal agencies in partnership with mainstream service providers who commit to transferring service control and management in line with capacity development.
- A funded role for partnership brokering and facilitation within the Aboriginal peak body that enhances the negotiating position of Aboriginal communities and agencies, and ensures that principles for respectful partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organisations underpin relationships.

SNAICC asserts that in order to ensure access to Family Support Program services for vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, they require stronger commitment to the development of capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and managed services; the development of cultural competency; and the development of genuine partnerships that promote both of these aims. Specific recommendations for how this can be achieved are detailed below in relation to specific aspects of service design and development addressed in the consultation.

Recommendation 1– FaHCSIA identifies existing capacity and capacity gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies in family support service delivery. Based on this, FaHCSIA develops a strategy to direct funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies through the Family Support Program to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and to undertake capacity building initiatives where gaps are identified. This should draw on an adaptation of effective capacity building models and approaches.

Recommendation 2: FaHCSIA trials new funding models that build in better partnerships, drawing from the example of the transition process to out-of-home care service provision by Aboriginal community-controlled non-government agencies for all Aboriginal children in care in NSW. This would require new services targeting support for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children are based on a partnership model between community controlled and mainstream organisations, where there is inadequate local community controlled capacity.

¹¹ SNAICC (2012). *Opening Doors through Partnerships*. 20.

3.2 How could more intensive support be provided to address the level of risk and disadvantage experienced by some children and families, within existing funding?

SNAICC recognises that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are adversely effected by experiences of poverty and marginalisation and the intergenerational impacts of the Stolen Generations. As a result, many families require intensive support to heal and strengthen family functioning. SNAICC supports the focus within the Family Support Program on providing intensive supports for families.

Promising results from short-term studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that effective and culturally appropriate models have high impact, reducing the need for tertiary child protection intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and improving family and community wellbeing. Recent SNAICC consultation with members engaged in delivering intensive family support programs in family preservation and reunification however have revealed weaknesses in the current design of intensive programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Services highlighted the need for attention to culturally competent models with increased flexibility to respond to community needs. Key features that SNAICC members identify as limiting within existing models of intensive family support include that:

- time-limited interventions create problems for family engagement as services note the significant amount of time required to build trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families before effective intensive support can be provided.
- Entrenched family functioning issues cannot be addressed through a short period of intensive intervention without appropriate ongoing support post intensive intervention.
- The connection of intensive family support services to referral from child welfare departments limits engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who associate these services with the stigma attached to child removal in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some services identify that alternative community and self-referral pathways could increase the capacity for engagement and early intervention to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Recommendations for capacity development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support agencies are made above, however SNAICC highlights intensive family support as key program area for a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service delivery. This is particularly important for client engagement in services so closely associated with statutory child protection systems and the threat of child removal that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families associate with Stolen Generations policies and practices.

Recommendation 3 – FaHCSIA supports focussed consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support service providers to determine key features of a culturally appropriate model of intensive family support, and how this can be implemented through the Family Support Program.

Recommendation 4 – The FSP prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support services for the development and delivery of culturally competent intensive family support services, and addressing capacity gaps where they currently exist.

3.3, 3.4 Reaching and responding effectively to the needs of vulnerable children and families

Indigenous Access Plans currently place the onus on mainstream service providers to set targets and develop strategies for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. SNAICC considers this is a positive development, however mainstream agencies may not have the skills or expertise to develop the cultural competence necessary to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Even agencies that succeed in setting and meeting appropriate Indigenous Access Targets may not be engaging in processes of relationship development, community capacity building and empowerment that are recognised as critical to the long-term wellbeing and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Clearer guidance and more stringent standards of accountability are required to ensure that cultural competence development is a priority for all FSP providers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. SNAICC recognises the importance of not over-burdening services with 'red tape' and reporting requirements. Any approach to development of cultural competence for mainstream agencies should be through an integrated framework for cultural competence development that directly informs organisation practice and development. This in line with the broader understanding of cultural competence as 'a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.'¹² The development of organisational cultural competence is not an easily reached endpoint, but a journey requiring professional, practice and systems reform in line with increasing cultural knowledge, understanding, respect and connection.

SNAICC recommends that FSP providers are required to adopt and implement a comprehensive cultural competence framework such as that developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), which forms a component of community services accreditation standards in Victoria. This could be supported by training support provided by organisations with key competencies in developing and delivering cultural competence training, such as SNAICC through its *Working and Walking Together* resource.

Recommendation 5– mainstream FSP providers are required and supported to implement a comprehensive cultural competence development strategy to ensure goals of increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service access and culturally appropriate service provision are achieved concurrently.

As stated above, the goal of culturally competent mainstream services does not preclude the need for ongoing focus on local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services as the most effective means of reaching and responding effectively to the needs of vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. As stated above, the evidence for this approach is clear and ever increasing. Strong community controlled services also play a critical role in demonstrating cultural competence in practice, providing opportunities for mutual exchange and learning to strengthen the capacity of all FSP organisations to respond effectively to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

¹² Cross, T., Bazron B., Dennis, K. and Isaacs, M. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed*. Washington: Georgetown University, p. 7.

Recommendation 6 – FaHCSIA develops and includes within tender and service agreements an ‘Aboriginal organisations first principle’ for areas with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. This would favour Aboriginal organisations for services targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and where there is insufficient capacity, require a partnership with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisation to strengthen local capacity and transfer ownership to the local Indigenous organisation over time.

4. Where are family support program services available to families?

4.1 Should a larger proportion of FSP funding be delivered through community-led governance models such as CfC FP?

Yes, SNAICC considers that a larger proportion of FSP funding should be delivered through community-led governance models. SNAICC supports the implementation of community-led governance models in line with the evidence that place-based models that shape service delivery around local community needs are effective.¹³ Such models, if implemented effectively, allow space and flexibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and leadership in the development of services that reflect the culture and values of the many diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Models like Communities for Children Facilitating Partner have only started to explore the meaning of place based models however: They have largely only added a further layer of planning and funding to existing service systems. They have not sought to rationalize or re-organise pre-existing services.¹⁴ The Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s has started to outline what these principles and a proposal for a trial process could look like.¹⁵ A clear set of principles for place based models in this context is required as a next step, with commitment to their holistic implementation by Government and the sector alike. These principles must ensure quality control for consistent application of identified core elements of an effective place based model. The extent to which models such as Communities for Children Facilitating Partner actually enable community-led governance, and, in particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community participation and leadership, remain a concern, and require attention to ensure progress towards FSP goals. This is addressed in further detail below.

Recommendation 7 – FaHCSIA develops a set of principles for place based models in consultation with the sector for consistent application across different models and contexts.

Recommendation 8 – FaHCSIA trials innovative, principled place based models, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

¹³ Edwards, B. et al. (2009). *Stronger Families in Australia study: the impact of Communities for Children*, Occasional Paper No 25, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). 3; Ofsted 2006 in Brechman-Toussaint, M., and Kogler, E. (2010). *Review of international and national integrated service models for young people in the preadolescent and adolescent years: Benefits, barriers and enablers*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARCY). 21.

¹⁴ Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s Children, *From Crisis Response to Prevention* (2012), Attachment D: Placed-based funding in high-needs areas, pp.35-37.

¹⁵ Ibid.

4.2, 4.3, 4.4 Strengthening the CFC model for vulnerable families

SNAICC has identified good practice examples where CfC Facilitating Partners have contributed to Indigenous community and capacity development and enhanced cultural competence in service delivery through partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.¹⁶ However, while CfC has created important space and flexibility for this to occur, the model itself has not placed adequate priority on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and community capacity development. As noted in the *FSP Future Directions* discussion paper, such outcomes have been inconsistent with not all Facilitating Partners giving agency to the community and the opportunity to co-design services. These weaknesses of the facilitating partner model need to be addressed, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where self-determination is key to wellbeing and positive outcomes.

Recent SNAICC research on integrated service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families has identified key components of integration initiatives that are effective and appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is a need to consider these aspects in the design of place-based initiatives like CfC that aim to increase service coordination and collaboration in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, or for the delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.

Priorities for integrated family support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families:¹⁷

Tender processes prioritise inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in service design, development, delivery.

Service contracts require mainstream agencies to develop respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

Participation in service provider partnerships is funded and facilitated to ensure services can and do engage with processes of relationship development required for integration, for example, through the development of project officer roles to support partnership processes.

Tender processes include high standards of cultural competence for integration lead agencies and facilitators, including understanding of principles for genuine and respectful partnerships in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community service contexts.

Existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services have clearly identified and valued roles in a new integrated centre or system, in partnership with other local service providers.

Mainstream service providers establish and maintain long-term and genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and walk alongside them to support their role in the community.

Mainstream service providers plan to build local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander capacity and handover leadership and control of targeted services to local Aboriginal and

¹⁶ SNAICC (2012). *Opening Doors through Partnerships*.

¹⁷ SNAICC (2012). *Coming Together*

SNAICC supports the development of a Communities for Children model that is more significantly aligned with the Australian government commitment in the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)* 'to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve the Closing the Gap reforms.'¹⁸ The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* asserts that 'to provide culturally appropriate responses, strategies under the National Framework must be based on partnerships between Indigenous families and communities, and between Indigenous agencies, mainstream service providers and governments.'¹⁹ To achieve this, attention is required to incorporate the above priorities within Communities for Children and other place-based service integration initiatives.

Recommendation 9 – Identify principles/elements for place based models to govern partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to integrate within the principles detailed in Recommendation 7 and 8.

5. How well does the Family Support Program provide a service response for vulnerable families?

5.1 What would it take to create a better alignment of effort

As discussed above, support for principled place based models would assist to reorient funding to ensure it builds on service collaboration and information sharing, and responds to community needs in the most cohesive and integrated manner. Similarly, it would provide a focused process in which to build on existing community strengths, draw on available service expertise within community and identify areas for external service support and prioritisation. SNAICC urges that any new initiatives within the FSP take account of and build from services already existing within communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centres, which aim to provide integrated child and family services in the community illustrate.

SNAICC refers again to recommendations 7 – 9.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1– FaHCSIA identifies existing capacity and capacity gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies in family support service delivery. Based on this, FaHCSIA develops a strategy to direct funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies through the Family Support Program to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and to undertake capacity building initiatives where gaps are identified. This should draw on an adaptation of effective capacity building models and approaches.

Recommendation 2: FaHCSIA trials new funding models that build in better partnerships, drawing from the example of the transition process to out-of-home care service provision by

¹⁸ Council of Australian Governments. (2008). *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁹ Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National framework for protecting Australia's children 2009-2020*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 28.

Aboriginal community-controlled non-government agencies for all Aboriginal children in care in NSW. This would require new services targeting support for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children are based on a partnership model between community controlled and mainstream organisations, where there is inadequate local community controlled capacity.

Recommendation 3 – FaHCSIA supports focussed consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support service providers to determine key features of a culturally appropriate model of intensive family support, and how this can be implemented through the Family Support Program.

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