

The NSW Experience: Working to Improve children's lives everyday

**Child Aware Approaches Conference
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre
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I would like to start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional land of the Kulin Nation. I would like to pay my respects to elders past and present and to Aboriginal people who are here with us today.

The National Framework on Protecting Australia's Children has given us a clear opportunity for action. Together we have demonstrated meaningful achievements through the delivery of the First Action Plan.

As we move forward, working together progressing the Second Action Plan, NSW continues to face ongoing challenges to its child protection system. Our challenges are not new to us, nor are they unique in Australia.

Unfortunately, the demands on our systems are unrelenting. We struggle to get to many reports about children and young people at risk in a timely way.

Aboriginal children continue to be significantly over-represented in incoming reports, as well as in our out-of-home care system

We continue to have a growing population of children in out- of-home care, and we know that the life outcomes for these children and young people are far less than what the community or we should deem acceptable.

Long term, sustained solutions to these most challenging of issues remain part of our present and future effort. These challenges are the focal point of the four goals in our NSW Community Services Plan 2012- 2014.

In the past, responses to these challenges have been influenced by a number of factors including emerging trends and reaction to crises, amongst others. This has resulted in a patchwork of policies and procedures that do not share an underlying vision.

The Community Services Plan provides a shared vision through which innovative initiatives are taking shape and being delivered to meet our goals to improve children's lives everyday. Our goals are that:

- Fewer children and young people are vulnerable to abuse and neglect
- Children and young people at risk of significant harm are safer
- Children and young people in out-of-home care have a better future, and
- That we have a capable organisation and service system

In NSW we're moving away from a risk averse system where the primary risk mitigation strategy was removal, to one that focuses on how to help families change. Our policy position and initiatives are evidence based - what we know has worked, and what we know doesn't.

We share the vision of the Second Action Plan, to work together, work locally and work with community to respond to families in a culturally and contextually responsive way.

To create sustained change to our child protection system and improve the lives of children, we have set out not only to focus on **what** we do, but critically the **way** we do our work with vulnerable children, young people and families and with our community partners. Accepting that policy and practice change requires a cultural shift that many organisations here today are grappling with.

In NSW we are examining significant policy change regarding the hierarchy of intervention. Importantly, we recognise that to drive effective positive change for the most vulnerable children different strategies are required at different points. What they have in common though is a collective effort from communities, non-government providers and the government. We share a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.

Collective impact stresses that successful large-scale change is more likely to come from cross-sector coordination than from isolated initiatives from individual organisations. Its premise is

that if all parties can agree on a common agenda and how it will be measured, we can ensure that our activities reinforce rather than duplicate. And through continuous communication we can learn from each others experiences and improve our response.

Collective impact is not just a fancy name for collaboration but represents a fundamentally different, more disciplined, and higher performing approach to achieving large scale social impact.

So what are we doing in NSW to re-orientate our service system?

In this last 12 months we have created an **Office of the Senior Practitioner** – this is a first for Community Services in NSW. The office will lead practice initiatives and reforms – two important pieces of work already underway are the **Care and Protection Practice Framework**, and **Practice First** – a new model of child protection service delivery.

In December 2012 we have introduced our first ever **Care and Protection Practice Framework** which has been designed for New South Wales child protection practitioners by our own practitioners. The Practice Framework provides clarity and direction with a shared vision for our staff to do their job.

It gives explicit permission to frontline staff to build relationships with children, families and the community with a shared vision for our staff to do their job. And, importantly, it is written with an

understanding that relationship based casework is the key to quality child protection.

It explains our mandate and articulates what we mean as an organisation when we talk about our skills, our knowledge, our culture and our organisation.

A shared vision- mandate- an articulation about what is important to us- lays a foundation from which a positive and strengthened practice culture can emerge.

One of my firm goals for the *Practice Framework* is to further the important cultural shift of sharing responsibility for keeping children safe. This framework assists us to do this and to have this shift reflected in open, respectful relationships at all levels of the system.

Collaboration is the most complex type of relationship. It is hard work, requires trust and energy, networking, communicating, and co-operating. Good collaboration is about enhancing each other's capacity, sharing power and authority and, most critically, realising we are interdependent and cannot achieve our goals without each other.

The Framework provides a united language and understanding across the entire NSW child protection sector, creating stronger connections with our NGO partners, so we are 'singing from the same song sheet'.

The *Practice Framework* is harmonious with the values and goals that underpin ***Practice First*** – a new model of child protection service delivery we are trialling in a number of regional and metro offices across the state.

The aim of *Practice First* is to effect a shift in practice and culture to complement the agency focus, in recent years, on the development of investigative and assessment skills. However, as we know, assessment is not a stand alone process, and the articulation of risk is only the first step to protecting children. *Practice First* impacts on the whole spectrum of work we undertake with families.

The *Practice First* model is underpinned by a set of foundation principles of practice that are evidenced based, reflect contemporary research about what works in child protection and provide a solid framework for improved outcomes. There are ten Practice First principles of practice and they have been developed to capture and inspire our practitioners.

Skilful people are the system's most important tool, and the quality of their relationships with families, and with each other, is a critical element of the model and the best leverage for change.

The model uses group supervision - peer critiquing, if you like - to reduce defensive practice where workers focused on reducing risk to themselves and are encouraged and supported to focus on risk to the child. It essentially helps us as a statutory

agency to hold the risk for the child and family alongside their strengths.

Practice First was influenced by the thinking and writing of a broad range of practitioners and researchers – most notably the Minnesota Differential Response Model, the wealth of information about strengths based practice, Systems Theory, and the *Reclaim Social Work* project in Hackney, London.

There are three essential components of *Practice First* that set it apart from child protection practices that have become the norm.

Culture: a child protection culture founded on principles of practice rather than one that seeks compliance with tools and adherence to structure.

People: casework is delivered by teams, not individuals. Decisions are made and shared within practice groups. Skill development is ongoing and requires our practitioners to have insight into the impact of their own practice on families, and to strengthen their skills in working with families to change. It relies on clear role definition and positions practice leadership as the most important aspect of management.

Systems: it is built on a clear mandate giving legitimacy to family work, freeing casework time from administration, and sharing risk and decision making across teams.

It is early days, however already *Practice First* is beginning to deliver real benefits for children, families and caseworkers. Caseworkers and managers talk of feeling energised by the focus on practice and in the words of one manager:

“I want to thank you for steering us away from a culture of compliance and excessive bureaucracy to one that has a focus on providing services to vulnerable families”

Other staff have also told me:

“I couldn’t go back to working the way we used to work... having the expertise of your colleagues, and community agencies in one room talking through the issues and the risk has helped us all to focus on what the best course of action is for the family...”

So what is it about *Practice First* that is different?

Practice First helps us shift into a collective way of thinking – connecting with colleagues and sharing expertise that can identify options for families and solutions that will lead to positive change. This includes inviting in community partners to assist with engagement and identifying supports and needs for a family.

So what were the indicators in the earlier stages of the trial at that gave us hope?

Caseworkers were getting out the door and visiting more families, more often – one site recorded an increase of 26 per cent more home visits, the other a staggering 182 per cent increase.

Our staff sick leave is reduced – down 15 per cent - suggesting that our people were happier, and were regaining a sense of purpose and commitment to the work. We also know this because our staff tell us they are happier working this way.

We also know that some families are reporting they have notice a change, a more respectful practice – that they are being invited to be part of the solution – and not just the problem that needs to be fixed.

We also saw a trend of reduced numbers of children coming into care (47 per cent in one site and 60 per cent in the other)...

Based on these initial indicators, in December 2012, we rolled *Practice First* out to a further 15 sites across NSW; and the early indicators for these additional sites are also very promising.

NSW is also progressing a legislative reform agenda aimed at strengthening parental capacity and accountability, promoting permanency and creating a responsive care system. The proposals being examined have evolved from a number of sources – including the Government and Minister, the sector, non-government early intervention services, the legal

community, child protection caseworkers, health services, and importantly - children, young people, carers and families

The reforms, which are currently being finalised, are based on three main areas.

The first is to work better with parents, to improve their parenting capacity and help them accept greater responsibility for the risks their children face.

These proposals emphasise early intervention and support for parents. The NSW Government provides a range of services to help parents raise their children –more than \$131 million on early intervention and prevention services is provided by Community Services alone. And there is a great deal of evidence that such services, like parenting programs and rehabilitation services, work.

Parents need to know that they are supported in meeting their responsibilities, but they also need to know that when they aren't able to adequately care for or meet their children's needs and when they expose them to harm, there are consequences.

NSW is exploring opportunities for additional **tools** when working with families where no progress is being made by parents to address the barriers that prevent them from properly caring for their child. Proposals include creating parenting capacity orders, issued by the Children's Court for parents who

have disengaged with voluntary intervention support and strengthening the parental responsibility contract scheme, including introducing PRCs to unborn children who are at risk.

Some of these proposals could be seen as 'getting tough on parents to take responsibility' and in some ways they are. But increasing parental accountability - making parents more responsible for their behaviour, actions and the way they parent - can lead to more appropriate positive parenting, which helps children stay safe and remain with their family.

We are also looking at increasing the involvement of extended family, through enhancing Family Group Conferencing, a model of alternative dispute resolution used in care and protection jurisdictions within Australia and internationally. A recent independent evaluation conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology found strong engagement by families, high levels of attendance and high levels of satisfaction.

FGCs delivered tangible results – families were able to develop plans in 90% of conferences and the vast majority of Family Plans developed had more than 50% of the actions implemented by the time of the review. While there are still ways we can strengthen the program, the roll out of FGCs across NSW has great potential to further involve families in the decision-making process and greatly improve the chance of successfully addressing child protection concerns.

The second area of the reforms is about increasing permanency and stability for children in out-of-home care.

Growing up in care is not the kind of environment we want to be placing more and more children in. The social and economic costs of continuing to feed such a system are frightening.

The Australian experience, as well as that from overseas, brings to light the detrimental effects of growing up in the care system which is characterised by breakdowns and multiple placements. The impermanence of a child's situation in the care system leads to *uncertainty* and *anxiety*.

A permanent family offers a stable future. It offers a child that fundamental experience of simply *belonging* – to a family, a neighbourhood, a community... and opportunities to establish lifetime relationships.

While keeping families together is our primary goal, we know some children cannot and never will be able to live with their family. For these children, permanency should be our priority so we can maximise the opportunity for good outcomes and stability.

The reforms in this area stipulate a new hierarchy of permanency with

- family preservation/restoration the first option, followed by
- long term guardianship to relative or kin, then
- adoption,

- and as a last resort, parental responsibility to the Minister.

Evidence suggests time frames for decision making are critical to the success of the stability of placements. Expert opinion is that decisions for younger children should not take longer than six months. This practice is being followed in other states in Australia, UK and US.

Other proposals include making the adoption of children and young people in out-of-home care easier and quicker by creating additional grounds for dispensing with parental consent and limiting birth parents' right to be advised of an adoption application when they cannot be located.

I am aware that not everyone will support with these proposals. Past adoption in particular has been associated with secrecy, stigma, and illegal practices.

However, as we know, adoption now is very different – it is open; children may retain their emotional and genetic links with their birth family. Adoption today embraces the value of a child's cultural and racial heritage.

Our proposals are sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal people - we recognise the importance of kin and the disastrous consequences of the Stolen Generation. The proposals specifically state that adoption is unlikely to be suitable for Aboriginal children and, when they can't live with their birth parents, then guardianship by kin is the most favoured outcome.

As with all these reforms, this area on permanency is about the best interests of the child.

The third and final area of reform targets ways to create a care system that is more responsive to the needs of children and young people and changes in family circumstances.

Proposals in this section are all about building an effective contemporary, child-focussed system and this include:

- making contact arrangements between children in care and their birth parents more flexible
- reducing time spent in the Children's Court
- better supporting children in out-of-home care and simplifying the scheme of parental responsibility and supervision orders.

These proposals have been developed against a backdrop of prolific activity and change already taking place in the NSW child protection system.....many of you will already be aware of recommendations of the 2008 Wood Inquiry into Child Protection in NSW, resulting in the out of home care reform agenda. Part of this is the transfer of service provision of statutory out-of-home care where the Minister holds parental responsibility, to the non-government sector.

We have partnered with the sector to build a vibrant, responsive, sustainable non-government out-of-home care system with the

capacity to achieve the best possible outcomes for children, young people and their families. We will do this over five years for non-Aboriginal statutory care and within ten years for Aboriginal statutory care.

The OOHC NGO sector has a track record of having better service delivery to meet children and or young persons case management requirements.

The implementation of the transition program commenced 1 March 2012 and by December 2016 6,800 children and young people living in OOHC will have been transitioned to NGO OOHC service providers.

To date, over 1300 children and young people have transitioned to non government service .

It is important to remember that at the heart of the OOHC transition program is to achieve the best possible outcomes for children, young people and their families and all efforts across the OOHC service sector is working towards achieving this goal by building a vibrant, responsive, sustainable non government OOHC sector.

But we are not leaving this process to chance.

A dedicated Transition Program Office has been established with representation from Community Services, and two peak organisations, the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies,

or ACWA, and the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat, or AbSec.

The partnership between Government and AbSec and ACWA is vital in driving the delivery of transition through collaboration.

To further support the goals of transition, Regional Implementation Groups have been established across the state. These groups are co-chaired by both Community Services and non government partners ensuring innovative local solutions to make the system sufficiently dynamic and agile. They're about sharing what works, to ensure the best solutions and services for children in care can be achieved.

Significant projects and activities are continually being developed and implemented to increase and support the success of the transition over time to the deliver the 6 key strategies for transition:

- Drive placement transfer regional processes
- Governance and cultural change
- Champion Capacity Building as the key to sustainable transition
- Increase focus on preservation and restoration through collaboration
- Base placement decisions on the needs of the child or young person
- Recruit the carers that children and young people need.

Significant achievements that are embedding transition

is the growth of accredited Aboriginal OOHC non-government organisations has been supported and new independent Aboriginal organisations have been established.

- To date, four Aboriginal non-government organisations have been newly accredited.
- Two accredited Aboriginal non-government organisations are now broadening their current service provision.
- Five partnerships have been established between accredited non-Aboriginal non-government organisations with non-accredited Aboriginal non-government organisations with the aim of supporting Aboriginal non-government organisations to achieve accreditation.

To ensure we have the carers that children and young people need the emerging system in NSW must ultimately be able to retain carers through the transition and beyond - while also attracting new carers into the system who are willing to make a difference to a child's life.

So to support carers in the transition, a Carer Engagement Strategy is being implemented. These people are the backbone of our society and their contribution must not be underestimated.

Carer recruitment will be led by the non-government sector, and ACWA is working on developing a state-wide carer recruitment campaign.

Various stakeholder and consultative groups have been established, including a CALD working group, Future Direction

Forums, a Chief Executive Carer Stakeholder Group and policy consultative groups.

Another major project to support transition is the implementation of the Referral Management System (RMS), which is an online system to strengthen transparency, reliability and responsiveness for placement referrals to non-government organisations, has been developed with state wide roll out commencing soon.

We have a skilled workforce of casework professionals committed to protecting the safety of children and young people in NSW.

We have an army of foster, relative and kinship carers who every day generously open their homes and hearts to some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

And we have an innovative and flexible non-government sector working in local communities to build resilience and strength.

We are making promising strides forward for the benefit of our most vulnerable

The important of collective action and impact is further evidenced by the work being progressed under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Under the Second Action Plan 2012-2105 NSW recognises this and has stepped up to work collaboratively with our national non-

government partners, state and territory governments and the Commonwealth.

Thank-you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about our exciting reform agendas. Opportunities like this are crucial as we increasingly work in a joined-up policy and practice environment.