

Adequate data collection and information sharing

The ACT supports the idea of a nationally consistent and harmonised approach to data collection and reporting practices across states and territories. However, this approach needs to recognise and build on the existing systems and investment already in place. Rather than attempting to achieve a centralised national system at this time, the ACT encourages the establishment of harmonised definitions, data collection and reporting methods across jurisdictions.

'A Step Up for Our Kids' (Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020) is a five year strategy that is overseeing more than \$39 million over four years invested in the future of children in, or at risk of, out-of-home care (OOHC) in the ACT. Under this strategy, more than \$2.5 million is being invested in a new integrated client management system for 'Child and Youth Protection Services' to improve information security and to simplify access and reporting for caseworkers and the OOHC sector.

The ACT Government acknowledges that improvements are needed to the way that information is collected and managed across the OOHC system in the ACT. As the ACT moves towards increased outsourcing of the OOHC sector, the ability to ensure the right information is recorded and shared between government and OOHC agencies to support better outcomes for children in OOHC is essential. This additional investment seeks to improve our current database capabilities which already have the capacity to record:

- allegations of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, including date of report and appraisal decision;
- information about a child's OOHC placement e.g. kinship, foster or residential care;
- children's demographic data, including age, gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, birth country, preferred language and disability status; and
- where a substantiated appraisal occurs, demographic data about the person believed responsible for the sexual abuse or exploitation, including name, age, gender and relationship to the child.

Broadly, the ACT supports improvements to information sharing practices across and within jurisdictions to better inform placement decisions and prevent incidents of child sexual abuse, noting that these efforts must be balanced with the need to uphold appropriate privacy provisions.

Like other jurisdictions, the ACT is party to the *Information Sharing Protocol between the Commonwealth and Child Protection Agencies (2009)*. The Protocol is a streamlined process for communication between state and territory child protection agencies and Commonwealth agencies (e.g. Department of Social Services) that hold information about the care, safety, welfare, wellbeing and health of a child. Work is also underway to improve inter-jurisdictional information sharing at a national, state and territory level, as respective governments work to address potential barriers to information exchange. As a member of the Children and Families Secretaries (CAFS) group, the ACT is working collaboratively with other jurisdictions to better facilitate information sharing in a child protection context.

Elements of a child safe organisation

The ACT Government supports actions to embed 'child safe organisation' elements into the OOHC sector. The Community Services Directorate has already incorporated the components of the *National Guidelines for Building the Capacity of Child Safe Organisations* (the national guidelines) into its Service Funding Agreements (SFAs) for OOHC providers, and children, youth and family services more broadly. The national guidelines explore policies, procedures, practice and strategies for implementing child safe recruitment and selection, and employing strategies to empower and promote the participation of children in planning, policy development and decision-making.

In addition to the child safe organisation elements set out in the national guidelines, OOHC providers SFAs include a requirement to comply with background checking of staff including under the ACT's Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) scheme. In 2015, legislative reforms took place to appoint a Human Services Registrar with responsibility for independent administration of the OOHC regulatory system. Relevant role responsibilities include:

- ongoing monitoring of an organisation's suitability;
- intervention when existing or emerging risks are identified; and
- implementing tools for working with approved organisations to develop a consistent, high quality service system that is responsive, innovative and achieves best outcomes for children.

Training products are also available to inform and support organisations that provide care to children, to build child safe organisations in the ACT. This includes 'Choose with Care' training, handbooks and workshops (including culturally appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training), delivered by Childwise, about how to minimise the risk of child abuse occurring within organisations.

Work is also underway to develop a reportable conduct scheme in the ACT. Implementation of this scheme is consistent with preliminary recommendations made by the Royal Commission within the consultation paper that all jurisdictions should develop a reportable conduct scheme. Once operational, it is envisaged that the scheme will improve child safe practices by providing:

- independent oversight of child abuse and assault investigation and complaint handling by organisations;
- improved information sharing about disciplinary and/or misconduct matters to inform risk assessments undertaken under the WWVP scheme; and
- a source of independent advice and information about best-practice management of child abuse and assault investigations or complaints.

Regulation and independent external oversight of the OOHC system

Strengthening accountability and ensuring a high-functioning care system is a core focus of work under *A Step Up for Our Kids*. This work involves building the capacity and capability of the non-government sector to deliver OOHC services, and ensuring strengthened government activity in oversight and regulatory areas such as accreditation, quality assurance and performance contracting.

In the ACT, a strong system of oversight exists in the form of the Office of the Public Advocate, the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner and the Official Visitors. Under the *Children and Young People Act 2008* (CYP Act), regular information is provided to oversight agencies, including where a child is alleged to have been abused in care and an appraisal has taken place. The CYP Act also sets out legislatively enshrined criteria for the OOHC sector to be considered a 'suitable entity'. These criteria have a strong emphasis on consumer participation, child safe and child friendly organisations, and service provision through a therapeutic lens.

The ACT Commissioner for Children and Young People (the CYP Commissioner) and the Public Advocate of the ACT have been, and will continue to be, involved in the development of the OOHC regulatory system, and the CYP Commissioner will be involved in a review of the regulatory system, anticipated to occur towards the end of 2016. The CYP Commissioner is also available to provide advice to community and government organisations about developing policies and procedures that are child safe and child friendly.

Under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, an independent system of regulation for OOHC providers is being established. In 2015, legislative reform resulted in the appointment of a Human Services Registrar to administer the regulatory system for all services within the OOHC system. The registrar is independent of the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) and assesses organisations against existing and new suitability criteria that include the National OOHC Standards. The registrar also has responsibility for maintaining a register of suitable entities and reviews their accreditation every three years, consistent with the renewal period for the working with vulnerable people (WWVP) scheme.

All authorised carers in the ACT must be (or, if a kinship carer, have applied to be) registered under the WWVP scheme. This pre-employment screening system works to reduce the risk of harm to vulnerable people (including children) by preventing their contact with people who have a history of inappropriate behaviour, or who have not been assessed for suitability.

To further strengthen oversight in the ACT, work is underway to develop a reportable conduct scheme. The reportable conduct scheme will allow an independent body to monitor and review how organisations respond to allegations of abuse or neglect against children in their care. It is anticipated that the reportable conduct scheme will be modelled on the NSW scheme which enables information sharing between the NSW Ombudsman and NSW Children's Guardian about information that may disqualify someone from working with children.

Strengthening sexual abuse prevention education

The ACT Government supports the establishment of an evidence-based national education strategy across the OOHC sector. Indeed, ACT Government has undertaken significant steps to ensure that evidence-based, trauma informed information and training is readily available to all parties involved in the OOHC sector in the ACT.

As part of a strategy to build the capacity and capability of the OOHC sector under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, carers and staff are being provided with the support and specialist knowledge they need to recognise and respond to the needs of children. Training is being provided to carers and staff across the OOHC sector to ensure they have the knowledge they need to deliver culturally sensitive, trauma-informed care to children in the OOHC system. Foster and kinship carers were the first cohort to receive this training, which commenced in September 2015. This training, including the delivery of a course designed to meet the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, will continue through 2016 to carers, agency staff and government staff.

This new initiative further strengthens existing training programs implemented in the OOHC sector to raise awareness about the specific needs and vulnerability of children:

- All OOHC staff and carers receive training about mandatory reporting of child abuse concerns, and how to respond to child abuse and neglect more generally. This training addresses many areas including what defines child sexual abuse, possible indicators of abuse, the grooming process, reporting responsibilities and processes.
- Prospective foster carers in the ACT are required to complete a competency based pre-service training program containing accredited competencies from the 'Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Intervention'. This training is also made available to kinship carers. Included in the training program is an explanation of what child sexual abuse is, possible indicators of abuse, mechanisms for grooming, and how to respond to a child who discloses abuse.
- In 2015, additional training was provided to staff caring for child in an OOHC setting about 'Child Sexual Abuse: Keeping our Young People Safe in Residential Care'.

In 2014, a comprehensive training strategy for front-line child protection staff about working with families affected by sexual abuse was launched. The program, developed by the Victorian Department of Human Services, incorporates contemporary research about child sexual abuse including, working with police, risk assessments, working with parents and children who have been subject to the trauma of sexual abuse, and understanding the dynamics and effects of inter-generational sexual abuse.

Several actions are being progressed across the ACT under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, to give children a voice, and carers the information they need to make more timely and informed decisions about children in their care. A tender process is underway for the delivery of the 'Children and Young People Engagement Support Service' for children in OOHC care. This service, commencing in 2016, will empower and enable children in OOHC to be heard and participate in decision making that affects them.

When children come into care, initial and subsequent annual therapeutic assessments are already informing the development of therapeutic plans by child health specialists. Therapeutic plans are developed in consultation with the child, to ensure they have a say

about what happens to them. A key focus of therapeutic planning is establishing and building healthy relationships and identifying appropriate cultural responses to trauma. This process gives children, their carers, and (where appropriate) birth families, an opportunity to build their understanding of the impact of trauma and how it may affect, and put at further risk, children in their care.

Since 2014, children (up to 12 years) in OOHC, who have experienced trauma have also had access to trauma-informed care from therapists at 'Melaleuca Place' the ACT's trauma-informed centre. These specialist staff work with children, carers, birth parents, and education providers to deliver evidence-based, trauma-informed therapies that facilitate healing and achievement of positive life outcomes for children recovering from abuse and neglect.

Therapeutic care and support for children and carers, including those who are leaving care and those who sexually harm other children

ACT Government's commitment to deliver a more tailored, trauma-informed and responsive OOHC system is set out in the five year strategy, *A Step Up for Our Kids*. Consultation during development of the Strategy highlighted many of the priorities and actions now underway to:

- establish a trauma-informed therapeutic framework for OOHC service delivery;
- enhance placement stability and options;
- improve protections and communication mechanisms for children in OOHC (including kinship care); and
- better train and support carers and staff across the OOHC sector.

The Community Services Directorate is in contract negotiations to establish a 'Carers Advocacy Support Service'. This service, anticipated to begin in 2016, will provide independent advocacy support services to kinship and foster carers experiencing difficulty in their caring role. It will provide a mechanism to support and empower carers in resolving issues with service providers and staff operating across and with the OOHC sector, including child protection services.

Work is also underway to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and improve life chances and outcomes for children who have experienced OOHC when they transition to adulthood. In 2012, child protection services in the ACT commenced providing voluntary support for care leavers up to the age of 25 through the Youth Support Transition Team (YSTT). YSTT support includes access to practical support, brokerage funding, mentoring and living skills development. The YSTT team provided direct support to 161 young people in 2014-15.

Under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, a continuum of care will continue to be provided to children and carers in the OOHC sector until a young person's 21st birthday. This will include an increase in case work resources and an extension of the subsidy paid to some carers. It is anticipated that this will be particularly beneficial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people when they seek to re-establish family and cultural connections.

The ACT recognises the importance of improving understanding of child sexual abuse (and its sub-types) across the child protection and OOHC sectors. The ACT client management system is

capable of recording incidents of substantiated child sexual exploitation as a sub-type of child sexual abuse and further work is underway to improve the ACT's system capabilities.

A shared communication protocol is now also in operation between OOHC providers and the ACT Government to facilitate more timely and streamlined information sharing between parties involved in the care of children in OOHC. Further, since 2006 Health and Child Protection Liaison Officer positions have worked to improve collaboration between organisations, including with the Child at Risk Health Unit (CARHU). CARHU deliver specialised health services, including annual therapeutic assessments, for children under 15 years of age who are in OOHC.

Under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, work continues to promote better health outcomes, including by preventing and responding to child abuse and exploitation. All children entering OOHC now undergo a therapeutic assessment at the commencement of their placement to make sure carers are provided with the right information early. Further, in 2015, a *Health Passport* for children in OOHC was established to provide children and their carers with timely and comprehensive health records in addition into their 'Blue Book' health records.

Work to promote better outcomes for children by strengthening high risk families is taking place by increasing investment in prevention and reunification services that deliver practical support and intensive 'hands on' training to families to care for their children. As more families are supported to stay together, it is expected that OOHC placement availability and capacity for placement matching will improve. Similarly, when children cannot live with their birth families, *A Step Up for Our Kids* is focussed on creating a continuum of care by ensuring that carers are suitably matched to children's needs.

Hearing the voice of the child and adopting a therapeutic approach are key strategies being employed to create a continuum of care for children in OOHC. To this end, 'Viewpoint' – an interactive computer program designed to engage children in an age appropriate way – is being rolled out across the OOHC sector in the ACT as a voluntary and safe way for children to report issues that are important to them.

Action is also taking place to ensure that children in OOHC receive stable placements where they can build trusting relationships with adults that will invest in them and their future. The 'ACT Together Consortium' (led by Barnardos, in partnership with the Australian Childhood Foundation, OzChild, Premier Youthworks and Relationships Australia) was engaged through tender as the single group responsible for delivering:

- trauma informed therapeutic case management for children in care;
- therapeutic residential care; and
- support for kinship and foster carers advisors.

This has allowed ACT Government to delegate long term care responsibility to identified 'responsible people' in the agencies and gives carers and agencies greater autonomy to make appropriate parenting decisions about children in their care. Training, commenced in September 2015, is being provided to staff across the OOHC sector to build the skills needed to deliver trauma-informed, responsive care to children. The training includes a course designed specifically for the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers.