



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Scoping project for the National Child and Family Investment Strategy: Final Report

JULY 2023



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Acronyms

AbSec	NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation
ACCG	Australian Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ACFC	Aboriginal Child and Family Centres
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
CAFS	Children and Families Secretaries
DSS	Department of Social Services
EYS	Early Years Strategy
FWS	Family and Wellbeing Service
JR	Justice Reinvestment
NCC	National Children's Commissioner
NCFIS	National Child and Family Investment Strategy
OOHC	Out-of-home care
P/EI	Prevention and early intervention
QATSICPP	Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak
SA ECDP	South Australian Early Childhood Data Project
SIA	Social investment approach
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
The Guidelines	Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
UN Committee	United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
VACCA	Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

Anne Hollonds

*National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission*



Foreword

As Australia's National Children's Commissioner, it has been a privilege to speak directly with members of the Child and Family Steering Committee, as well as government and non-government stakeholders, to seek their expert views on the development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy (NCFIS). The Investment Strategy will be designed for the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026* and *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023-2026*. This scoping report draws on consultations with key stakeholders whose work is relevant to both action plans.

The finalisation of this report coincides with the release of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), which reports high levels of child maltreatment in Australia. The findings point to problems with the accessibility, effectiveness and design of basic service systems that should be protecting children from harm. These issues also emerged repeatedly in our consultations for this scoping report, with stakeholders raising concerns about program and service silos, limited coordination between sectors and jurisdictions, and poor engagement with communities about the help they need. Stakeholders emphasised the need to use data and evidence to guide decision-making, and to improve collaboration and co-ordination. They recommended empowering communities to codesign support services that are fit-for-purpose and locally-led, for example by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO's).

The findings of the ACMS also show the prevalence of multi-type maltreatment, particularly emotional abuse and its co-occurrence with family and domestic violence, and the long-term impact on mental health. The report is a pressing reminder of the unique needs of children, particularly those in families with complex problems who are not getting the help they need. The statistics in the ACMS are not just numbers. Each statistic represents a child who has experienced maltreatment, and these are tragedies happening every day, under our watch.

We need a much greater sense of urgency for the reform of policy and service systems for children and their families, and I believe this requires child wellbeing to be made a national priority.

Thank you to all the individuals, organisations and government agencies that took the time to share their expertise and insights to inform the future development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy. It is my hope that the information in this report will be used as a catalyst for evidence-informed investment, policy and systems change, to enable children and young people in Australia to be safe and supported.

Anne Hollonds

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Hollonds', written in a cursive style.

National Children's Commissioner

Special note on ‘stakeholders’

‘Stakeholders’ from all jurisdictions were consulted, including personnel from government departments, peak bodies, ACCO’s, and academia. Due to the limitations of this project, only a few direct service providers were consulted, and no service recipients (children and their families) were able to be consulted. Stakeholder feedback has been synthesised and analysed into the report narrative. Direct quotes can be found in call out boxes. Jurisdiction and other identifying information have not been provided in order to maintain confidentiality.

Investments must be guided by a deep understanding of population and community needs and experiences. Interventions should reflect knowledge of working practice and replicate existing successes, rather than being crisis responsive. This will allow for tailored and targeted supports to identify and address complex and diverse needs of children and families, with evidence-based interventions. – *Stakeholder*

Executive summary

Background of this report

The National Child and Family Investment Strategy (NCFIS) was announced in the 2022–23 Budget and is an initiative under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2022–2032*. The National Children's Commissioner (NCC) has produced this report to inform the development of the NCFIS.

This report is based on a literature review, and consultations and roundtables with 18 stakeholders. Stakeholders were asked to reflect on their experience in, and knowledge of, prevention and early intervention and to offer suggestions to guide future investments in improving the system. Timing and funding limited the depth of the literature review and the range of consultations. Moreover, availability of evaluations for existing strategies and programs is limited.

Prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia

Data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows that 1 in 23 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were subject to substantiated (investigated and concluded) abuse or neglect, compared to 1 in 114 non-indigenous children.¹

However, until now, there has been no national information on the prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia. The initial results of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) were published in April 2023. It showed that **child maltreatment is endemic** across Australia, with sample wide prevalence rates showing physical abuse at 32.0%, sexual abuse at 28.5%, emotional abuse at 30.9%, neglect at 8.9% and exposure to domestic violence at 39.6%.² Compared to older participants, those aged 16–24 reported even higher prevalence of emotional abuse (34.6%), neglect (10.3%) and exposure to domestic violence (43.8%).³ Children who are emotionally abused, sexually abused or exposed to multi-type maltreatment are at particularly high risk of mental disorders.⁴

The ACMS also showed that **multi-type maltreatment is common**.

Australian children experienced multi-type maltreatment more often than a single type (39.4% v 22.8%). Almost one-quarter (23.3%) experienced three to five maltreatment types, and 3.5% experienced all five types. A common multi-type maltreatment combination involves exposure to domestic violence, emotional abuse and physical abuse. Broader family-related adverse experiences almost doubled the risk of multi-type maltreatment.⁵

A recent ANROWS research project reported that

the probability of using violence in the home was highest among young people who had both witnessed violence between other family members and been subjected to targeted abuse (46%).

Our increased understanding of the prevalence of child maltreatment, particularly emotional abuse, and its co-occurrence with family and domestic violence, and its long-term impact on mental health, must be a key consideration in the development of this investment strategy.

Current barriers to achieving positive outcomes for Australian children

Stakeholders identified a number of barriers that are currently limiting outcomes for children. They said that children's rights are not being prioritised in government planning and program implementation, with little or no meaningful engagement with children who have lived experience of child maltreatment. Furthermore, self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has not been widely integrated in decision-making practice. This also means that evidence being generated by community-led organisations is not contributing reform at scale as there are limited opportunities to share it.

According to stakeholders, many of the barriers are caused by systemic issues that fail to centre the child. There is fragmentation within jurisdictions and siloing between departments, which contribute to limited flexibility in program implementation, monitoring and data-sharing. Resistance to change within the system serves to exacerbate the gaps and duplication that result from poor coordination across jurisdictions and sectors.

The service system is also focused on short-term programmatic responses, rather than outcomes and prevention, which is reflected in the way programs are designed and in the funding cycles. In addition, there is a distinct lack of focus on the drivers of child maltreatment, which narrows the scope of programs and strategies. In this context, change that encompasses a collaboration and a power-shift to communities is highly unlikely.

Principles and actions to direct the investment strategy

For solutions, stakeholders identified overarching principles that speak to the shift in ethos and approaches that will be required for investments to produce outcomes for children. They also named specific areas of action to apply these principles on the ground.

Overarching principles

- (a) **Empowerment, participation and self-determination:** communities, including children, become decision-makers and direct their own futures, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- (b) **Collaboration and partnership:** Working across levels of government, organisations and communities, co-designing methodologies and nurturing equity between partners.
- (c) **Sustainability:** Committing to positive change, with a long-term view that is responsive to children's needs now and in the future.
- (d) **Systems approach:** Approaching all action across jurisdictions and sectors in a way that reflects the complex, interconnected needs and rights of children.

- (e) **Evidence-based investment:** Basing investment on evidence of what works, in each context, integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being.
- (f) **Human rights-based approach:** applying human rights principles to inform processes and outcomes, so that the child remains at the centre of investments, plans, strategies and programs.

Specific areas of action

- (a) **Common language and definitions:** Clear and consistent language, including national definitions of key terms must be developed. This will help to improve approaches to deliverables and measurement.
- (b) **Data and evidence generation:** Improve data sharing. Strengthen and link national minimum data sets, complemented by investment in context-specific data and evidence. Ensure data sovereignty is defined and respected.
- (c) **Planning, monitoring and evaluation:** Place the child at the centre of all plans and monitoring frameworks, also shifting focus to outcomes, rather than inputs and outputs, to enable flexibility in implementation and a longer-term perspective.
- (d) **Community leadership and accountability:** Shift focus to community-led protection programs by increasing investment, developing transparent accountability mechanisms, and delegating authority.

- (e) **Multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional collaboration:** Breakdown siloes by working across jurisdictions, service areas and communities. The starting point for this is placing the child at the centre and adjusting governance structures to facilitate action around them.
- (f) **Capacity and capability building:** Build capacity as a long-term investment in service providers and communities. Focus on community-led organisations, particularly for data collection and evidence generation.
- (g) **Funding processes and cycles:** Adjust funding processes so they are more community-friendly, engaging community-led organisations as partners, and extend funding cycles so that they enable longer-term action.
- (h) **Prevention and early intervention focus:** Shift focus to universal prevention and early intervention programs for better outcomes for children and to optimise limited resources.

Recommendations:

Informed by the specific areas of action, the NCC makes the following recommendations:

1. Children and Families Secretaries (CAFS) prioritise reaching national agreement on key definitions, including prevention, early intervention, wellbeing, and place-based approaches, in 2023-2024. This will require broad consultation with non-government stakeholders, including direct service providers and those with lived and living experience, in line with Action 4 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023-2026*.

2. The Australian Government funds AIHW to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and CAFS to reach a national definition of data sovereignty (in line with Action 3 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*), and all jurisdictions adopt the national definition and reporting arrangements.
3. The Australian Government funds AIHW to engage with governments, non-government stakeholders, direct service providers, CAFS and those with lived and living experience to strengthen and link existing national minimum data sets to encompass information about prevention and early intervention, including local data about place-based programs and services. (This is in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*, and Priority Reform 4 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*.)
4. The Investment Strategy embeds planning, monitoring and evaluation processes as requirements for funding contracts, with children and families at the centre of all decision-making.
5. The Investment Strategy requires planning, monitoring and evaluation processes must be outcome focused, rather than activity-based.
6. The Investment Strategy includes consultations with communities, especially children and their families as stakeholders so that locations for piloting investments are informed by local knowledge and culture.
7. The Investment Strategy prioritises investments in ACCOs that have assumed delegated authority, in line with Action 1 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026* under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, which commits all jurisdictions to implement legislative reform to support the delegation of legislative authority with regard to statutory child protection powers over the next two years. (This is also in line with Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).
8. The Investment Strategy initiates investments where community-led organisations, Government and NGOs are equal partners, including accountability checks for all partners, and investment decisions based on 'proportionality' and 'greatest need'. (This is in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026* and Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*).
9. The Investment Strategy supports long-term investment in place-based services and programs that are built from the ground up, based on the needs and priorities of communities. (This is also in line with Priority Reform 1 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).
10. The Investment Strategy identifies existing capabilities and resourcing gaps in local community organisations, including ACCOs, so that funding supports the capabilities that are required to respond to complex community needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. (This is in line with Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).
11. The Investment Strategy establishes funding arrangements with organisations, including ACCOs, that include a dedicated budget for monitoring, evaluation and reporting outcomes.

12. The Investment Strategy supports frontline practitioners, including ACCOs, to have a full range of skills and capabilities to support families with complex needs in trauma responsive ways, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. (This is in line with Action 3 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023–2026* and Action 4 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).
13. An appropriate Commonwealth agency, such as the Australian Productivity Commission, is tasked with mapping services and programs for children and families across Commonwealth portfolios to create a baseline to inform investment decisions and coordination of services and programs.
14. The Australian Government establishes guidelines and minimum standards for multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional collaboration, and whole-of-government approaches for child protection. This must be developed with, and include as a key tenet, the participation of communities, children and families, particularly partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in line with Action 8 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*.
15. Expand funding cycles to enable stability in planning and implementation, with timelines agreed to by all partners, including working with communities to develop funding practice methodologies, including commissioning and procurement processes. This must be appropriate to local needs and priorities, and be culturally inclusive (in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).
16. Prioritise investment in prevention and early intervention programs and supports, identified by evidence and knowledge from community-led organisations, targeting the most vulnerable children and families. (This is in line with Action 1 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023–2026*).
17. Use the new findings in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study to guide and prioritise prevention and early intervention investment, particularly focusing on emotional abuse, and its co-occurrence with family and domestic violence, and its long-term impact on mental health.
18. The Investment Strategy supports research that expands and strengthens our understanding of the characteristics of families with complex needs, facilitating the development a range of evidence-based early responses and preventative measures. (This is in line with activities (d) and (e) under Action 3 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).

1 Background of this report

The NCFIS was announced in the 2022-23 Budget and is an item under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2022-2032*. It is action 2 in the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*.

The aim of the NCFIS is to prevent at-risk children and families from coming into contact with the child protection system and to improve their life outcomes. The NCFIS will support jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, to reorientate child and family support system funding into more effective, tailored and coordinated early intervention and prevention services and supports.

As stated in the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*:⁶

- The [NCFIS] will work in collaboration with Safe and Supported to shift towards adequate and coordinated funding of early, targeted, healing-informed culturally safe support services that are effective in supporting children and families, and are delivered by ACCOs.
- The strategy will prioritise increasing the proportion of services delivered by ACCOs.
- Deliverables of the strategy will help inform jurisdictional efforts under other activities in the plan.

All Australian governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group will be closely involved in the development of the NCFIS. A Subject Matter Expert consultant will be tasked with developing the strategy from 2023. An innovation fund, developed under a Subject Matter Expert consultant, will enable key elements of the NCFIS to be tested in select locations.

In 2022, the Department of Social Services (DSS) commissioned the NCC to undertake a 'scoping project' to develop principles and make recommendations to guide and inform the development of the NCFIS.

1.1 Rationale for an investment strategy

(a) Enhancing child safety and wellbeing

Reorientating investment to prevention and early intervention can strengthen family service platforms, child protection and out-home-care systems. This requires sustained commitment to 'seed change, start to improve outcomes for children and young people, and deliver long-term, economically sustainable results'.⁷ Well-funded, appropriate services can change the way vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families are supported, helping them to feel safe.

Investment in prevention and early intervention can also reduce the number of children and families coming into contact with the child protection system and youth detention, reduce disadvantage and vulnerability, and improve outcomes across children's lives.⁸ For example, keeping children in schools supports their safety, wellbeing, health, and education, reducing their likelihood of becoming socially isolated, committing offences and continuing cycles of poverty and disadvantage.⁹

(b) Targeting the most marginalised

The development of an investment strategy provides an opportunity to address systemic disadvantage, trauma, and intergenerational harms and create sustainable outcomes to improve the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. It is an opportunity to make clear, direct, and specific commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to reduce overrepresentation in the child protection system. These commitments can facilitate a shift to the provision of therapeutic, holistic and culturally safe supports to families.¹⁰

Target 12 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45% by 2031. This target is achievable, if 5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are diverted from out-of-home care or reunited with their families per year.¹¹ However, if investment in prevention and early intervention is not prioritised, this figure may increase by 50% in the next 10 years.¹²

(c) Effective resource allocation

The Australian Productivity Commission highlighted in their *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* report that when spending is top-down, siloed and fragmented, child

and family needs are not met.¹³ The report suggested that a lack of long-term collaborative contracting meant services failed to offer holistic and interconnected support to families.¹⁴ There were also gaps in service delivery, data and expenditure, priorities across stakeholders were unclear, and funding was unnecessarily duplicated in some areas.¹⁵ The Productivity Commission recommended moving towards a 'system that targets funding to the needs and priorities of children, families and communities'.¹⁶ Similarly, Social Reinvestment WA recommended targeting, coordinating and reorientating investment 'across the spectrum of intervention' to adequately and sustainably address the systemic vulnerabilities that place children and families in contact with child protection and youth justice.¹⁷

1.2 Methodology

This report is based on a literature review, consultations, and roundtables. Relevant literature is included throughout the report where it supports material from consultations and roundtables. Examples from specific programs or strategies are included in call-out boxes throughout the report. They are not comprehensive case studies, nor should they be read as 'best practice', as many of them have not been fully evaluated. Recommended actions are included in section 4 to assist the subject matter expert in developing the strategy.

(a) Literature review

The NCC contract with the Department of Social Services (DSS) specified that the NCC should undertake a 'small literature review'. The literature review focused on framing key terms and providing an overview of approaches to investment strategies, with examples from Australia and overseas. The literature review was provided to DSS in September 2022, and

informed the content of the discussions in the stakeholder consultations and roundtables. The full literature review is in Appendix 1.

(b) Stakeholder consultations and roundtables

Key stakeholders were identified by the NCC and DSS and specified in the contract between the NCC and DSS. The NCC added further stakeholders where further information was required.

18 consultations were held online by the NCC, including:

- Children and Families Secretaries (CAFS) members (x9 consultations)
- Australian Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates (ACCG)
- The Secretariat of National Aboriginal Islander Child Care (SNAICC) – National Voice for our Children
- AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (AbSec)
- the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (x2 consultations)
- Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP)
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Professor Leah Bromfield, Australian Centre for Child Protection.

Consultations were guided by the findings of the literature review and discussion points were provided to participants beforehand.

Requests for further information were made at stakeholder consultations, including any evaluations on investment strategy projects.

This information was provided to the NCC in confidence, to be included in this report in a de-identified way. Consultations were recorded. Consent for recording was only for the internal use of the NCC with anonymity assured for all participants.

Stakeholders (30) also attended two roundtables with the NCC to reflect on the findings. The PowerPoint used to guide the roundtables is provided in Appendix 2. Stakeholders indicated that their views were accurately reflected in the overarching principles and the specific areas of action. Minor amendments were made to the report to add some detail and clarification, as requested by the stakeholders.

(c) Limitations

Limitations to this report include:

- **Limited availability of evaluations:** Investment strategies, plans, frameworks and projects across jurisdictions mostly lack contemporaneous monitoring and evaluation. This makes it difficult to know whether investments are working effectively and achieving outcomes that constitute 'best practice'.
- **Timing and funding constrained the depth of the literature review and the number and range of participants included in consultations:** While the information gathered has been instructive, the project would have benefitted from wider consultations, including policy makers from the other government departments, including Health, Education and Housing, direct service providers, and children and their families.

2 Context of investment in child maltreatment

2.1 Prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia

Until now, there has been no national information on the prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia. In 2017, the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* recommended that the Australian Government conduct and publish a nationally representative prevalence study on a regular basis to establish the extent of child maltreatment in institutional and non-institutional contexts in Australia (recommendation 2.1).¹⁸ This recommendation resulted in the ACMS. The initial results of this study were published in April 2023.

The findings of the ACMS study show that child maltreatment has enduring effects throughout life, with increased health service use, including a 'massive mental health burden'.¹⁹ It recognises that 'the strain on our health system is considerable', including that mental health disorders and health risk behaviours associated with child maltreatment crystallise early in life.²⁰ The Productivity Commission estimated the annual national cost of mental ill-health and suicide at \$200–\$220 billion,²¹ with child maltreatment contributing substantially to this national health and economic burden.²²

In summary, the main findings of the ACMS study were:

- **Child maltreatment is endemic** with sample wide prevalence rates showing physical abuse at 32.0%, sexual abuse at 28.5%, emotional abuse at 30.9%, neglect at 8.9% and exposure to domestic violence at 39.6%.²³ Compared to older participants, those aged 16-24 reported even higher prevalence of emotional abuse (34.6%), neglect (10.3%) and exposure to domestic violence (43.8%). While some declines have occurred in physical and sexual abuse, over one in four young Australians have experienced physical abuse (28.2%) or sexual abuse (25.7%).²⁴ Sexual abuse and emotional abuse are attributed to the highest likelihood of self-harm, suicide attempts, cannabis dependence, smoking, and significantly increased odds of major depressive disorder (MDD), generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²⁵
- **Multi-type maltreatment is common** with 39.4% of participants experiencing two or more types of maltreatment, and 23.3% experiencing three to five types of maltreatment.²⁶ 25.4% of 16–24-year-olds experienced 3-5 maltreatment types, mirroring those aged 25–44 (25.7%).²⁷ Those who experience three to five types of maltreatment are over three times as likely to see a GP on six or more occasions per year.²⁸

- For those experiencing maltreatment, **self-harm** was disclosed by 30.5% aged 16–24, comprising two in five females (39.5%) and one in five males (20%). In the previous year, those experiencing maltreatment and engaging in self-harm was 14.3%, compared to 3.0% for those without.²⁹
- Prior year prevalence of **suicide attempt** for those aged 16–24 years experiencing maltreatment was 5.2%.³⁰
- **National gender disparity** was evident in the study with females experiencing significantly more sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, and comparable levels of physical abuse and exposure to domestic violence. The prevalence of multi-type maltreatment is also significantly greater in females.³¹

The 2020–21 AIHW Child Protection Data showed that 1 in 23 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were subject to substantiated (investigated and concluded) abuse or neglect, compared to 1 in 114 non-indigenous children.³² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10.4 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children.³³

Knowledge of prevalence is fundamental to targeting prevention and early intervention investment. The findings of this study must drive future investment strategies. As the ACMS prevalence study concludes:

We can and must invest more, and wisely, in universal prevention at the population level and to targeted interventions to subpopulations at high risk. Long-term benefits will far outweigh short-term costs.³⁴

2.2 Current barriers to achieving positive outcomes for Australian children

Stakeholder consultations identified a number of barriers that present challenges for governments in their efforts to address child maltreatment. While some barriers relate to the nature of the problem itself, such as the increasing complexity of causal factors relating to child maltreatment, others relate to systemic challenges.

(a) Children's rights and wellbeing are not prioritised

A number of stakeholders indicated that children's rights and wellbeing are not seen as priorities by governments. Even the child protection sector is not considered as an essential or specialised sector in its own right. At the core of this lack of prioritisation of children is a lack of understanding that children have rights. This includes their right to be listened to and involved in decisions, and their right to have their best interests considered.



Governments often don't get the right people in the room to engage with children's issues. That is, children aren't present. – Stakeholder

Child rights don't resonate that strongly in Australia.
– Stakeholder

(b) Failing to engage with children and families with lived experience

Stakeholders spoke about the need for a more participatory approach, including all stakeholders with lived experience (children, families and communities) across all aspects of program design, delivery and evaluation. Insufficient engagement was also reported by the Productivity Commission in its NT Review as a systemic barrier to accessing funding for providers, resulting in top-down service provision.³⁵ In addition, support to locate and navigate services was identified as a gap by stakeholders.

(c) Lack of focus on underlying drivers of child maltreatment

From a practitioner's perspective, child abuse is seen as a child protection issue. There's an inability to see preventing child abuse and neglect as early intervention and prevention business. Other agencies seem to be stepping back because they think we will do this. – Stakeholder

Systems are set up to catch at the end of the cliff.
– Stakeholder

One of the continuing challenges commonly cited by stakeholders is the entrenched disadvantage facing many children and families. These complex risk factors include family violence, drug and alcohol problems, mental illness, school disengagement, homelessness, and contact with the criminal justice system. Stakeholders said that the governments and systems are failing to understand and respond to this complexity in any systematic and coordinated way.

Services are not developed or informed by service users. – Stakeholder

Stakeholders spoke about some of the intransigent issues facing children and families in the child protection system, including access to safe and affordable housing, poverty, family services, and access to education and healthcare.

17% of children in Australia are living in poverty. Children across Australia continue to be removed from their families ... [because] the dominant discourse driving child protection is that poverty equates to neglect.
– Stakeholder

Several stakeholders spoke about the inability of governments to address these structural drivers of child maltreatment. Underinvestment in prevention and early intervention needed to address these drivers is partly because of the perceived need for a solution to an immediate problem. There is a general lack of understanding within policy settings and service delivery that disadvantage and vulnerability are intergenerational and cyclical.

Professor Bromfield, who leads the Australian Centre for Children Protection at the University of South Australia, and who was interviewed as part of this report, argues that child protection systems were initially designed on the understanding that child abuse and neglect was a small problem where fairly 'light touch early intervention' with at-risk families, such as access to a relevant support service, could prevent the majority of child abuse. However, the reality for most families is far more complex and often intergenerational – not a newly emerging issue in a single generation. Professor Bromfield maintains the key issue is that current child protection systems are based on outdated assumptions.

Early notifications of child abuse and neglect are often not addressed because they do not reach

the threshold of risk of harm used by particular jurisdictions and there are few resources allocated to deal with safety concerns in the early stages.³⁶

Not supporting families in the early stages often leads to increased reports of harm, which invariably can result in removal of children from their families, and increased numbers of children in out-of-home care.

Research by the Australian Centre for Child Protection shows that one-quarter of families were known to child protection more than 20 times throughout their life compared to 8% of individual children. This highlights the importance of understanding the child protection concerns for children in the context of their family. Examining contact for individual children in isolation will underestimate involvement with child protection, and the risks that children face within the family context. It also prompts further questions regarding the opportunities for early intervention to prevent further risk for children and their siblings. Over three-quarters of children and families reported to child protection have had multiple child protection concerns raised about them, and this should inform the assessment and response for practitioners including assessments of risk, chronicity of child maltreatment, and cumulative harm.³⁷

(d) Lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in child protection

Stakeholders identified a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination as the key barrier to reform of the child protection system. One stakeholder described this barrier as government's failure to recognise the disempowerment and dependency created by past policies that funded non-Indigenous organisations, such as churches, to deliver Aboriginal services and supports. This interventionist approach hinders the ability of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to access support due to cultural safety issues and intergenerational trauma. These services are also not designed in ways that respect local ways of knowing, doing and being.

Stakeholders also raised the tension between Western evidence-based responses to trauma and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. Traditional responses are foundational and are healing by nature.

They are not handing over control. They are not involving us in decision-making. They are not at letting us develop our own programs. When they do, it's temporary dollars. – Stakeholder

Despite plans to increase investment in ACCOs across jurisdictions, stakeholders expressed concerns about the amount of investment committed, particularly whether it was proportionate to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection. Stakeholders questioned the ways that investments have been managed to date, and whether the approaches genuinely reflect self-determination. There is a risk that governments seeking to address the issue of self-determination will be too prescriptive about the process of investing in ACCOs without collaborating with and respecting the priorities of communities.

Concerns were also raised about the design of programs and the monitoring and evaluation frameworks that hold ACCOs accountable to the government for the continuation of funding. These processes lack mechanisms to effectively

capture the experiences and priorities of communities. Combined with a lack of adequate funding to resource ACCOs sufficiently, these processes undermine the ability of ACCOs to support communities and achieve sustainable outcomes.

(e) 'Ritualism' and resistance to change

Several stakeholders referred to resistance to cultural change within the child protection workforce and government as a barrier to reform of child protection systems. For example, reverting to the dominant paradigm of 'child rescue'.

People are too comfortable with removing kids, and the way the system works now. – Stakeholder

[Those working in government] don't want to be naïve and say there is no racism and bias within the Department ... but do not make any meaningful changes to structures that maintain harms. – Stakeholder

The way in which child protection workers conform to the culture of a workplace or department is described by Professor Megan Davis, in the NSW *Family is Culture* Report, as 'ritualism'. This is defined as 'acceptance of

institutionalised means for securing regulatory goals while losing all focus on achieving the goals or outcomes themselves'.³⁸ Davis found many examples of ritualism playing out in the way the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (formerly known as 'FACS') operates, for example in the application of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). She points out that 'this culture of compliance has overwhelmed other critical casework skills, including intuition, instinct and judgment'.

(f) Siloed and fragmented decision-making and systems

Fragmentation and lack of coordination between government agencies was raised frequently by stakeholders as being systemic barriers to reducing child maltreatment. These issues do not only occur in the child protection context but are seen as challenges for governments as a whole.

...we automatically dive down into which department is responsible for what with no clear understanding of what we are driving on a national level. – Stakeholder

Several stakeholders referred to government working as a series of siloes that are set up to support internal needs, not the needs of children, families and communities. Siloing of programs, services and staff means that the family moves through the system, rather than the system adapting around the family. This is closely linked

to the lack of focus on the drivers of child abuse, as discussed in section 2.2 (c).

Several inquiries and reviews have highlighted these concerns in the past. The Productivity Commission's *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* report pointed out that siloed decision-making had resulted in overlapping funding arrangements and complex service supports creating new problems, rather than resolving existing ones.³⁹ Similarly, the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry Report and the NSW *Family is Culture* Report emphasised the detrimental effects of siloed decision-making and investment.

Plans, strategies and frameworks currently are not created to be responsive to the evolving needs of the populations they serve and are not prepared to build or redesign programs when needed.
– Stakeholder

Some stakeholders blamed a lack of strategic thinking around child protection, including ill-defined 'systems' and inadequate national-level outcomes for child protection. This is compounded by the challenges of a federal system.

(g) Lack of flexibility in government expectations

Stakeholders spoke about how government grants and funding requirements often lack flexibility and fail to respond to community needs or capacities. For example, some stakeholders said that program requirements might be unnecessarily prescriptive and undermine the ability of ACCOs to sustain a workforce. Flexibility

is limited, even as programs and environments evolve and change.

Often community programs, despite positive outcomes, are defunded as they are not able to meet all the requirements of government evaluation (often due to lack of data or capacity).
– Stakeholder

Stakeholders pointed out that the way that programs are expected to be evaluated may act as a barrier to meeting community needs and government commitments. The lack of culturally appropriate evaluations may be a particular barrier to investments in ACCOs.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some stakeholders said that evaluations that reflect local context may not be enough to assess the program overall as measurement needs to go beyond conventional mechanisms for assessing outcomes. In addition, the long-term impacts of programs are often not measured, reflecting the relatively short-term funding cycles.

(h) Limited workforce and community capacity

The lack of a skilled and capable workforce in the child and family sector is seen by stakeholders as one of the main barriers to reducing child maltreatment, particularly in the context of implementing place-based, local approaches. This is particularly evident in regional and remote areas.

One stakeholder suggested that while practitioners may be able to recognise trauma,

there is a lack of skill across the board to deal with the trauma. This is exacerbated by the fact that diagnostic tools, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition, do not encompass the full clinical picture of complex trauma.⁴¹ The same stakeholder said that while practitioners can recognise trauma, they often lack confidence and skills to respond in a trauma-informed way.

This is reflected in service delivery. For example, when children and families with complex trauma come into the system, service provision is often not sequenced in a way that effectively meets their needs. For example, alcohol and drug, mental health and family and domestic violence issues require a response before trauma issues can be addressed. It is not possible to effectively respond to or address trauma if the child and family remain in unsafe circumstances. Responses must be effectively sequenced to meet the needs of the family.

Some stakeholders reported that the lack of local capacity is compounded by rigid approaches to recruitment stipulated in contracts and/or by funded programs. Human resources and recruitment procedures, including the use of ‘fly-in, fly-out’ contractors, can sometimes be barriers to using local community members in specialised/non-specialised roles. Stakeholders spoke of the need to overcome these bureaucratic processes and focus on building the capacity of communities.

Child safety workers require skills to work in a culturally competent and community-responsive way. Often, ‘fly-in, fly-out’ contractors are unfamiliar with the cultural context and do not sufficiently prioritise the voices and existing knowledge of community members.

Some stakeholders also pointed out the limited capacity for monitoring and evaluation among service providers, including community-led organisations. They pointed to monitoring and

evaluation often being conducted by external agencies, contracted by government, which means that capacity is not being developed internally within organisations. This can be compounded by some organisations preferring to remain focused on service provision. Furthermore, smaller community-led organisations will not necessarily have access to the infrastructure for ongoing data collection, nor have monitoring and evaluation processes built into their budgets. This can also create a participatory burden on smaller service providers fielding external requests for information.

(i) Inadequate and short-term funding of programs

Due to relatively short-term funding cycles and inadequate funding, stakeholders felt that programs respond to communities in a risk-averse way, rather than building flexible programs with communities. Long-term investment is not enabled through government processes, which limits the ability of child and family services to achieve positive long-term outcomes.⁴² Furthermore, it takes a significant length of time to address the drivers of child maltreatment and even longer to see improved outcomes.

This 'short-termism' has a cumulative effect on the way organisations operate. For example, it can limit the ability of ACCOs to build workforce and organisational capacity and can damage relationships with communities because it limits delivery of services.⁴³ This is particularly a problem for organisations located in rural and remote areas.

Where grant contracts are short-term in nature, it means that there is generally a focus on outputs rather than longer-term outcomes. This creates uncertainty for service providers and reduces their ability to plan and invest.⁴⁴ One stakeholder described receiving pilot funding for a program that was successful, but

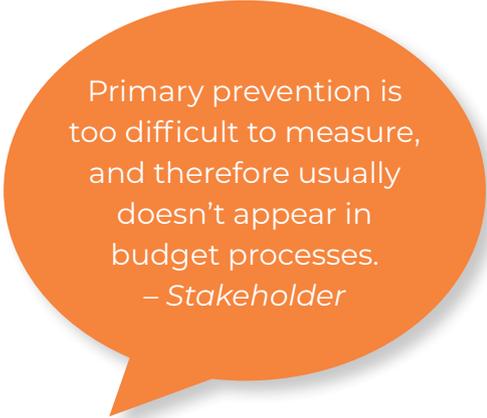
the Government did not approve additional funding following the pilot period. As a result, the organisation had to find alternative avenues for funding in order to continue providing the program.

Some stakeholders suggested that procurement and commissioning processes do not value community leadership in decision-making and a failure to take a human rights-based approach.

Stakeholders also pointed out that the level of funding for Aboriginal and community-led organisations, including ACCOs, was inadequate to meet the target to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children going into out-of-home care in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

(j) Challenges in measuring outcomes

Several stakeholders spoke about the difficulties of measuring the outcomes of prevention and early intervention programs, and this was a barrier to further investment in programs that may deliver positive outcomes in the long term.



Primary prevention is too difficult to measure, and therefore usually doesn't appear in budget processes.
– Stakeholder

As a threshold issue, there is inconsistency in definitions of key terms, such as prevention and early intervention, which impedes consistent and comparable measurement and collaborative approaches to investment. These are critical if a national strategy for investment is to be pursued.

According to some stakeholders, there are particular challenges associated with measuring outcomes of place-based initiatives as these initiatives already have big data gaps. Further, taking smaller initiatives off a centralised system of data measurements and putting them in a locally-based system can increase the risk of losing rigour in data.

Measurement of outputs rather than outcomes was seen as a barrier to long-term change. Where there are no clear outcome measurements, organisations undertake tasks and transactions with limited connection to longitudinal risks, harms and outcomes.

(k) Lack of data and mapping of services

Stakeholders spoke about the lack of data on the incidence of abuse. They indicated that the true incidence and prevalence is unknown as many children have not come into contact with the system. The ACMS study (section 2.1) is a welcome source of data on the national prevalence of the five forms of child maltreatment and should be used in the development of the investment strategy. This information was not publicly available at the time of our stakeholder consultations.

There is also a lack of understanding across jurisdictions about what services and programs are available, as well as their effectiveness. This problem was also identified by the Productivity Commission in the context of family and community services. It found that this lack of knowledge undermined government ability to plan services effectively and to prioritise between users.⁴⁵

Some stakeholders said that they had data, but it may not be the 'right' data to tell the story of vulnerable children.

(l) Restricted understanding of what constitutes 'evidence'

Some stakeholders noted that there were limitations in the way Aboriginal needs and perspectives were reflected in data, service mapping and programs. There is a reliance on a large number of Western guidelines and tools – such as the primacy given to peer-reviewed evidence – used in policy and program decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Mainstream evidence-based practices have the potential to undermine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices by not including data collected, owned, or shared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For example, some community-controlled organisations can be limited by their organisational capacity and strict reporting requirements by government. Often reporting requirements do not allow for descriptions of how programs on the ground are contributing to positive outcomes. Poor understanding of how programs and services are delivered on the ground also limits their transposability to other contexts where community needs are different.

Stakeholders also suggested that there was an inconsistent understanding of data sovereignty.

3 Principles and actions to direct the investment strategy

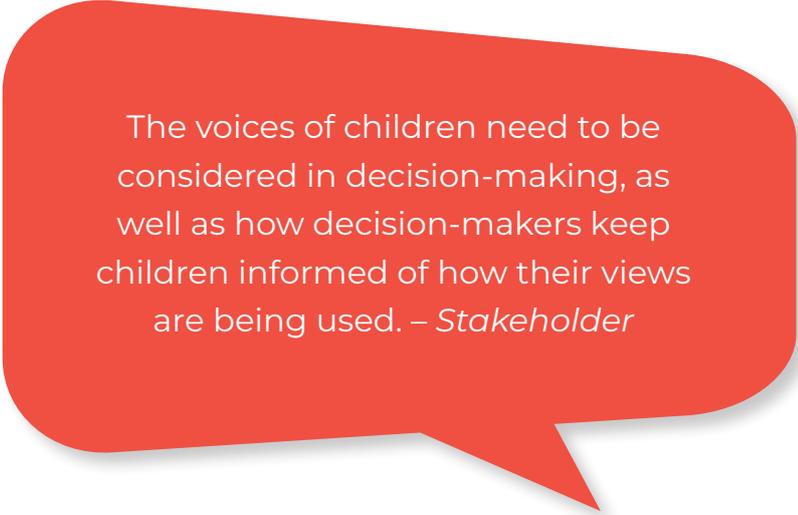
When discussing the barriers, stakeholders identified suggestions to shape an investment strategy to overcome these barriers and reduce child maltreatment. Some suggestions were focused on ethos and approach to investment and implementation, while others were focused on action on the ground. They have been divided along these lines in this report, as follows:

1. **Overarching principles** to frame the investment strategy. They are high-level, interrelated and relevant to all aspects of reform and investment. They reflect the stakeholders' vision for comprehensive change in the child protection system, which they said is critical if child maltreatment is to be reduced.
2. **Specific areas of action** that require focused investment to apply these principles in the development of the investment strategy. They call for reform at all levels of the child protection system. The NCC has drawn on these areas to make specific recommendations.

3.1 Overarching principles

(a) Empowerment, participation and self-determination

Stakeholders indicated that during reform and policy development, government should engage with stakeholders and communities in ways that support and value their knowledge and experiences, empowering their decision-making in investments that impact on their lives. This new investment strategy is viewed by some stakeholders as an opportunity to move away from traditional interventionist approaches.



The voices of children need to be considered in decision-making, as well as how decision-makers keep children informed of how their views are being used. – *Stakeholder*

Stakeholders showed a preference for a rights-based participatory approach, arguing that investments must be ‘human-centred’ and ‘citizen-centred’. This requires putting communities, children and families at the forefront of decision-making and ensuring that they are involved throughout the investment processes, from design to evaluations.

Responsibility needs to be shared with communities, stakeholders and government to drive outcomes based on measures of success that reflect community and stakeholder goals and are systematically understood by all involved. – Stakeholder

Stakeholders also raised the issue of how government interacts with communities in terms of engagement being passive or active, and the extent to which this impacts on outcomes. Stakeholders said that there is often tension when governments decide to scale up program models nationally, which reduces the ability of communities to effectively engage in decision-making processes and influence program design.

Stakeholders stated that governments should engage with stakeholders and communities in ways that are tailored to their needs and that can strengthen existing relationships.

Illustrative example: Empowered Communities

Empowered Communities is an Indigenous partnership place-based approach. It involves Indigenous communities and governments working together to set priorities, improve services and apply funding effectively at a regional level. The program aims to increase Indigenous ownership and give Indigenous peoples a greater say in decisions that affect them.⁴⁶

At the heart of effective systems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the right to **self-determination**. Article 3 of the UNDRIP states that ‘Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’. It is also a key element of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children* and recognised by all Australian jurisdictions as an integral right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise autonomy and to maintain and strengthen their political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions.

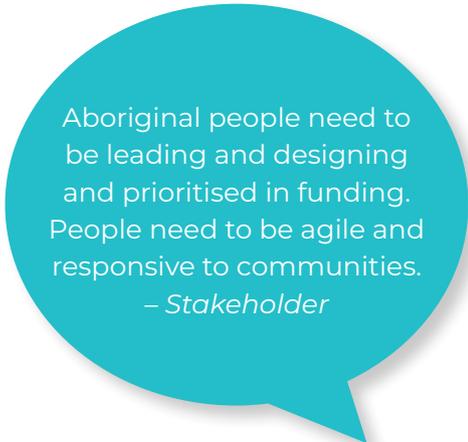
Self-determination is important for all children and families. This includes strengthening the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through Indigenous-specific methodologies and leadership. The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* commits all Australian jurisdictions to the principle of self-determination.

For example, the Queensland Family Wellbeing Service prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination by enabling ACCOs to run the service. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are best placed to understand differences in family arrangements and parenting practices compared to Western-style family arrangements, in order to bring about beneficial outcomes within their own communities.

Progress in this area requires systemic reforms that fundamentally shift how decisions are being made for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Stakeholders highlighted the need to prioritise the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in decision-making processes and developing service delivery mechanisms that include cultural context, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and ways of working. As SNAICC argues in the *Family Matters* report:

We know that when our families enjoy equitable access to high quality, culturally safe supports, our children will thrive. We know that when our communities have control over decisions, our children will thrive. We also know that for this to happen it requires laws, policies and practices that are culturally safe and responsive to our needs, and governments and services that are accountable to our communities. We know that at the very heart of effective systems is our right to self-determination – the right of our communities to determine their own futures.⁴⁷

Stakeholders called for practices that support community control and ownership, embedding ways of working that are inclusive and culturally responsive. Strengthening processes and systems that uphold self-determination will shift policy and service delivery away from interventionist decision-making processes that have historically maintained systems and perpetuated further disadvantage and harm.



Aboriginal people need to be leading and designing and prioritised in funding. People need to be agile and responsive to communities.
– Stakeholder

(b) Collaboration and partnership

Stakeholders frequently raised joint action between communities, governments and practitioners, focusing on optimising efforts and resources; and expanding the notion of partnership to include communities and individuals.



We need to have a partnership approach with states and territories. It makes no sense that we try to do it on our own.
– Stakeholder

Stakeholders asked for collaboration and co-responsibility across jurisdictions and with partnering organisations in order to avoid fragmentation of effort and/or unnecessary duplication.



Need to recognise we are in partnership with organisations, it's not just government sucking out information.
– Stakeholder

Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of government engaging with stakeholders and communities as partners, not solely as beneficiaries. Collaboration and partnerships with stakeholders and communities provide decision-makers with access to knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Co-design methodologies can assist in making sure that the specific needs of communities are addressed.⁴⁸ This is essential when responding to the needs and priorities of children and families with diverse or complex experiences. Responses must always be culturally safe and appropriate, trauma-informed, inclusive, and holistic.⁴⁹

Illustrative example: ACT's Step Up for Our Kids (2015–2020) and successive Next Steps for our Kids (2022–2030) strategies

These strategies for strengthening families and keeping children and young people safe place high value on relationships, particularly in terms of restorative practice.⁵⁰ Where relationships are valued, problems are solved jointly, and every person is treated with respect, care and dignity. These relationships are with children and young people, with their parents and carers and between service providers. Restorative practices are underpinned by respectful partnering relationships that are maintained through shared and accountable decision-making.

(c) Sustainability

Stakeholders regarded sustainability as being integral to the long-term viability of investments, with accountability to the goals and targets as outlined in *Safe and Supported: the National Plan to Protect Australia's Children*, and for more efficient allocation of resources.

To create long-term change and sustainable outcomes to support children and families, interventions need to be holistic, targeted and aimed at breaking cycles of harm. [This] requires deep investment into children as well as early intervention and prevention.
– Stakeholder

Sustainability is broadly defined as supporting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.⁵¹ For an investment strategy to be sustainable, it requires mechanisms and resources to be allocated across systems to holistically respond to challenges and barriers and strengthen positive outcomes.

Stakeholders suggested that the development of a national investment strategy should be approached with the intention of long-term commitment to change and an approach that embraces flexibility and responsiveness in order to continue achieving outcomes based on present needs and challenges.

This aligns with the Priority Reforms in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, which supports long-term commitment to improving the lives and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by investing in economic, social, and environmental targets to create positive outcomes now and into the future.⁵²

(d) Systems approach

Throughout the consultations, stakeholders, frequently commented on fractured structures and mechanisms.

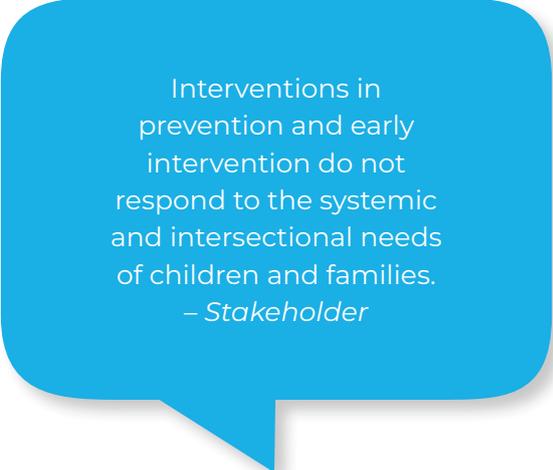
A whole-of-system investment approach is required to address the drivers of child abuse and neglect to effect change.
– Stakeholder

It was argued that while much can be done at the local level, systemic drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation require systems-level solutions. Children's contexts, needs and rights are complex and interconnected, and they require action that brings together information from different places and minimises gaps.

Using a whole-of-system performance management framework rather than contract-by-contract is key – this would keep everyone accountable and create more transparency. – Stakeholder

A systems approach analyses how structures, institutions, events, behaviours, and norms interact as part of a complex system, rather

than as separate, independent parts. In terms of child protection and wellbeing, taking a systems approach means strengthening the synergies between the many intersecting elements and structures that create safe and supported environments for children to grow.⁵³ A systems approach allows decision-makers to see children's health, learning, development, and wellbeing as a collective outcome of social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors over the long term.⁵⁴



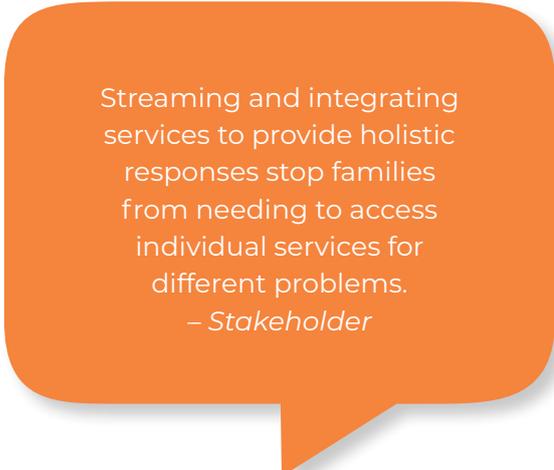
Interventions in prevention and early intervention do not respond to the systemic and intersectional needs of children and families.
– Stakeholder

A systems approach to child wellbeing means moving away from viewing issues, challenges, actors, and principles as separate entities, and moving towards understanding how they interact within a complex and mutually dependent environment.⁵⁵ By analysing how a system is constructed, it is possible to adjust policies and practices to address the root causes of problems – not just the symptoms.

Rather than treating child safety concerns in isolation, the systems approach promotes a holistic view of children and child protection, which engages the full range of actors involved in protecting children's rights.⁵⁶ Families, neighbours, service providers, and wider social systems all have an impact on the development of a child.⁵⁷

The ACMS study calls for:

coordinated implementation of responses by government and non-government agencies and communities, with genuine commitment to prevention and early intervention, responses to root causes of violence, and monitoring of efficacy.⁵⁸



Streaming and integrating services to provide holistic responses stop families from needing to access individual services for different problems.
– Stakeholder

A systems approach does not only include the interaction of formal structures and mechanisms. In some cultures, formal system structures may not be appropriate or even necessary given organic social safety nets already in place. Many parents, extended family members, and other members of the community protect children through largely informal mechanisms. In other contexts, more elaborate system structures are required to coordinate the various actors who have been assigned responsibilities within that system.⁵⁹

Tensions will continue between the solutions identified in local contexts and reforms required to address inequities across the broader system. Research identifies the complexity and difficulties in shifting system dynamics through small-scale initiatives.⁶⁰ However, a systems approach can respect the integrity of the grassroots while mapping the dynamics of the surrounding system by exploring the ways in which the relationships between system components affect

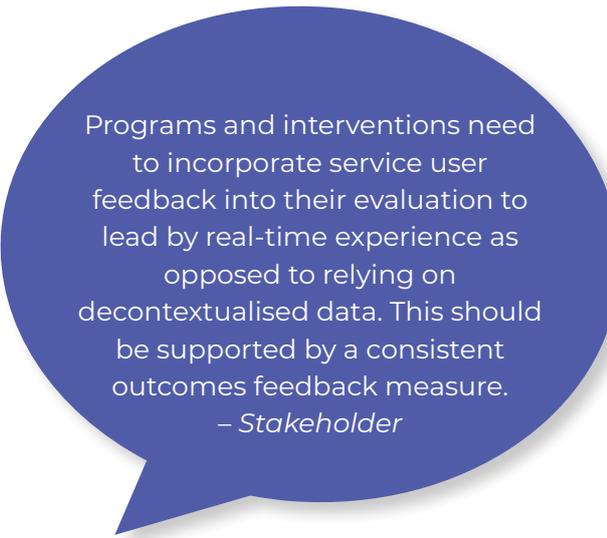
its functioning and ascertain which interventions can lead to better results.⁶¹ A key starting point to systems change is smarter investment.⁶²

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Implementation Framework* describes systems reform and it is discussed in the literature review (Appendix 1).

(e) Evidence-based investment and innovation

Stakeholders argued that building investment on a solid evidence base was imperative to driving better outcomes. This includes determining what data is gathered and why; how it is collected and used; where it needs to be focused, who owns it and with whom it should be shared. They also maintained that the level of investment should be reported in the measurement of outcomes.

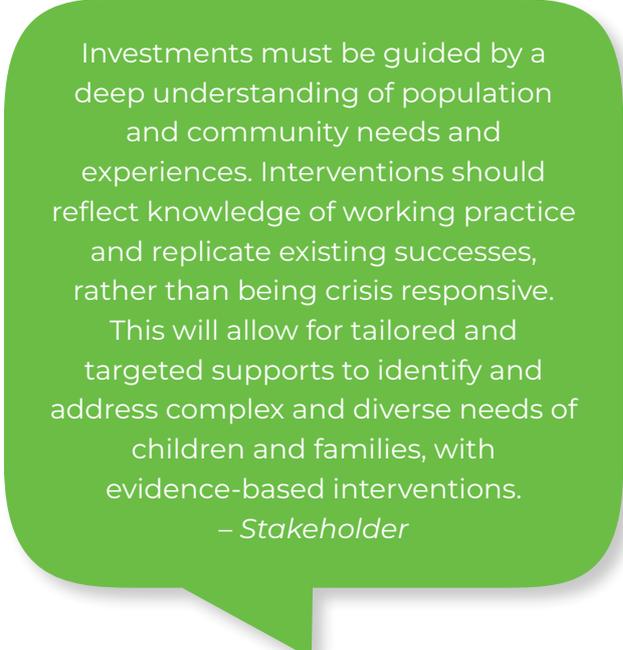
This is supported by research that suggests prevention and early intervention are most effective when supported by evidence of good practice.⁶³ In Australia, public policy is not always developed through a process of collecting and evaluating evidence to inform decision-making.⁶⁴



Programs and interventions need to incorporate service user feedback into their evaluation to lead by real-time experience as opposed to relying on decontextualised data. This should be supported by a consistent outcomes feedback measure.
– Stakeholder

This has meant that the needs of children and families are not always adequately addressed in ways that best serve them.

Stakeholders suggested that the investment strategy should incorporate knowledge of local needs and experiences. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are developing evidence bases around Aboriginal knowledge and culture, which is critical to informing policy and practice and improving the outcomes for children and families. It is often assumed that Western constructs of evidence and programming can be applied generally across a wide range of contexts. A more nuanced approach would potentially draw on wisdom and experience from a range of contexts and sources.



Investments must be guided by a deep understanding of population and community needs and experiences. Interventions should reflect knowledge of working practice and replicate existing successes, rather than being crisis responsive. This will allow for tailored and targeted supports to identify and address complex and diverse needs of children and families, with evidence-based interventions.
– Stakeholder

Some stakeholders suggested broadening terminology to refer to knowledge-based approaches rather than evidence-based approaches. Knowledge-based approaches are inclusive of a broader range of knowledge, such as lived experience, the views of children and young people, practice wisdom and cultural systems.

(f) Human rights-based approach

Human rights are based on principles of dignity, equality, and mutual respect. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provide the framework to apply a human rights lens to social investment. Other human rights instruments provide a critical focus on marginalised groups that need support to realise their rights and an imperative for government action. These include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Ratifying governments bear a duty to reflect each article of these instruments in domestic laws, policies and strategies.

To be child-rights focused, the NCFIS must take into account the full expanse of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights contained within these international instruments. To that end, action will be consistent with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Target 16.2, which aims to end all forms of violence against children, and Target 5.2, which aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.⁶⁵

This approach is about turning human rights from purely legal instruments into effective policies and practices. It is a framework that helps define outcomes and the process by which outcomes are achieved.⁶⁶ A focus on outcomes enables the process to be more adaptive and responsive to participants. Details of how this is actioned can vary between organisations and practitioners, but the PANEL framework identifies common principles:⁶⁷

- **Participation:** Everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect their human rights. Participation must be active, free and meaningful, and give attention to issues of accessibility, including access to information in a form and a language that can be understood.
- **Accountability:** Accountability requires effective monitoring of compliance with human rights standards and achievement of human rights goals, as well as effective remedies for human rights breaches. For accountability to be effective, there must be appropriate laws, policies, institutions, administrative procedures and mechanisms of redress in order to secure human rights. Effective monitoring of compliance and achievement of human rights goals also requires development and use of appropriate human rights indicators.
- **Non-discrimination and equality:** A human rights-based approach means that all forms of discrimination in the realisation of rights must be prohibited, prevented and eliminated. It also means that priority should be given to people in the most marginalised or vulnerable situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights.
- **Empowerment:** Everyone is entitled to claim and exercise their rights and freedoms. Individuals and communities need to be able to understand their rights, and to participate fully in the development of policy and practices that affect their lives.
- **Legality:** A human rights-based approach requires that the law recognises human rights and freedoms as legally enforceable entitlements, and the law itself is consistent with human rights principles.

Furthermore, the human rights-based approach requires child-centred practice. This means putting children at the centre of policy and service delivery. In the Kids Central Toolkit,⁶⁸ the Institute of Child Protection Studies identifies six key considerations:

- children and young people's safety and well-being are of primary importance
- children are individuals with unique needs and wishes
- because children are usually best supported within their family every effort should be made to assist families to support their children
- environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow
- children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives
- the best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children and families in an ongoing way.

In a child-centred approach, the success of a delivered service would be measured by its impact on children, not solely by a completed output.

Using a human rights-based approach, an investment strategy can be an effective policy tool for improving the lives of children and families. By shifting the child to the centre of the conversation, investment becomes focused on wellbeing, enabling a process that:

- supports the productivity of people throughout their lives
- realises human rights through the provisioning of social and economic supports that are integral for child and family wellbeing and empowerment

- increases self-determination and cultural safety
- overcomes barriers by improving planning and coordination within and across jurisdictions to improve ways of working collaboratively
- improves accountability and transparency to facilitate improved assessment and evaluation of system performance.

3.2 Specific areas of action

(a) Common language and definitions

The need for clear and consistent language was one of the most frequently cited issues in stakeholder consultations. For example, inconsistent definitions of terms such as prevention, early intervention, wellbeing, and place-based approaches is common across jurisdictions and within jurisdictions. The terms are currently used with various meanings ascribed to them.



Consistent and clear definitions are required to encourage standardised practice. – Stakeholder

Without **national definitions of key terms**, collaboration and sharing of information across and within jurisdictions is compromised. Using and extrapolating from the results of evaluated programs relies on consistent definitions of key terms.

There is a lack of consistency and challenges with understanding how plans, strategies, frameworks, services and interventions are driving outcomes without a clear definition of working terms, such as prevention and early intervention, and 'help'. Consistent and clear definitions are required to encourage standardised practice.
– Stakeholder

This national investment strategy presents an opportunity to develop and agree on **consistent meanings for key terms** and to work on an improved approach to deliverables and measurement.

Recommendation:

1. CAFS prioritises reaching national agreement on key definitions, including: prevention, early intervention, wellbeing, and place-based approaches, in 2023-2024. This will require broad consultation with non-government stakeholders, including direct service providers and those with lived and living experience, in line with Action 4 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023-2026*.

(b) Data and evidence generation

Stakeholders argued that an investment strategy must include investment in data and evidence-generation. Specifically, they called for rigorous documentation of Australian programs so that local models can be prioritised, reducing the heavy reliance on evidence produced overseas.

Furthermore, some maintained that precision in the Australian context should rely not only on administrative data, but also the perspectives of children and their families.

Indigenous data sovereignty is a live topic. It is about recognising that there is value in information and making sure to have all the arrangements in place on how it is used. – Stakeholder

Stakeholders identified consistent data collection and **data sharing** across programs and portfolios as a strong way of monitoring outcomes for children and families. For example, in Queensland, education and youth justice match data to see where interventions have been successful in keeping children in school. Using a cross-portfolio approach was widely regarded as a positive practice.

Stakeholders were broadly supportive of strengthening and linking existing **national minimum data sets** to encompass information about prevention and early intervention, including local data about place-based programs and services. Stakeholders also recognised the complexity of measuring long-term programs compared to short-term programs, especially in the context of programs implemented nationally and those that are place-based.



To monitor outcomes and pathways, we should be including [local communities] own views and experiences.
– Stakeholder

They emphasised the need to collect national data on age, ethnicity, language, disability, religion, and sexual identity. This data should then be analysed collectively to facilitate understanding of **intersectionality**; showing how children’s intersecting identities can combine to create and heighten exclusion and vulnerability. Stakeholders also raised the issue of children not visible in any formal systems, who can thus be difficult to capture in data. For example, those who are homeless, those not attending school, and those living in remote areas. Stakeholders argued that this investment strategy must be inclusive of these children.

Stakeholders voiced the need for **data analysis to occur across jurisdictions and portfolios** in order to expand the understandings of the situations faced by children. For example, family wellbeing is often defined in terms of employment, housing, education, and rates of family removal/reunification. Where these findings are reported separately with no reference to other findings, they can be misleading.

Additionally, stakeholders argued for the collection of data to sit independently of government. With independence of data comes transparency, which should underpin policy and investment. Independent data is also a tool in holding decision-makers to account – a key tenant of the rights-based approach.⁶⁹

Some stakeholders suggested that this should be balanced by clarity over ownership of data. Overall, stakeholders argued that there was inconsistent understanding of **data sovereignty**. Data sovereignty recognises the value of information to communities and is critical for them to craft their own narrative and direct their futures. It supports local, place-based decision-making. Stakeholders were of the view that inclusive and holistic approaches to research, measurement and evaluation methodologies could improve data sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural safety.⁷⁰ They were mindful that data sovereignty also requires those collecting and analysing data to have support and training to complete this work. This is in line with Action 3 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*.

All data sharing must prioritise the best interests of the child, particularly the child’s right to privacy.

Illustrative example: VACCA's Evaluation and Outcomes Project

Through their 'Cultural Therapeutic Ways' approach, VACCA seeks to enhance program design, delivery and evaluation methodologies to be culturally appropriate, inclusive and holistic.⁷¹ Recognising that existing processes do not meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples, the project supports ACCOs and Aboriginal communities to build self-determination through the collection, use and sharing of data and knowledge. It builds on an evidence-based approach underpinned by human rights principles to better reflect the needs, values, priorities and experiences of communities.

in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023–2026*, and Priority Reform 4 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).

(c) Planning, monitoring and evaluation

Stakeholders argued that effective planning and measurement mechanisms were paramount to the success and the sustainability of investments and programs. This means assessing what works well, building on successes, and, where approaches are not having the desired effect, working to adjust service delivery to improve outcomes.

[The importance] of outcomes for participants in a program or approach as individuals rather than as outputs of a service.
– Stakeholder

Recommendations:

2. The Australian Government funds AIHW to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and CAFS to reach a national definition of data sovereignty (in line with Action 3 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*), and all jurisdictions adopting the national definition and reporting arrangements.
3. The Australian Government funds AIHW to engage with governments, non-government stakeholders, direct service providers, CAFS and those with lived and living experience to strengthen and link existing national minimum data sets to encompass information about prevention and early intervention, including local data about place-based programs and services. (This is

Stakeholders called for shared understandings amongst all parties regarding outcomes and measurement of outcomes. This includes outcomes determined by children, families and communities.

Stakeholders asserted that it is integral for decision-makers to design strategies, frameworks, plans and investments with clear structures and approaches that are long-term in nature, culturally informed and trauma-informed.

To that end, stakeholders expressed a preference for working with outcomes, rather than lower-level outputs or inputs. Plans, programs, and frameworks must be designed and implemented with a long-term view, that is strategically focused on rights, rather than on short-term and arbitrary outputs. They also maintained that early indicators of change should be articulated

in planning and monitoring so that progress, or lack of progress, towards outcomes is visible and allows scope for adjustment where required.

Examples of outcome focused frameworks and strategies include:

- *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2022-2032*, includes an outcomes framework that was developed through wide consultations, marking a change from the previous framework.
- *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030* is based on outcomes, and was co-designed with victims, survivors, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. It has been designed to monitor progress in the short, medium and long term and to guide future investment decisions.
- The *Northern Territory Social Outcomes Framework* recognises the values that the community associates with individual and community wellbeing. It provides a transparent approach for the NT Government, the non-government organisation (NGO) sector and the community, to measure progress towards a broad, aspirational vision for the future of the Northern Territory.

Recommendations:

4. The Investment Strategy embeds planning, monitoring and evaluation processes as requirements for funding contracts, with children and families at the centre of all decision-making.

5. The Investment Strategy requires planning, monitoring and evaluation processes must be outcome focused, rather than activity-based.
6. The Investment Strategy includes consultations with communities, especially children and their families as stakeholders so that locations for piloting investments are informed by local knowledge and culture.

Illustrative example: WA Department of Communities Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

The IMEF provides a consistent and transparent framework to monitor and evaluate for whole-of-government strategies for which the Department is responsible.⁷² It guides the Department measurement of outcomes, and the contribution it makes to other state government initiatives, including the Community Services Outcome Measurement Framework, the state-based implementation of *Closing the Gap*, and the WA Aboriginal Engagement Strategy. This approach is results-based, with a participative orientation and incorporates social theory and logic models.

Illustrative example: Northern Territory Child and Families Tripartite Forum

The Forum brings all stakeholders – the federal and territory governments, and the community sector – together, helping to ensure interests and preferences are being heard and accommodated in decision-making and agenda-setting processes.⁷³ The forum works to support implementation of reform across the child protection and youth justice sectors and provide strategic oversight, monitoring and advice on government priorities. It has developed a Coordinated Investment Framework to guide funding arrangements by the federal and territory government, which is yet to be published.

(d) Community leadership and accountability

Increased **accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities** was identified by stakeholders as an emerging issue driving cultural change at all levels of government. This is consistent with findings in the literature review, Action 7 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026* and Priority Reform 3 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*, as well as the *Family is Culture* report, which advocates for significant structural reform and accountability mechanisms in the NSW child protection system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.⁷⁴ In some instances, this has involved some departments resourcing and delegating authority to local organisations, such

as ACCOs, for community ownership and control over decisions regarding their children.⁷⁵ Of the jurisdictions reporting reduced levels of contact with the child protection system, stakeholders attributed increased community control as the common factor.

You need to embed local leadership and meet families where they live. You need to be able to reach mobile families who are not going to plug into a community centre.

– Stakeholder

Alongside this, stakeholders said that there is increasing understanding in the child protection context that **one size does not fit all**. Stakeholders argued that it was inappropriate to select particular models and programs and scale them up to a national level. Instead, they suggested that models and programs should be community owned and suited to the local context. They said that programs need to acknowledge children and families as individuals, who exist in their own unique contexts. **Place-based approaches** were routinely cited as effective, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Stakeholders called for long-term investment to strengthen outcomes in communities, as opposed to current processes that drip-feed funding dictated by government budget processes. This is consistent with Priority Reform 1 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*.

Stakeholders also called for investment into initiatives to be proportionate to the communities requiring assistance, rather than based on general population needs. For example,

in the ACT just over 30% of children in the child protection system are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and thus overrepresented in the system. As a result, the Government has agreed to disburse 30% of child protection funding purely for ACCOs.



Targeting like this is also at the heart of the *Their Futures Matter* reform in NSW, which focused on a four-year child protection system transformation. This is driven by an investment and commissioning approach to ensure that funding and programs are directed to where they deliver the greatest social and economic benefits.⁷⁶ An example from Victoria is the 'Stop Family Violence' initiative that commits 10% of funding to Aboriginal services, and that Aboriginal services have a first right of refusal.

Recommendations:

7. The Investment Strategy prioritises investments in ACCOs that have assumed delegated authority, in line with Action 1 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026* under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, which commits all jurisdictions to implement legislative reform to support the delegation of legislative authority with regard to statutory child protection powers over the next two years. (This is also in line with Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).
8. The Investment Strategy initiates investments where community-led organisations, Government and NGOs are equal partners, including accountability checks for all partners, and investment decisions based on 'proportionality' and 'greatest need'. (This is in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026* and Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*).
9. The Investment Strategy supports long-term investment in place-based services and programs that are built from the ground up, based on the needs and priorities of communities. (This is also in line with Priority Reform 1 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).

Illustrative example: Bendigo and District Aboriginal Corporation's (BDAC) Garunga Bupup (Healthy babies) program

BDAC is the only ACCO in Victoria with authority to take responsibility for Aboriginal children in care.⁷⁷ To support these children, Garunga Bupup is a prevention program that begins at the pre-natal stage, supporting Aboriginal mothers in their journey to parenthood. Mothers are coached by community workers who use the Aboriginal principle of 'walking the journey', which involves building relationships, being with family, and wrap-around service coordination. BDAC works intensively with these parents to prevent children being taken into the child protection system, and develops cultural safety, family support and trust between family, community and support services. Other wrap-around and holistic supports are also provided to families at point of need through children's lives to facilitate their safety and wellbeing.

Other community-led approaches are also discussed in detail in the literature review, including **Justice Reinvestment, Logan Together** and **Stronger Places, Stronger Communities**.

Looking at emerging workforce issues, the imperatives behind reorientating investment aren't just about money but also the capacity of the system. Around Australia, people are talking about the significant changes in recruiting and keeping pace with demand... The capabilities of the workforce need to meet the complex needs of families.

– Stakeholder

(e) Capacity and capability building

To overcome limitations in workforce capacity, some government stakeholders indicated that they were investing in developing staff skills and building capacity. For example, in WA there are efforts to develop a sustainable workforce capability model, through the WA Signs of Safety Project.

Stakeholders described capacity building as an investment in people and communities so that the sector could be responsive to need and accessible to all. They said that increasing capacity of the workforce should be built to delivery outcomes, shifting away from delivery of outputs.

Stakeholders also linked the importance of **capacity building to sustainability**, for practitioners in the sector and for communities. For the sector, increased funding of services in the learning and development of staff is an investment in the service sector as a whole. This recognises that staff move between service provider organisations in their career. Some stakeholders called for increased investment in learning and development to include a focus on

tertiary training to increase the size of the current and future workforce.

For communities in regional and remote contexts, if a long-term investment is made in service funding, it is an **investment in the community**, creating employment, and developing and training local people, thereby supporting the local economy and self-determination. This is consistent with Action 4 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*.

In this context, stakeholders suggested investment in the local workforce within communities, building on the strengths and lived experiences of people. In lieu of specialised training, they already understand the needs and capabilities of their communities. This would help to strengthen the connection to family, culture and country for Aboriginal children in care. This should include partnering with and investing in ACCOs. Stakeholders also raised the importance of mapping the transfer of service delivery to ACCOs, including workforce and infrastructure transfer. This is also consistent with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*, under activity (b):

Co-design with ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family peaks (or leadership where no peak yet exists) a plan to strengthen ACCOs, which considers their aspirations, evidence-based service models of culturally appropriate care, and workforce and infrastructure needs.⁷⁸

Concurrent to this, stakeholders pointed out that government child protection authorities must ‘let go of the work and support our First Nations colleagues to lead it’.

Several jurisdictions have already committed to investing in and supporting the capacity building of ACCOs. Some jurisdictions have approached this through delegated authority and/or quarantining child protection budgets specifically

for ACCOs to proportionally respond to the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children interacting with the child protection system. For example, Tasmania introduced an advice and referral line to improve service delivery to children and families,⁷⁹ with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff supporting people to access culturally appropriate services. This was co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and includes an Aboriginal Liaison Officer.⁸⁰ This is consistent with the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*, which states that ‘the strategy will prioritise increasing the proportion of services delivered by ACCOs’.⁸¹

For all organisations and agencies, capacity must be built to be more responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families. This may mean appointing staff that reflect the cultural diversity in the community, improving cultural knowledge of all staff, and implementing policies and using assessment tools that reflect the needs of these families.⁸²

Stakeholders identified several specific areas for skills development and capacity building. One is data and evidence generation. Some stakeholders advocate for investment in the monitoring and evaluation capacity of community-led organisations so that they can collect, process and analyse data, and be in control of how they use it. Another specific area for capacity building is in trauma response for service providers, which will be important to prevent escalation of maltreatment of children in some families. For example, the Australian Centre for Child Protection has introduced micro credentialled courses on trauma to enhance capacity building in the sector, including professional certificates in Understanding Childhood Trauma, Assessing Childhood Trauma and Responding to Childhood Trauma. They are designed to be accessible, fit-for-purpose

quality training to upskill the current workforce. Evaluations have reportedly shown positive outcomes.

Illustrative examples: VACCA's Outcomes and Evaluation Project; and ACT's Aboriginal Development Unit

VACCA's **Outcomes and Evaluation Project** supports ACCOs and communities to meet their need and priorities.⁸³ The project challenges mainstream approaches and practice in favour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. This approach builds self-determination into programs and practices empowering Aboriginal communities.

The ACT **Aboriginal Development Unit** will work across all programs and staffed by an all-Aboriginal team.⁸⁴ The plan and model are still being developed, but could include prevention and early intervention, intensive family support, referral pathways and new investment for the establishment of diversionary services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This work will help ACCOS to take on more children and build capabilities, possibly even fully delegating authority.

Recommendations:

10. The Investment Strategy identifies existing capabilities and resourcing gaps in local community organisations, including ACCOs, so that funding supports the capabilities that are required to respond to complex community needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. (This is in line with Priority Reform 2 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020*).
11. The Investment Strategy establishes funding arrangements with organisations, including ACCOs, that include a dedicated budget for monitoring, evaluation and reporting outcomes.
12. The Investment Strategy supports frontline practitioners, including ACCOs, to have a full range of skills and capabilities to support families with complex needs in trauma responsive ways, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. (This is in line with Action 3 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023–2026* and Action 4 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).

(f) Multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional collaboration

Working across levels of government, and between departments within jurisdictions, was widely regarded as positive practice amongst stakeholders. This is consistent with Action 8 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*. Likewise, the literature review found that successful investment strategies both acknowledged and worked collaboratively across different levels of government and diverse service

sectors. Stakeholders specifically talked about the importance and need for education, health, housing and Treasury to be working collaboratively with child protection agencies. Some argued that youth justice agencies should also be involved where this was relevant to the needs of families.

This requires serious commitment to developing communication pathways, brokering partnerships, planning and coordination, particularly in a federal system. Breaking down siloes and working across service areas acknowledges the complexity of the individual and the family, their needs and vulnerabilities. It requires multi-disciplinary service provision that prioritises these complex needs together, rather than addressing specific issues in isolation or relying on one program to solve a multitude of problems. One stakeholder characterised multi-disciplinary responses to complex trauma as a 'gamechanger' that could disrupt the intergenerational trajectory of maltreatment.

System-wide reform demands that responsibility lies within all government departments, not just those with expressly stated child-related mandates. That is, the rights of children demand a whole-of-government approach. This is in line with a human rights-based approach, which offers a key starting point for multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral collaboration, placing the child at the centre of all policy decisions. It can also offer more efficient use of resources, which are often limited in the child protection context.

Illustrative example: New Zealand's Joint Venture for Family and Sexual Abuse

The Joint Venture approach is a model used by the Government to improve collaboration and partnership across agencies to address systemic issues.⁸⁵ The model evolved as a consequence of violence not fitting squarely within the boundaries of individual government agencies. It requires cross-sectoral investment. The approach involves collaboration between government agencies and an independent Māori body, with no actor holding a primary mandate, to affect a whole-of-government response to achieving outcomes. Rather than one minister being responsible for child-related policy, it is incumbent on all ministers to consider the impact of their portfolio on children.

Although the model has been transformational in changing how agencies work together, an evaluation concluded that it needs to move beyond relying on good faith collaboration to achieve outcomes. The model would benefit from clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all members, improving accountability mechanisms, resourcing to build on existing skills, knowledge and experiences, and making stronger commitment by members.

A number of governments across Australia have already adopted whole-of-government approaches in various strategies:

- **Supporting Families Changing Futures 2019-2023 (Qld):** A whole-of-government strategy for the final stage of a 10-year child and family reform program, with a focus on children and families experiencing vulnerability.⁸⁶
- **Safe and well: Supporting families, protecting children 2021 (SA):** A whole-of-government strategy for supporting families at risk to safely care for their children, protecting children and young people from harm, and investing in young people in care and leaving care.⁸⁷
- **It takes a Tasmanian village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2021 (Tas):** A whole-of-government Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to improve the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people, with a focus on the first 1,000 days (pregnancy to 2 years of age).⁸⁸ In addition, in October 2022, Tasmania combined several departments to create the Department for Education, Children and Young People, which focuses on putting the child at the centre.
- **Brighter Beginnings (NSW):** A whole-of-government strategy that focuses on the first 2,000 days of a child's life, guiding service delivery priorities to improve universal health, education, and family services.⁸⁹
- **Their Futures Matter 2017-2020 (NSW):** A four-year whole-of-government reform, intended to place vulnerable children and families at the heart of services.⁹⁰

Their Futures Matter has been evaluated. The lessons from this could assist in developing the investment strategy. In July 2020, the NSW

Auditor-General found that the key objective to establish an evidence-based whole-of-government early intervention approach for vulnerable children and families in NSW was not achieved. The areas of concern identified by the Auditor-General include the need for:

- cross-portfolio leadership to establish a whole-of-government investment approach
- cross-agency action to redirect funding in the Their Futures Matter investment pool to better target evidenced-based early interventions
- robust service mapping and comparative evidence of what works best across agencies to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and families in NSW at the first sign of vulnerability
- repurposing or decommissioning of programs and services that are comparatively less effective.⁹¹

Some stakeholders suggested that multi-jurisdictional coordination would be strengthened by the development and/or alignment with **national strategies**. For example, stakeholders suggested that a national investment Strategy should be synchronised with the Early Years Strategy (EYS), which is seeking to embody multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral work. While the scope of the EYS is broader than early intervention and prevention, it aims to reach and support the most disadvantaged families. The EYS seeks to combine a national focus with a local lens so that communities are empowered to frame their own outcomes. Syncing the investment strategy with the EYS presents an opportunity to develop consistent approaches, language and measurement, which would strengthen reporting and focus efforts on outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families.

To facilitate collaboration across jurisdictions, stakeholders agreed that **service mapping** could increase the ability of users and practitioners to navigate services. Some stakeholders also suggested that transparency in service mapping could increase uptake and awareness of appropriate services by providers, families and communities. A systems approach requires baseline information on the location and type of service currently being provided. Others emphasised the importance of understanding and addressing community expectations of services.

Alongside collaboration between services, some stakeholders raised the issue of **collaboration between services and communities**. For many children and families with complex needs, supports need to be integrated into communities where family wellbeing is viewed as holistic and intersectional.

Finally, core data sets, standardised measurement and a common language – all issues raised during consultations (see section 4.2) – should frame any efforts to institute multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral policy and planning. In NSW, the 2017 Human Services Framework (now known as the Human Services Data Set) started measuring outcomes across government agencies. Developed to foster a holistic view of services and programs, it had an outcomes-based approach, provided a platform for a shared understanding of priorities, and enabled collaboration between agencies. It eventually led to collaboration across jurisdictions, with NSW working with DSS to track outcomes across both Commonwealth and NSW portfolio areas.

Investment can be maximised by aligning investment decisions across jurisdictions. To further help minimise fragmentation and improve sustainability, some stakeholders called for a cross-party approach to funding and partnerships at national, state and local levels.

Recommendations:

13. An appropriate Commonwealth agency, such as the Australian Productivity Commission, is tasked with mapping services and programs for children and families across Commonwealth portfolios to create a baseline to inform investment decisions and coordination of services and programs.
14. The Australian Government establishes guidelines and minimum standards for multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional collaboration, and whole-of-government approaches for child protection. This must be developed with, and include as a key tenet, the participation of communities, children and families, particularly partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in line with Action 8 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*.

(g) Funding processes and cycles



Stakeholders said that any commitment to prevention and early intervention must be reflected in the improvement of funding processes and the lengthening of funding cycles, with reliable funding over longer periods of time to allow for measuring of long-term outcomes. This means ensuring the theory of change defines short-, medium- and long-term indicators so progress, or lack of progress, is tracked over

the course of the funding cycle, allowing scope to adjust the program where required.



Why is Defence allowed a 10-year investment plan but everybody else only has four years?
– Stakeholder

Stakeholders discussed how governments could better use local commissioning and procurement processes. They suggested that shifting commissioning and procurement control away from central governments and using community-led organisations, including ACCOs, to drive investment to improve outcomes, including co-design on how to achieve this. This is consistent with a human rights-based approach. Stakeholders argued that transitioning to this level of engagement would be key to self-determination in Aboriginal communities.

AbSec has developed a *Commissioning Framework* that takes a human-centred and social wellbeing lens. The framework is supported by the NSW Government and will be used within and beyond the child protection sector.⁹²

Recommendation:

15. Expand funding cycles to enable stability in planning and implementation, with timelines agreed to by all partners, including working with communities to develop funding practice methodologies, including commissioning and procurement processes. This must be appropriate to local needs and priorities, and be culturally inclusive (in line with Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).



We need to stop doing what is not working and invest in something from the ground up and not done by the government. Build on child protection ... and respect the need for early intervention. – Stakeholder

(h) Prevention and early intervention focus

Stakeholders agreed that investment in prevention and early intervention must be prioritised in the same way as secondary and tertiary levels of response, shifting mindsets to focus on supporting children and families before they reach crisis point where there is often little choice to do anything other than to remove the child from their family.

The ACMS provides evidence that:

child maltreatment increases health service use later in life, particularly for people who have experienced multiple types of maltreatment. Better prevention strategies and targeted support for children and families at risk are needed. In addition, a more nuanced understanding of how the complex interactions between child maltreatment and individual and environmental protective factors affect health and wellbeing across life is needed to design effective strategies for improving long term outcomes.⁹³

One stakeholder reinforced the need to use epidemiology as the primary starting point in the application of the public health model, which:

attempts to prevent or reduce a particular illness or social problem in a population by identifying risk indicators. Public health models aim to prevent problems occurring in the first place by targeting policies and interventions at the known risk indicators for the problem, quickly identifying and responding to problems if they do occur and minimising the long-term effects of the problems.⁹⁴

Under this model, 'prevention' can be applied at any stage of an individual's trajectory, depending on their need. Prevention measures may be designed not only to prevent child abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place, but also to prevent the escalation, or even re-occurrence, of abuse and neglect. For example, one stakeholder suggested that a tertiary therapeutic system would be more efficacious than universal services for some children. Some families and children have such complex needs the first time they present that they need intensive family support services. In this scenario, prevention of escalation is the priority to break the cycle of maltreatment.

Policymakers should consider how the screening of concerns and decision-making regarding appropriate responses, including alternatives to

child protective responses, should be informed by the lifetime extent of reporting and the accumulation of risk and harm for these families. Understanding the characteristics of these families will allow for the provision of supports and services targeted to their specific needs. Doing this at the earliest possible time will help to prevent repeat reporting to child protection systems and improve outcomes for children.⁹⁵

Reorientating spending towards prevention and early intervention is cost-effective. Economic modelling suggests that investment in primary prevention will significantly reduce costs associated with child protection as these investments seek to mitigate harms before they become issues later in life. Modelling in 2019 predicted that investment in targeted early intervention 'over a 10-year period in Victoria can save \$1.6 billion in the child protection and out-of-home care system alone and prevent 1,200 children a year from entering out-of-home care. This equates to a \$2 saving for each \$1 invested'.⁹⁶ Other modelling and academic research suggest similar cost savings.⁹⁷

The NSW Government is using actuarial modelling to inform the development of measurable, high-quality programs and services with quantified costs and benefits to government. The NSW Government expects that this will help redirect investment from crisis-driven services to prevention and earlier intervention, reducing costs over the long term.⁹⁸

Finally, improved prevention presents an opportunity to address the epidemic of mental health issues affecting Australians.⁹⁹ The results of the ACMS provide:

robust evidence for policy and practice with the aim of averting and ameliorating the consequences of mistreatment during childhood.¹⁰⁰

Illustrative example: Victoria’s Early Intervention Investment Framework

The Framework was designed as a budgeting tool to guide early intervention investment through evidence-based and collaborative decision-making processes,¹⁰¹ aiming to reduce pressure on acute services and create better outcomes through cost-efficient allocation of resources across government. The Framework was introduced in 2021–22, becoming the first jurisdiction to embed early intervention into its budget processes.

Illustrative example: Western Australia Government’s State Commissioning Strategy for Community Services

The State Commissioning Strategy aims to develop a ‘holistic and sustainable’ community services system through a commissioning approach that overcomes existing structural barriers that impede effective service delivery.¹⁰² The Strategy is supported by an Implementation Plan and Outcomes Measurement Framework that encourages data and knowledge sharing and collaboration across agencies and clear processes and principles to reach outcomes. It is aligned with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* and Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, supporting the Government to fulfil its responsibilities to build the capabilities of the ACCOs sector. Transitioning commissioning processes across agencies requires long-term structural change but will be necessary for the development of sustainable outcomes.

Recommendations:

16. Prioritise investment in prevention and early intervention programs and supports, identified by evidence and knowledge from community-led organisations, targeting the most vulnerable children and families. (This is in line with Action 1 of the *Safe and Supported First Action Plan 2023–2026*).
17. Use the new findings in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study to guide and prioritise prevention and early intervention investment, particularly focusing on emotional abuse, and its co-occurrence with family and domestic violence, and its long-term impact on mental health.
18. The Investment Strategy supports research that expands and strengthens our understanding of the characteristics of families with complex needs, facilitating the development a range of evidence-based early responses and preventative measures. (This is in line with activities (d) and (e) under Action 3 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026*).

4 Conclusion

Stakeholders agree that investing in business-as-usual will not be sufficient to address child maltreatment in Australia. Without exception, they said that putting the child's best interest at the centre of the strategy is paramount. Key to doing this will be adopting an evidence-informed systems approach, guided by human rights principles that respond to the complex needs of children and families.

A protection system that works for children is one that wraps around them, adapting to their needs and priorities. Under a systems approach, portfolios, jurisdictions and community organisations can work more effectively together, streamlining services and funding processes and cycles, so they are fit-for-purpose and serve the needs and capacities of stakeholders at all levels.

As has emerged in this report, there is an underlying tension between the expressed preference for top-level coordination across jurisdictions and a call for place-based programs and services that are responsive to local contexts and needs. This speaks to a broader reality of nationwide poverty, deprivation and vulnerability, all of which play out in local areas and communities and in the fragmentation of the basic service systems. These tensions can be resolved through partnerships that are transparent and strive for equity, and a systems approach that is robustly implemented.

To create long-term change and sustainable outcomes to support children and families, interventions can be transformative if they are holistic and aimed at breaking cycles of harm. The ACMS calls for government to 'invest more, and wisely, in universal prevention at the population level and targeted interventions to subpopulations at high risk'.¹⁰³ Tipping the investment balance in favour of prevention will help to develop thinking that goes beyond

immediate protection concerns to consider broader initiatives focused on addressing structural drivers of inequality and promoting a child's wellbeing and development. Further, breaking the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment relies on solutions that are rooted in empowerment, sustainability and collaboration.

The action required to address the root causes of poverty and exclusion are beyond the scope of any single strategy, investment or otherwise. However, stakeholders were clear that long-term thinking will be critical to effective investment in prevention and early intervention. If there is a shift towards more holistic programming – with data systems, multi-jurisdictional, multi-sectoral planning, and services collaboration – this will need time to plan and implement. It will also need time to show results. Likewise, enabling longer funding periods for programs will provide stability and security for organisations trying to effect far-reaching change.

Related to this is a universal shift to focusing on outcomes for children, not simply program inputs and outputs. Focusing on the whole child means shifting focus from 'what is being done?' to 'what changes are being made?' Institutionalising a focus on outcomes requires a long-term view, as well as giving space to community-led programs that require flexibility and responsiveness in their given contexts.

The ACMS emphasises that 'programs must strike a balance between being evidence-based and community-driven'.¹⁰⁴ Stakeholders in the consultations bring these facets together, suggesting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led organizations should also be responsible for evidence-generation that is culturally sensitive and that uses traditional knowledge.

This could go some way to addressing the power imbalance in data ownership, which influences how programs are designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated. Indeed, much of the conversation on child protection systems centres around power and authority, and where it sits. While some jurisdictions and portfolios are delegating authority to various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led organisations, this is inconsistent across the board. A human rights-based approach requires equality in partnerships, in which communities have real decision-making power alongside governments, and are not simply the recipients of state funding.

As this report shows, stakeholders suggest change in the way governments seek to address child maltreatment. While there are many barriers to effective prevention and early intervention, there are many ideas among stakeholders for improvement. There are also a number of examples that illustrate action already being taken across the country, by government and by communities. The ideas and examples indicate that quick fixes are not possible. The investment strategy has the potential to create child-centred, positive change. As noted by a stakeholder from an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organization, this investment strategy could be a 'rich opportunity for powerful, healing work'.



Investments need to be 'human-centred' and ensure that programs are putting families first.
– Stakeholder

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature Review

1 Background

The National Child and Family Investment Strategy (NCFIS) was announced in the 2022-23 Budget and is an action under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan* (Action 2).¹

The aim of the NCFIS will be to prevent children at risk of abuse or neglect, including family and domestic violence, from entering child protection systems. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop and agree upon national principles for increasing investment in prevention and early intervention services across jurisdictions. Implemented effectively, this will reduce the need for investment in tertiary or crisis responses over time. It will also allow for the allocation of additional funding where necessary to alleviate vulnerability and proportionate allocation of funds towards family support services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

As part of the planning for developing the NCFIS, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has asked the National Children's Commissioner (NCC) to complete a brief literature review on best practice in child and family investments. The literature review will inform consultations with key stakeholders. Information gathered will be published in a final report in 2023.

All Australian governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group will be closely involved in the development of the NCFIS. A Subject Matter Expert consultant will also be tasked with developing the strategy from July 2022 to January 2024. An innovation fund, developed under the Subject Matter Expert consultant, will enable key elements of the NCFIS to be tested in select locations.

2 Literature review

This literature review identifies key concepts that could inform an investment strategy and explores examples of current approaches in Australia using desktop research. The review identifies that Australian jurisdictions are already developing and implementing investment strategies in various ways. Some have evaluated their approaches whilst others have not. This literature review does not include an analysis of the different types of approaches and programs implemented across Australian jurisdictions, as this information will be sourced through the consultations where states and territories will be asked about their approaches to child and family investment, including details of what has worked and what has not worked.

This document is structured as follows:

- Description of the international human rights framework. This entails an exploration of the key international human rights instruments which should be used to guide the development of the NCFIS.
- Framing of 'investment' and 'prevention and early intervention', highlighting the need for clear definitions.
- Exploration of academic research into approaches often used in Australia and internationally to invest in children and their families. This section focuses on three approaches: the 'Social Investment Approach' (SIA), the systems reform approach, and place-based and collective impact approaches (considered together). International and domestic examples are included throughout.

As per the project scope, the literature review is brief and designed to frame subsequent consultations with key stakeholders. Further information on current strategies, frameworks and plans; investment decisions across jurisdictions; barriers to investment; best practice examples; and emerging principles for the development of the NCFIS will be provided in the final report.

Key points are identified at the end of each section to assist in summarising the approaches and any observations from the examples. They may be helpful in the development of the NCFIS, alongside results from consultations with stakeholders in the final report.

3 Methodology

The literature review was completed through a desktop review of international and Australian academic literature, and policy/program frameworks relevant to informing the development of principles to underpin the NCFIS (listed in Appendix 1), with specific inclusion of content relating to prevention and early intervention.

The review was undertaken using a human rights framework. The five principles of a human rights framework include participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment, and legality (referred to as the PANEL principles). How this framework has informed the project will be further elaborated on in the final report.

The information gathered in the review will frame questions and discussion in consultations. The outcomes of this project will be provided in a final report.

3.1 Limitations

The literature review is limited by the availability of evaluations of approaches, plans, frameworks, strategies and projects both domestically and internationally. Evaluations, where available, will be sought through consultations with jurisdictions.

4 Human rights framework

Human rights are based on principles of dignity, equality, and mutual respect. Human rights are the cornerstone of strong communities where everyone can contribute and feel included. The International Bill of Rights (the collective term for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) provides the framework to apply a human rights lens to social investment.

Other human rights instruments provide a critical focus on marginalised groups that need support to realise their rights and an imperative for government action. These include the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child*, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability*. These instruments are offered for consideration in the development of the NCFIS.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world. It integrates the economic, social, cultural, civil, and political

rights inherent in other instruments, and how they apply to children. Some articles in the CRC also highlight the rights of specific groups of marginalised children. For example, article 30 is particularly relevant to First Nations children:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.²

The importance of Indigenous culture is also expressed explicitly throughout other parts of the CRC including article 8 (the right to identity), article 14 (the right to freedom of thought and religion), article 20 (the right to cultural continuity in out-of-home care placements) and article 29 (highlighting the need to develop respect of a child's cultural identity in their education).

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) provides further normative standards to protect the rights of Indigenous people, including Indigenous children. Article 3 of UNDRIP unequivocally states that 'Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination'.³

In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the UN Committee) released its *General Comment No. 11 – Indigenous children and their rights under the Convention*.⁴ The UN Committee recommends that, in nations where Indigenous children are overrepresented in out-of-home care arrangements, 'specially targeted policy measures should be developed in consultation with Indigenous communities in order to reduce the number of Indigenous children in

alternative care and prevent the loss of their cultural identity'.⁵ It specifically states that 'if an Indigenous child is placed in care outside of their community, the State party should take special measures to ensure that the child can maintain his or her cultural identity'.⁶

The UN Committee also discusses the importance of access to primary education for Indigenous children and notes that 'State parties should ensure a range of special measures to this effect, including allocating targeted financial, material and human resources in order to implement policies and programs which specifically seek to improve access to education for Indigenous children'.⁷ The Committee recognises that access to meaningful education directly contributes to the self-determination of Indigenous people.⁸

UNDRIP emphasises that states must 'recognise in particular the right of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child'.⁹ It affirms that 'Indigenous people have the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence, including forcibly removing children of the group to another group'.¹⁰ It also states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, Indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.¹¹

Consistent with the content of the CRC and UNDRIP, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution adopting *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (the Guidelines).¹² The Guidelines state:

Financial and material poverty, or conditions directly and uniquely imputable to such poverty, should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care, for receiving a child into alternative care, or for preventing his/her reintegration, but should be seen as a signal for the need to provide appropriate support to the family.¹³

Countries who are party to the CRC are duty bearers to facilitate the economic and social entitlements of parents so they can support their children. The Guidelines maintain that:

States should pursue policies that ensure support for families in meeting their responsibilities towards the child and promote the right of the child to have a relationship with both parents. These policies should address the root causes of child abandonment, relinquishment and separation of the child from his/her family by ensuring, inter alia, the right to birth registration, and access to adequate housing and to basic health, education and social welfare services, as well as by promoting measures to combat poverty, discrimination, marginalization, stigmatization, violence, child maltreatment and sexual abuse, and substance abuse.¹⁴

Article 7 of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD)** states that children with disabilities have the same human rights as all other children and the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children with disabilities. Furthermore, the UNCRPD highlights participation, stating that children with disabilities have a right to express their views, obliging State actors to listen. The UNCRPD has further specifications on identity and care rights of children with disabilities.

N.B.: These frameworks inform the Human Rights Based Approach, which guides the practical

application of human rights in programmes, strategies, research and process. Its guiding principles – participation, legality, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and transparency – offer comprehensive ways of engaging with stakeholders and developing relevant, appropriate content. It will thus be further explored in the Report.

(a) Applying a human rights framework in Australia

Universal strategies to meet economic and social rights, such as the provision of adequate housing and universal childcare, are integral for keeping families and children strong and well. The NCC's ***Keeping Kids Safe and Well report (2022)*** highlights adequate housing as a key provision to the rights and wellbeing of children and their families.¹⁵

The *Family is Culture* report (2019) reviewed the systems, structures and policies influencing decision-making for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the NSW child protection system. It questioned whether the approach taken by the NSW government was consistent with its international human rights obligations in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹⁶ It advocates for significant structural reform and accountability mechanisms in the NSW child protection system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹⁷ Overall, the report made 125 recommendations to the NSW government that broadly reflect five key themes:

- stronger oversight and accountability
- improving data collection and reporting
- better casework policy and practice
- enhanced services and supports
- changing care and protection legislation.

The report provided detailed insight into the context and structure of the child protection system in NSW through a systems lens and highlights the need for structural reforms through cultural change, legislative and policy

amendments, service delivery, and evaluation. The report also addresses key human rights challenges within the child protection system including self-determination, participation, accountability, early intervention, cultural connection, restoration, and safety.

The ***Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) report (2020)*** and ***Implementation framework (2022)*** capture the needs, experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls and provides a pathway for systemic reform. Based on more than 500 engagements, submissions and survey responses, the report captures the whole-of-life needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait women and girls, and what they believe is needed for the design of policy, legislation and service delivery to support and strengthen their rights and wellbeing. The report provides several recommendations that address marginalisation, trauma and intersectional discrimination. Its recommendations are potentially transformative and foreground human rights. (More details below).

Other Indigenous research also calls for action to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and children in the child protection system. This research makes five overarching recommendations:¹⁸

1. Maternity and neonatal services need to be redesigned to offer culturally responsive and trauma-informed support with resources for parents – so they can then look after their children.¹⁹
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through community-controlled organisations need to lead the design and delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the prenatal and neonatal space.
3. Practical supports, including access to housing must be offered to parents where there has been contact with child protection systems and there may be a risk of child removal, including the development of quality live-in supported parent accommodation, to offer safe, culturally supported therapeutic environments.
4. Participation of Indigenous communities, families and children must be central to any child protection interventions and child protection systems must adopt a therapeutic model of care, as is done in some elements of the justice system.²⁰
5. Connection to culture is vital and is a key part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander well-being and resilience. In the event that child protection services are involved, and do remove children, all efforts must be made to continue to connect children with their culture, and this can be done in line with collective child-rearing practices.²¹

Key points

- Children and their families have a full spectrum of social, economic, cultural and political rights.
- Human rights frameworks support universal welfare approaches to fulfilling economic and social rights, such as the provision of adequate housing and universal childcare, as it is these supports that are integral for keeping families and children strong and well.
- The rights to self-determination and cultural safety and connection to culture, country and kinship for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be incorporated into any strategies that impact them.

5 Framing key terms

DSS requested that the NCC explore key terms and concepts used in child and family investment strategies, in order to inform the development of the NCFIS: investment, prevention and early intervention, place-based initiatives and collective impact. The latter two terms will be explored in section 6, alongside the Social Investment approach.

While these terms are commonly used in the literature, and within existing national and state and territory plans, strategies and frameworks, they are often not defined. For example, the terms ‘prevention and early intervention’ are used frequently when describing the overall

objectives of various child and family strategies, and in reference to specific initiatives, but the exact measures that fall under these definitions can be unclear.

Below is a brief exploration of these terms, which will be further explored in the final report based on the consultations.

5.1 Investment

The term ‘investment’ most commonly refers to the investment of money or finances in order to gain an even greater economic return or profit. Indeed, some approaches to social investment tend to focus on the concept of human capital, rather than the wellbeing of individuals. These approaches seek to increase productivity potential, with social outcomes as a secondary focus.²²

However, in the area of child and family wellbeing, the term ‘investment’ has been used to refer to a variety of approaches that take either an economic lens, a social empowerment/wellbeing lens, or a combination of both.

Irrespective of whether viewed through an economic or a social lens, ‘investment’ is variously defined broadly as strategically allocating resources into an asset or service with the assumption that a future return is beneficial and worthwhile.²³

The OECD recommends three key pillars for effective public investment:²⁴

1. Co-ordinate across governments and policy areas: integrate strategies, adopt coordination instruments and mechanisms, and invest strategically at sub-national levels.
2. Strengthen capacities and promote policy learning across levels of government: assess long-term impacts, map risks, enable stakeholder engagement

throughout investment cycle, including private sector and public institutions, and focus on results.

3. Ensure sound framework conditions at all levels of government: develop a fiscal framework, promote transparency, including with financial management, and implement quality regulatory systems.

The OECD further notes that poorly managed investment can hamper growth, erode public trust, and waste resources.²⁵ These pillars provide scope for 'results' to include a social element and highlight the importance of transparency and engagement.

The pillars broadly align with three areas identified by the Australian Productivity Commission as requiring improvement across governments:

- greater planning and coordination, including within and across jurisdictions
- increased preparation for, and communication about change
- more accountability and transparency to facilitate improved assessment and evaluation of system performance.²⁶

In terms of best practice for family and community services, the Australian Productivity Commission recommended that governments build on existing initiatives and data, agree on indicators of wellbeing outcomes, and identify the characteristics of effective service models.²⁷ It further advised that governments 'should always have the role of system stewards'.²⁸ While government stewardship of systems, and the strategy and its implementation, is important, processes of self-determination and community control are key for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

5.2 Prevention and early intervention

(a) Prevention and early intervention as defined in the Public Health Model

Prevention and early intervention are terms that are often used in conjunction with the 'public health model', a concept with currency in many disciplines, including health, education and welfare. According to AIFS, the public health model is an:

epidemiological model that attempts to prevent or reduce a particular illness or social problem in a population by identifying risk indicators. Public health models aim to prevent problems occurring in the first place by targeting policies and interventions at the known risk indicators for the problem, quickly identifying and responding to problems if they do occur and minimising the long-term effects of the problems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006).²⁹

A number of national, state and territory strategies, plans and frameworks explicitly adopt a public health model, with prevention as a key focus.³⁰

Under this model, 'prevention' is an overarching term used to describe measures that take place across three different levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. Although primary prevention, or universal measures, are seen as typical 'prevention' measures, prevention measures can be applied at any stage of an individual's trajectory. Prevention measures may be designed not only to prevent child abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place, but also to prevent the escalation, or even re-occurrence, of abuse and neglect. As described by AIFS:

In the public health model of disease prevention, preventative interventions are described as either primary, secondary, or tertiary interventions (Tomison & Poole, 2000). When applied to the child protection and child welfare sector, the public

health model provides a theoretical framework that spans the service continuum from primary intervention services that target everyone, to secondary intervention services that target families in need, through to tertiary intervention services that target families where abuse or neglect has already occurred.³¹

While prevention is seen as the primary goal of child maltreatment plans/frameworks/strategies, most do not include definitions of it. Those that do, describe prevention measures as those that *address the underlying drivers* of violence, abuse and neglect. For example, the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children* describes prevention as working to change the underlying social drivers of violence by addressing the attitudes and systems that drive violence against women and children to stop it before it starts.³²

(b) Defining ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ prevention

‘Primary’ prevention activities, as opposed to prevention per se, are those that are aimed at the whole community, such as public education programs, primary health services, schools, and housing. For example, in the case of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse* this includes such measures as public education awareness-raising campaigns and programs to create child-safe cultures and environments.³³ Some state and territory strategies provide examples of initiatives and actions that could be termed primary prevention activities. For example, *Tasmania’s Strong Families Safe Kids Next Steps Action Plan 2021-2023* explicitly references the public health model.³⁴ It describes examples of primary services as ‘health services, Early Childhood Education and Care, schools and Child and Family Centres’.³⁵

In the NT, the *Safe, Thriving and Connected: Generational Change for Children and Families 2018–2023* describes the primary and secondary

prevention supports as consisting of two layers, whereby:

the base layer comprises the core or universal services available to the entire population across their life course, for example, health assessments, immunisations, school education and housing. Those individuals and families who have emerging or increasing risks to health and wellbeing are also likely to benefit from more targeted support measures. Together, these two layers aim to support families and individuals to avoid the need for crisis intervention.³⁶

Prevention is also one of the core elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles (ATSICPP). In a Guide to implementing the principles, SNAICC describes prevention in child protection as including:

- primary prevention activities (that improve the health and wellbeing of children, families and communities)
- early intervention or secondary-level activities (that provide family support services for children and families who are experiencing vulnerabilities or facing personal or social barriers in meeting their needs)
- tertiary or statutory intervention for children and families where maltreatment has been identified and aims to prevent it re-occurring and promote preservation and restoration/reunification.³⁷

While SNAICC’s Guide focuses primarily on the secondary and tertiary levels of intervention, it clearly points out that prevention under the principles is contingent on income support, wages and tax policies, health, housing, justice, education, and other social programs. SNAICC stresses the importance of child safety and wellbeing policies building and investing in prevention and early intervention approaches that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention.³⁸

(c) Defining early intervention

In the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan*, early intervention is defined as:

*a key stage of prevention that includes identifying, diagnosing, treating and managing health and wellbeing issues to stop them becoming more serious.*³⁹

In many definitions of early intervention, reference to 'early' is about intervening early in the development of a problem rather than 'early in life'. However, there is agreement that interventions early in life are also often the most effective. The *Family is Culture* report argues that:

'Early' intervention means intervening early in a child's life – from birth to school age. The literature is clear that it is crucial to provide intervention support early, when a child's brain is still developing, to avoid issues later in life. It is well documented that children's early years are a critical time in which the foundations for healthy development are laid.⁴⁰

Some include both types of 'early' in their definitions. For example, the NSW Government's Targeted Earlier Intervention Program defines early intervention services as:

Services that support vulnerable children, young people, families and their communities *early in life and early in need* to improve outcomes.⁴¹

This Program includes neighbourhood centres, parenting programs, youth programs, and early childhood programs. Both AbSec and SNAICC refer to 'early' intervention as meaning both early in the child's life, *and* at the early stages of a problem emerging.⁴²

At the core of most 'early intervention' definitions is the targeting of interventions according to identified risk factors, both to stop violence or abuse from happening in the first place, or to prevent escalation to more levels. Identifying those children and families who may be at risk is a key part of early intervention. For example:

In the **National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children**: Early intervention aims to identify and support individuals and families experiencing, or at risk of, gender-based violence in order to stop violence from escalating, protect victim-survivors from harm and prevent violence from reoccurring.⁴³

In the **National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children: Safe and Supported**: Early intervention (inclusive of prevention) refers to initiatives and actions designed to alter the behaviour or trajectory of individuals who show signs of, risk factors for or vulnerabilities to an identified problem, by providing the resources and skills needed to combat the identified risks.⁴⁴

In the **Victorian Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children**: Intervening early and providing the right assistance to reduce the risks of harm and costly interventions.⁴⁵ Early help is defined as 'partner[ing] with universal services and communities to identify and respond early when children and families show early signs of need and vulnerability.'⁴⁶

In the **UK Early Intervention Foundation**: Early intervention means identifying and providing effective early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes. Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.⁴⁷

Some strategies and frameworks list the types of activities or initiatives that constitute early intervention in the child protection context. Most commonly, intensive family support and parenting support programs are listed as early intervention measures. SNAICC, in its most recent Family Matters Report, when analysing the proportion of investment governments are making in early intervention, examined intensive family support and other family support services exclusively.⁴⁸ However, other initiatives commonly described as 'early intervention' under

various child protection strategies and plans include:

- specialist family counselling services
- mental health services
- disability services
- youth programs
- early childhood programs
- pre-natal and early parenting programs
- domestic, family and sexual violence services
- drug and alcohol services
- housing programs.

According to SNAICC in its Guide to ATSI CPP, effective early intervention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is best delivered holistically using an integrated service delivery model.⁴⁹ These should provide a mix of practical, educational, therapeutic and advocacy supports to children and families. The Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFC) are an example of this. They aim to connect vulnerable families to an array of services designed to meet locally determined priorities and needs, providing both primary prevention and early intervention services.⁵⁰

Principle 5 of the Queensland *Our Way Aboriginal Strategy* frames early intervention as being about supporting, healing and strengthening families.⁵¹ Principle 5 states that:

We recognise that family is the foundation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's social, cultural and emotional wellbeing and is their most important lifelong support. We acknowledge the unique need for healing supports to address the impacts of intergenerational trauma on families that has resulted from experiences of colonisation, the Stolen Generations and other discriminatory government policies. We recognise and respect the evidence that shows that early intervention is critical to heal and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to care for their children and ensure they thrive.⁵²

The *Our Way Aboriginal Strategy* also argues for a shift and balance in investment. It recognises that:

The majority of current government investment in child and family support is concentrated on the tertiary child protection system. As quickly as possible, investment needs to be rebalanced with a greater share provided to universal and secondary services, with a particular focus on prevention and early intervention services. In addition, too little of the current investment goes to community led or controlled organisations, which are best placed to determine, design and deliver services that will meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.⁵³

AbSec suggests 'a refocusing or fundamental shift from reactive to proactive support – to move away from the current crisis-driven, tertiary intervention focused approach and towards early support for Aboriginal families in the community to reduce contact with the system. This requires investing resources earlier in the system'.⁵⁴

(d) The complexity of prevention and early intervention

Defining terms such as prevention and early intervention in the child protection context is complex in the sense that the wellbeing of children is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of their families. AIFS maintains that

although the public health model attempts to categorise programs and services as primary, secondary or tertiary, the complexity of issues around child protection leads to a need for some programs to be both primary and secondary, or secondary and tertiary. For example, a parenting program may include parents who have been referred because their children are considered to be at risk of abuse and neglect. The program may also include parents who have been referred from child protection services because their children have already experienced actual abuse and neglect and they are required to complete the program to help ameliorate the risk of further maltreatment.

Another example that illustrates the difficulty of rigidly applying the public health model to child maltreatment interventions can be found in the use of therapeutic treatment programs for maltreated children. For example, therapeutic interventions for maltreated children can be considered tertiary interventions (as maltreatment has already occurred) and also secondary interventions as addressing the consequences of maltreatment may reduce the likelihood of inter-generational effects.⁵⁵

If the objective of the NCFIS is for funds to be reinvested or re-prioritised from tertiary responses to earlier intervention, greater definition and categorisation of these measures may need to be established, in consultation with stakeholders.

This also applies if the NCFIS includes measures to invest in proportionate funding for Indigenous peoples. As SNAICC suggested when discussing investment in family support services,

data on access to broader and earlier family support services, outside of intensive services, are limited and inconsistent due to a lack of agreed definitions of family support and inconsistent reporting frameworks between jurisdictions. Public expenditure data on child protection and family support services are also not available by Indigenous status nationally, which means that there is no clear picture of whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families receive an equitable share of resources relative to needs.⁵⁶

Overall, in developing an NCFIS, it will be necessary to reach a common understanding among all stakeholders of the goals and outcomes of the strategy, in addition to defining terms like prevention and early intervention.

6 Approaches to investment strategies

The following section is an exploration of three approaches to investment. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Each provides perspectives and tools for further discussion and application.

6.1 Social Investment Approach

The 'Social Investment Approach' (SIA) is the dominant approach used to develop investment strategies in many countries, including Australia. The approach emerged in the early 1990s from concerns about the contemporary labour market, life course transitions and instability. Its focus was on increasing the quality of 'human capital' in a rapidly changing work environment where conditions, including aging populations, can impede 'positive economic output'.⁵⁷ SIA attempts to prevent life course challenges impacting on the capacity of all people to contribute to the economy, rather than addressing these challenges later in life, when this is generally more costly. The OECD, the World Bank and the European Union, as well as other countries across the world, support this approach with the view that it promotes economic growth by supporting labour market capabilities.⁵⁸

Economist James Heckman won a Nobel Prize in 2000 for his work on applying the SIA with regard to children.⁵⁹ Heckman's research emphasised the long-term economic gains across society by investing in early childhood education and care. This acts as an attempt to counter life chance disparities and equalise 'productivity' potential.⁶⁰

Similar research by Margarita Leon argued that early childhood care and education is one mechanism which can contribute to ending the intergenerational transmission of inequality.⁶¹

Leon examined the performance of countries using the UNICEF target of developed nations spending 1 per cent of their GDP on early childhood education and care.⁶² While Denmark, Finland and Spain meet the 1% GDP expenditure threshold, most countries are well below this target, including Australia.⁶³ Similarly, the International Labour Organisation argues that universal early childhood education and care is imperative to ensure societal growth and suggests that, on average, countries around the world will need to increase their expenditure to at least 1.5% of GDP by 2035.⁶⁴ Due to its theoretical origins in the discipline of economics, the measurement of SIA outcomes are largely financial indicators or wellbeing indicators viewed through an economic lens.

As with any theory, there is debate about its application in holding a narrow economic focus. Key issues of concern include its emphasis on extracting data from meta-analysis and applying this to all communities. Some researchers argue that where Australia has applied SIA in its pure form, it focuses too closely on economic valuations of capabilities and wellbeing, without addressing social and cultural values.⁶⁵ For example, income management programs are criticised for paying 'no attention [...] to the structural causes of Indigenous disadvantage, such as colonisation and ongoing institutional racism'.⁶⁶ They suggest that the yearly actuarial/fiscal monitoring of such programs 'assume that multiple and complex disadvantage can be alleviated in a short amount of time and through clear, measurable and typically linear mechanisms of change'.⁶⁷

In the context of New Zealand's Māori and Pasifika children, the application of an SIA through general programs driven by meta data analysis has been perceived by some researchers as an aggressive form of neo-colonisation as the approach does not consider the wellbeing and priorities of these communities, as defined

by their knowledge and culture – reducing their value to Western economic metrics.⁶⁸ New Zealand's Productivity Commission states that 'citizens have rights to social services even if there is no fiscal return, or in some cases, not even better outcomes for them'.⁶⁹

Beyond these examples, the SIA has evolved beyond its economic origins and is used to deliver outcomes that can be economically or socially-based, or a hybrid of both. While early education and care is often a focus of SIA, it can be applied more broadly to include areas such as health and employment. Some examples of the hybrid-SIA approach, as well as other investment approaches are provided in the following section.

(a) SIA strategies in practice

(i) Australia

The Australian Commonwealth Government has traditionally embraced the SIA in several policy areas. For example, in 2015, DSS developed the **Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare** to better support the welfare system to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups in Australia.⁷⁰ The approach is based upon economic analysis to estimate future and lifetime welfare costs, including future payments to specific groups of people. It uses data analysis to provide insights into how the welfare system is working and uses those insights to find innovative ways of helping more Australians live independently of welfare. This approach was implemented as a key recommendation of *A New System for Better Employment and Social Outcomes – Final Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform to the Minister for Social Services* (McClure review) which adopts an explicit SIA approach to welfare reform in Australia.⁷¹ A *Baseline Valuation Report* is released annually.⁷² 'Try, Test, Learn' came out of the Priority Investment Approach as a way to test innovative approaches to generate new insights and empirical evidence into what

works to reduce long-term welfare dependence. The last evaluation suggests positive outcomes among participants (with the caveat that the evaluation period was short).⁷³

Some governments in Australian states and territories have undertaken whole-of-government budgetary processes, typically through the Treasury or Finance portfolios. For example, the NSW Office of Social Impact Investment, within NSW Treasury, leads the implementation of the **NSW Social Impact Investment Policy**, working closely with other government agencies and non-government stakeholders.⁷⁴ Key elements of this work include developing new social impact investment transactions and building capability and capacity among agencies and others to participate in social impact investing.

In Victoria, the **Early Intervention Investment Framework** is a new budgeting tool designed to guide and grow the Victorian Government's investment in early intervention initiatives.⁷⁵ By linking Government funding to quantifiable impacts on those using services as well as for the service system, this framework sets out to guide investments towards timely assistance for Victorians which will improve life outcomes for individuals and reduce pressure on acute services.

Limited evaluation of these strategies, plans and frameworks were available online. This preliminary research has provided the foundations for discussion in consultations with relevant jurisdictions and stakeholders and will be further explored in the final report.

(ii) Canada

Canada is currently embracing a SIA and made a recent announcement to invest \$27 billion into early childhood and care across the country.

⁷⁶ From 2021, the investment is being provided over five years to strengthen the capacity of the early learning and childcare system across

Canada, in conjunction with other investments (up to \$30 billion), including through Indigenous early learning and childcare. These early life course investments aim to benefit all populations across the country, building on the evidence that the economy receives between \$1.5 to \$2.8 in return for every dollar invested in early childhood education.⁷⁷

As a new strategy, it is too early to determine its effectiveness, nor how the investment is contributing to broader social, environmental, or cultural indicators of wellbeing.

(iii) United States of America

Former US President Barak Obama openly embraced the SIA in his 2015 *State of the Union Address* stating:

It's time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or a woman's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us.⁷⁸

As reported by the Brookings Institute, the Obama administration was deeply committed to the SIA and spent \$1.5 billion striving to ensure that all social policy initiatives were backed by a strong financial benefit evidence base, all incorporating the language of the SIA.⁷⁹

As part of this SIA, a nurse family visiting service was designed to enhance family functioning and childhood development. Research on this initiative has since demonstrated that the nurse family visiting service reduced child maltreatment by up to 50%.⁸⁰ In addition, the same study suggests that the program had a positive effect on pregnancy planning and economic self-sufficiency.⁸¹

(iv) Japan

Japan approaches social investment from the perspective of enhancing human capital and economic productivity with policies targeted at children, women, and older people.⁸² Social

investment policies began in the 1990s with the 'Angel Plan' (1994-1999) which was designed to reduce the burden of care placed on women and families through social supports, such as parental leave, subsidised childcare, and other forms of family support to improve productivity and respond to market concerns.⁸³

Compared to countries like Australia and Canada where social investment policies have been veiled or loosely focused on improving socioeconomic outcomes and 'investing in children', Japan's focus has been on overall economic development, with equality and socioeconomic improvements being auxiliary benefits.⁸⁴ The motivation for the plan was three-fold. The first was to enable better access to the labour market for women, moving towards the promotion of equal opportunity in the workplace. The second was to address labour shortages, which could be filled by women, and the third was to incentivise families to have more children given that the economy was faced with an aging population and low birth-rate.⁸⁵

This increased the role of the state in providing social support that had traditionally been in the private domain.⁸⁶ Some research suggests the movement towards welfare as a state responsibility has contributed to social marginalisation by relegating social and cultural responsibilities concerning family and kinship held by Japanese people to that of the government.⁸⁷

Also, despite the plan's goals, Japan remains one of the highest OECD countries with a gender wage gap, despite it having high female employment (52.2%).⁸⁸ The fertility rate in Japan also remains low.⁸⁹

(v) *United Kingdom*

Historically, the United Kingdom's focus was on reducing economic hardship and providing universal support 'from the cradle to the grave'.⁹⁰ For example, the government provided free

education, universal access to health care, and public housing after World War 2.⁹¹ However, from the 1980s, state investment in public welfare reduced dramatically following the introduction of neo-liberal style policies. This involved privatisation of welfare through various agencies, including the NHS Trust and using the economic performance of schools and services to guide investment. These changes reflected a shift towards individualism and away from supporting socioeconomic equality.⁹²

In the 2000s, there were further cuts to public expenditure with the introduction of means testing and caps on access to benefits.⁹³ This model focuses on economic measures and outputs.

In 2022, there was an *Independent review of children's social care*. This review found that the shift away from universal benefits was detrimental to meeting the needs of populations. It argues that rather than preventing and intervening in potential challenges early, it is skewed towards crisis interventions without providing ongoing support and resources that children and families require.⁹⁴ The report suggests a 'radical reset' of the whole system, focusing on prevention and early intervention, which supports place-based and collective impact approaches to care and service delivery, and is adequately and sustainably funded.⁹⁵

(vi) *Nordic Countries*

The dominant model of providing welfare and social benefits in Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland is 'universalism'. This approach was developed prior to the popularisation of SIA and invests heavily in universally accessible welfare services, funded largely through high-income tax arrangements, aiming to create a society that strives for equality.⁹⁶

Three key enabling factors shape the universal welfare approach:

- Higher taxation relative to Australia (approximately 50% marginal tax rate) with broad social support.⁹⁷
- High GDP spending on health and education and universal access to social benefits, including welfare supports. Most social and health services are provided either free or at a reduced market price.⁹⁸ Public education is highly valued and private schools are not government-funded. Generous paid parental leave is universally supported as an economic measure as well as a child well-being measure.
- Strong workforce incentives and requirements, producing a competitive economy. Although unemployment benefits are provided, if needed, many Nordic countries average the lowest unemployment rates compared to other OECD countries.⁹⁹

The logic underlying and driving welfare universalism in the Nordic states is equality, and that if high taxes are to be a burden for all, the benefits of the spending should also be available to all.¹⁰⁰ Whether this would be an effective mechanism to lead investment in Australia would require further exploration into tax and spending. The Treasurer's Wellbeing Budget may also provide some insight.

These 'universal' welfare benefits are designed to support all members of society. This approach is distinct from a pure SIA, which is driven by trying to enhance the economic productivity of all people throughout their life course.

There are significant differences in economic outcomes between Nordic and other countries, including global competitiveness and economic freedom. Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden,

and Iceland are rated among the top countries on the Social Progress Imperative Scale in terms of social progress, happiness, and trust, compared to other countries.¹⁰¹

Key points

- SIAs are context-specific and may benefit from project-based opportunities and innovation to inform scale-up.
- Early childhood development is central to economic development, cutting across social issues, including education, care and gender.
- Universal social investment helps to reach the most marginalised sustainably, potentially minimising the risk of crisis interventions.

6.2 Systems-reform approaches

A systems reform approach seeks to understand how structures, institutions, events, behaviours, and norms interact as part of a complex system, rather than as independent parts – and reform them so that they serve human rights more effectively.

It is the combination of many intersecting elements and structures that create safe and supported environments for children to grow.¹⁰² A systems-reform approach allows decision-makers to see children's health, learning, development and wellbeing as a collective outcome of social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors over time.¹⁰³ Increasing recognition of this complexity and interconnectivity has resulted in movement away

from programmatic approaches towards more holistic ones.

By analysing how a system is constructed, it is possible to adjust policies and practices to address the root causes of problems and issues. The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Implementation Framework* describes systems reform as a complex practice, that

places issues in context by taking a bird's eye view to see the bigger picture of how elements interact and create a diverse range of outcomes. **Structures**—laws, policies, funding arrangements, relationships and institutions, and **actors**—people, employees, decision-makers, the public, deliverers and recipients of services—are both fundamental aspects of how systems function. The generalised method of systems practice is non-linear, action-oriented and iterative. It encourages a process of identifying issues through exploring root causes and probing assumptions. It necessitates listening to diverse perspectives and designing initiatives based on evidence, and then trialling, evaluating and incorporating new learnings into initiatives, to constantly improve and achieve better outcomes.¹⁰⁴

Systems thinking political economist, Francois Fortier suggests that 'a systems approach helps achieve a given goal by fostering synergies while anticipating and mitigating conflicts between drivers and actors, and between goals and intervention strategies' – meaning that by understanding context, it is easier to identify driving and blocking forces.¹⁰⁵ By utilising this lens, policy and decision-makers are effectively able to respond earlier to issues (early intervention) and challenge influencing factors before they develop into potential harmful outcomes (prevention).

Causal mapping is commonly used to visualise the complexity and interconnections inherent within systems. Understanding what systems look like and how they function in practice is

a critical first step in undertaking a systems reform approach. In August 2022, the *Early Years Catalyst* initiative released its 'systems mapping report' that explores the barriers to improving systemic forces and structures that influence early childhood development (ECD) outcomes.¹⁰⁶ The report maps the systems that influence early childhood development through 30 interconnected feedback loops across seven categories that reflect normative narratives and systemic forces that hold the ECD system in place and block meaningful and transformative change. These loops provide insight into how complex the ECD system is, and how resolving specific challenges requires a nuanced understanding and broader approach to achieve meaningful change. It shows how interactions, influences and processes within systems can shape equity, equality, and other determinants of wellbeing.¹⁰⁷

In practice, a systems reform approach to investment requires collaboration and partnerships between policy priorities and mechanisms across jurisdictions, stakeholders, and communities.¹⁰⁸ It requires strong leadership, coordination and accountability,¹⁰⁹ and a culture of resource and knowledge sharing to respond holistically to challenges and avoid traditional siloes. For example, the Productivity Commission's 2020 report *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* illustrated how siloed decision-making had resulted in overlapping funding arrangements and complex service supports creating new problems, rather than resolving existing ones.¹¹⁰ This was also evident in the findings of the Productivity Commission's *Mental Health Inquiry Report* and the NSW *Family is Culture Report*. Without collaboration, policy makers risk creating supports and arrangements that are overly complex or rely too heavily on administrative policy as opposed to the needs of communities and stakeholders. The fact that Australia is a federation adds further complexity

in terms of collaboration and consistency of approaches, especially where responsibility lies with the states and territories which is the case in terms of child safety and child protection systems.

DSS, the National Office of Child Safety and the National Indigenous Australians Agency recognise collaboration and consistency as being critical across current frameworks, plans and strategies, including *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*, the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse*, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait*

Islander Early Childhood Strategy, Closing the Gap, and National Disability Strategy. Some of these existing plans already incorporate a systems lens into their methods of working.¹¹¹

Collaboration and partnerships with stakeholders and communities provide decision-makers with access to knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Co-design methodologies can assist in making sure that the specific needs of communities are addressed.¹¹² This is essential when responding to the needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families where responses must be culturally safe and appropriate, promoting self-determination and empowerment.¹¹³



Data linkage is fundamental to measuring the outcomes of investment to improve the wellbeing outcomes for children and families in Australia. The South Australian Better start Health and Development Research project 'Better Evidence Better Outcomes Linked Data platform (BEBOLD) is an example of a de-identified, linked state and Commonwealth administrative data platform.¹¹⁴ The project holds linked de-identified administrative data for approximately 500,000 South Australian children born from 1991 onwards, and their parents and carers. The 'joining up' of these data across government agencies has offered new opportunities for examining a broad range of wellbeing outcomes. Data sources held in the SA ECDP include:



This type of data linkage will be required to inform ongoing policy and practice in a National Child and Family Investment Strategy. The dataset is also seeking to link data from police, courts, vocational education and training, SA Tertiary admissions, National Disability Data Asset, Registry data and SA Certificate of education to the dataset.¹¹⁵

This approach closely aligns with the principle of sustainability which seeks to create and maintain positive structures and systems in ways that align with present and future interests and wellbeing.¹¹⁶ Fundamentally, sustainability is comprised of three mutually dependant elements: economic, social and environmental wellbeing. These elements must be invested equitably without compromise and viewed through a holistic systems lens. In doing so, decision-makers are prompted to invest in services and supports that align with broader interests focused on addressing structural drivers of harm and support and strengthening positive outcomes.

(a) Systems reform approaches in the context of child protection in Australia

(i) Their Futures Matter

In New South Wales, the *Their Futures Matter* reform was intended to lead a system transformation over a four-year reform of the child protection system, driven by an investment and commissioning approach to ensure that funding and programs are directed to where they deliver the greatest social and economic benefits.¹¹⁷ The reform aimed to achieve five key strategic outcomes:

1. every child gets the best start and families have access to information and opportunity for self-service
2. a whole-of-government investment approach is in place to ensure more effective and efficient allocation of resources
3. children, young people and families receive a streamlined, multi-disciplinary response appropriate to their needs
4. more children and young people are safe at home, reducing entry into out-of-home care (OOHC) and preventing escalating risk

5. communities are equipped to support children, young people and families.¹¹⁸

Pivotal to the reform is the underpinning dataset, known as the **Human Services Dataset**.¹¹⁹ The Human Services Dataset was intended to bring together a large volume of data from NSW Government agencies, and to de-identify and analyse the data to understand which population groups are most at risk of poor outcomes. This was the basis for designing or enhancing support for these priority groups in collaboration with agency partners. The Dataset brings together 27 years of data and over seven million records across government databases about children, young people and families, including child protection, housing, justice, health and mental health, and education.

In July 2020, the NSW Auditor-General found that while important foundations were put in place by the *Their Futures Matter* reform, and new programs were trialled, the key objective to establish an evidence-based whole-of-government early intervention approach for vulnerable children and families in NSW was not achieved. It pointed out that a range of the reform's objectives remained outstanding at the time, including:

- cross-portfolio leadership to establish a whole-of-government investment approach
- cross-agency action to redirect funding in the *Their Futures Matter* investment pool to better target evidenced-based earlier interventions
- robust service mapping and comparative evidence of what works best across agencies to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and families in NSW at the first sign of vulnerability
- a repurposing or decommissioning of programs and services that are comparatively less effective.¹²⁰

While the Auditor-General did not assess *Their Futures Matter* against child wellbeing outcomes, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, in its response to the report, pointed out that the numbers of children in OOHC in NSW have decreased since the reforms. The Government has continued to build on the foundations, including improving and utilising the underpinning Human Service Dataset, and putting in place 'robust cross-agency government mechanisms'.¹²¹

(ii) Roadmap for Reform: Strong families, safe children – the first steps

Victoria's *Roadmap for Reform: Strong families, safe children – the first steps*, was launched in 2016. The Roadmap aims to drive system transformation through three 'pathways to support' for children at risk:

- early help
- targeted and specialist
- continuing care.

Its *Priority Setting Plan 2021-24* includes the following priorities to drive an early investment approach:

1. Shift the child and family system to intervene earlier to improve family functioning, keep children with their families and safely reunify children, with a priority focus on Aboriginal families.
2. Build evidence across the system to enable effective services targeted to the needs of priority groups of children and families.
3. Strengthen partnerships between child protection, family violence, sexual assault and child and family services to enable improved experiences and outcomes for children and families.
4. Advance Aboriginal self-determination and self-management, including through

care and case management of Aboriginal children by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal-led service offerings.

While there are no evaluations to date, the Plan indicates that the Victorian Government will work with the child and family services sector, peak bodies, and other partners to develop a comprehensive evaluation and monitoring framework. This will examine key result areas, indicators, targets and measures that demonstrate an impact on the experiences and outcomes of children and families.¹²²

(iii) The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Implementation framework

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Implementation framework* was released in 2022. It is a First Nations social justice led 'investment' strategy to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls and communities across their life course through a First Nations gendered systems thinking approach.¹²³ The implementation framework provides 10 'ways of working':

- co-design and collaborate
- take a strength-based approach
- engage in deep listening
- commit to self-awareness and reflection
- rebalance power
- think in context and relationships
- be visionary and sustainable
- be intersectional
- be informed by women's law and culture
- take a healing-informed approach.¹²⁴

These ways of working guide the four action areas and priorities which suggest holistic action for systemic change across women and girls lives. The project has been endorsed and supported by Indigenous scholars and links with the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.¹²⁵

(iv) *Family is Culture*

The *Family is Culture* report (2019) reviewed the systems, structures and policies influencing decision-making for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the NSW child protection system. It advocates for significant structural reform and accountability mechanisms in the NSW child protection system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹²⁶ Overall, the report made 125 recommendations to the NSW government that broadly reflect five key themes:

- stronger oversight and accountability
- improving data collection and reporting
- better casework policy and practice
- enhanced services and supports
- changing care and protection legislation.

The report provided detailed insight into the context and structure of the child protection system in NSW through a systems lens and highlights the need for structural reforms through cultural change, legislative and policy amendments, service delivery, and evaluation.

Key points

- A systems approach sees child wellbeing as the outcome of the interaction between of social, cultural, environmental and economic factors. Any solutions to wellbeing issues must thus be addressed holistically and with an intergenerational and intersectional lens.

- Shifting resources towards prevention and early intervention has the potential to mitigate issues before they arise. The value of early intervention lies in the ability to see how systems interact over time.
- At the core of a systems approach is partnerships and robust data systems that link the components of the systems to monitor and evaluate results for children. Effective data linkage will also assist in evidence-based decision-making.

6.3 Place-based and collective impact approaches

Place-based approaches to economic and social challenges are used by governments to address the needs of specific communities in defined geographical locations.¹²⁷ This type of approach acknowledges that the context of each city, region and rural district offers unique opportunities for advancing wellbeing.¹²⁸ Ideally, these approaches are characterised by local partnerships, shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.¹²⁹

The importance of place-based approaches for child wellbeing was raised by children and families in the *Keeping Kids Safe and Well: Your Voices* report.¹³⁰ Children and families from

vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds emphasised the need for specific localised services and resources to meet their needs.

As one parent/carer stated:

Needs better accessibility to smaller services, for example family support services. Not just the standard government services available through MyGov etc... We need further, more niche support services made accessible or aware.¹³¹

Some research is critical of place-based approaches claiming that such approaches imply poverty and disadvantage are outcomes of local deficits and not the result of broader socio-economic policies.¹³² Effective poverty-reduction strategies must respond to local contexts and issues, while also recognising that some solutions often lie beyond these settings in wider structural reform.¹³³

Collective impact approaches can be used in the delivery of place-based initiatives. They are described as collaborative and organisational approaches to complex social problems.¹³⁴ Often, collective impact approaches include:

1. a common agenda between all people involved in the approach, including consensus about the social problems to be addressed, and the goals to be achieved. These goals and outcomes can change through a process of consensus.
2. a shared agreement about measurement processes including agreement over who holds the data/material/ relevant information.
3. activities which are mutually reinforcing—aiming to achieve the common agenda.
4. continuous and documented communication about the approach at all stages, which is openly shared.

5. an organisation that provides support to the approach but is not the leader, and can only act with the authority of the group.¹³⁵

These five stages sit within three phases – initiating outcomes, organising action, followed by sustained action and impact. Such initiatives require ongoing funding or other supports for sustainability¹³⁶

A distinguishing feature of a collective impact approach from other types of partnerships is the involvement of an organisation that provides support – often called the ‘backbone’ organisation.¹³⁷

Some research suggests that the siloed and hierarchical nature of many government departments and service providers in the Australian context does not easily lend itself to collective impact collaborations.¹³⁸ Research also maintains that collective impact approaches require the capacity to collect longitudinal data in order to assess outcomes with it possibly taking from 2-24 years to see positive change as a result of initiatives.¹³⁹

The criticisms of place-based and collective impact approaches highlight the need for these approaches to be simultaneously aligned with broader initiatives that are focused on addressing the structural drivers of inequality. Effective place-based approaches in Australia will require collaboration and coordination with long-term commitment across government, and from stakeholders and communities.

(a) Examples of Australian place-based and collective impact initiatives

(i) Communities for Children

Communities for Children is a place-based investment initiative led by DSS which focuses on strengthening family relationships across 52 disadvantaged Australian communities.¹⁴⁰ Through the initiative, non-government

organisations are funded by the government as 'facilitating partners' to develop and implement programs and services for communities.

These partners work with local committees to determine approaches to best meet community-based needs and priorities. This may include parenting support, group peer support, case management, home visits, community events and life skills courses.¹⁴¹

The facilitating partners oversee community plans and service delivery, working with communities to coordinate and deliver strategic outcomes. For example, The Smith Family, as a facilitating partner across nine communities, has focused their support on providing effective evidence-based service delivery to ensure communities are empowered, healthy and supported through a variety of community-based initiatives.¹⁴²

In 2010, the Australian Institute of Family Studies evaluated the initiative reporting positive impacts by improving the number, types and capacity of services available in communities.¹⁴³ Engagement has also improved with low socio-economic communities and diverse population groups, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

(ii) Connected Beginnings

Connected Beginnings is led and funded by the Commonwealth Departments of Education and Health and aims to improve school readiness for Indigenous children in 31 sites across Australia.¹⁴⁴

As per the 2018 evaluation of this collective impact initiative, the Commonwealth Department of Education states that 'Connected *Beginnings* targets some of the most disadvantaged communities across Australia. It is designed to improve children's

school readiness'. Success measures to date include:

- 8% increase in the number of children aged 60–72 months who are fully immunised
- an increase in education and care attendance of 12 average hours per child from 2018 to 2020
- 45% of pregnant women receiving antenatal care visits at 13 weeks (33% national average).¹⁴⁵

The initiative will expand to 50 sites by 2025.¹⁴⁶

(iii) Stronger places, Stronger people

Stronger places, Stronger people, is a collective impact initiative funded and managed by DSS. It has commenced with funding of \$35 million in nine regions across Australia, including Logan, Rockhampton and Gladstone in Queensland, Bourke and Kempsey in New South Wales, Mildura in Victoria, Burnie in Tasmania, the Far West Region of South Australia (including Ceduna) and the Barkly Region (including Tennant Creek) in the Northern Territory.¹⁴⁷

This initiative aims to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. Under the initiative, a 'backbone' organisation is tasked with coordinating and synthesising the efforts in each selected region.

There is also a National Leadership Group 'which brings together leaders from communities, business, philanthropy, academia, and service delivery, along with Special Advisors from the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments'.¹⁴⁸

The National Leadership Group releases short 'communiques' after their meetings, noting developments or changes within program

initiatives. These leadership meetings are held twice a year.

(iv) Empowered Communities

Empowered Communities, an Indigenous partnership place-based approach, built upon the controversial Cape York Welfare Reform involved:¹⁴⁹

Indigenous communities and governments working together to set priorities, improve services and apply funding effectively at a regional level. Importantly, it aims to increase Indigenous ownership and give Indigenous people a greater say in decisions that affect them.¹⁵⁰

This program was active across ten regions in Australia including Cape York, the Central Coast in NSW, Inner Sydney, Goulburn Murray, East Kimberley, West Kimberley, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, and Ngarrindjeri between 2015 and mid-2022.¹⁵¹ \$31 million has been spent on this initiative across the different regions between 2015 and 2022.¹⁵²

(v) The Barkly Regional Deal

The Barkly Regional Deal was signed in 2019 and is funded largely by the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the Arts. The Barkly Regional Deal aims to improve the productivity and liveability of the Barkly region by stimulating economic growth and improving social outcomes, including reducing overcrowding and improving child safety.

The total value of the Deal is \$84.7 million and includes:

\$51.7 million from the Australian Government

\$30 million from the Northern Territory Government

\$3 million from the Barkly Regional Council.¹⁵³

Key components of the Deal include 28 economic, social and cultural initiatives to be implemented across the Barkly region with the majority of this new investment expended over the first three years; a 10-year timeframe—until 2029; and a community governance framework to drive the implementation of the Barkly Regional Deal, including a Governance Table.¹⁵⁴

(vi) Justice Reinvestment

Justice Reinvestment (JR) is the most prominent community-led place-based initiative in Australia. In Australia, JR is focused on reducing Indigenous incarceration in Australia, and it does this through strengthening community well-being in all domains from early in life.

The most established Justice Reinvestment program is Maranguka,¹⁵⁵ based in Bourke NSW. There are also projects in 'the Shire of Halls Creek (WA), Port Adelaide (SA), Moree, Mt Druitt, Bourke (NSW), Rockhampton, Cherbourg (Qld) and the ACT'.¹⁵⁶ There is also some interest to form JR initiatives in Tennant Creek (NT), Lismore and Kempsey (NSW) and Cairns (Qld). JR projects in Cowra (NSW), Doomadgee (Qld) and Katherine (NT) appear to have stalled.

Some of these JR initiatives were community initiated and others were government initiated. Transitions of coordination between government departments (at the state level), as well as COVID-19, has interrupted community engagement processes, which in turn has impacted on the progress of JR in some areas.¹⁵⁷ Five key elements of JR approaches in Australia to date include:¹⁵⁸

- evidence-based
- place based
- economically rational
- First nations focus
- community development

Maranguka in Bourke NSW commenced in 2013 through the Bourke Aboriginal Community Working Party who approached Just Reinvest NSW seeking information about JR.¹⁵⁹ Through the Bourke Tribal Council there is community governance of the Maranguka JR process and representation of the 24 clan groups of the Aboriginal community within Bourke. Maranguka also has a cross-sector leadership group which has senior government representation from relevant government departments to try and resolve lack of coordination and inefficiencies in service delivery in the Bourke region.

Maranguka was evaluated in 2018. The evaluation showed:

- Family strength: 23% reduction in police recorded incidence of domestic violence and comparable drops in rates of re-offending.
- Youth development: 31% increase in year 12 student retention rates and a 38% reduction in charges across the top five juvenile offence categories.
- Adult empowerment: 14% reduction in bail breaches and a 42% reduction in days spent in custody.¹⁶⁰

This evaluation demonstrates positive outcomes which could also contribute positively to reducing the number of children coming into contact with the child protection system.

JR initiatives highlight the importance of First Nations self-determination, noting that this approach is far more constructive and successful than government or not-for-profit selected community 'top down' approaches.¹⁶¹

However, research also shows that organisational support in some form has been a precursor to successful JR initiatives across Australia. Allison and Cunneen argue for a national coordinating JR body that could lead and collaborate with

communities across Australia, furthering JR initiatives in time.¹⁶²

(vii) Logan Together

Logan Together is a placed-based project in Queensland that takes a collective impact approach, with the Logan Together Backbone Team coordinating the initiative. Logan Together aims to improve the wellbeing of every child aged 0-8 in Logan, hoping to create positive generational change within the community.¹⁶³ In 2018, a national place-based evaluation framework commissioned by the Queensland Government Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors and the Australian Government Department of Social Services was tested by the Logan Together initiative.¹⁶⁴ A 2019 Queensland Government progress report on Logan Together found that 'the Logan Together collective is making positive progress towards the longer term goal of the 'Roadmap' via a collective impact approach'.¹⁶⁵

(viii) National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration

DSS is currently establishing a National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration (Nexus Centre) which intends 'to map and support existing and emerging place-based initiatives around Australia, with a focus on [Commonwealth programs and initiatives](#) first, and a plan for scaling up its support over time in a sustainable way'.¹⁶⁶ The National Leadership Group for *Stronger places, Stronger people* released a discussion paper in early 2022 stating that:

The need for a national entity to amplify, advocate, and facilitate development of place-based collaboration in Australian communities has been identified by previous consultations over the last few years. A national entity has been envisaged to provide oversight and strategic partnerships to better amplify place-based work across portfolios

by identifying common experiences of barriers, achieving a more joined up approach to have them resolved and working with Government and other system actors on institutional reforms required to enable place-based approaches. It could also result in more streamlined and targeted capability building efforts for communities and developing a locally driven professional workforce in these related fields. The entity would be non-government, with bi-partisan support, focused on working with communities and governments at the systems level.¹⁶⁷

Currently, there are 'at least' six Commonwealth place-based initiatives, across over 130 sites over Australia. It will be helpful to have a national entity that can enhance, coordinate, and disseminate information about what is happening on the ground.¹⁶⁸ The Nexus Centre will be a key stakeholder in the development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy.

Key points

- Place-based and collective impact approaches have the potential to achieve positive outcomes for children and families, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Place-based and collective impact approaches must be simultaneously aligned with broader initiatives focused on addressing the structural drivers of inequity.
- To be successful, place-based and collective impact initiatives need to have long-term and sustainable funding and development support, be data-driven and evidence-based and be based on a shared understanding and agreement by all people involved about the measurement of outcomes.

7 Conclusion

This review has explored a range of academic and grey literature relevant to investment approaches and provided some examples of these approaches in practice in order to inform the future development of the NCFIS.

This report considers several different approaches to effective investment strategies. A social or economic approach to investment measures benefits and returns as quantitative gains or losses, which support the wellbeing and capabilities of people or finances. A systems-level approach highlights the importance of aligning policy priorities across jurisdictions to address complexity and interconnections. Place-based and collective impact approaches are used by governments to address the needs of specific communities in defined geographical locations.¹⁶⁹

The literature shows the positive benefits of early investment in prevention and early intervention. The literature on SIA makes it clear that early investment in children and their families can support the productivity of people throughout their lives. However, investment decisions should be informed by broader wellbeing indicators based on meeting population needs, not just financial indicators. These are often not easily measurable in the short term.

The literature review concludes several sections by identifying key points. These points will help provide the foundation for consultations in understanding approaches and principles that may be useful in the development of the NCFIS.

The themes can broadly be grouped into four categories:

1. human rights guidelines support universal welfare approaches
 - fulfilling economic and social rights, such as the provision of adequate housing and universal childcare, as it is these supports which are integral for keeping families and children strong and well
 - investment approaches need to recognise that children have a full spectrum of social, economic, cultural and political rights.
2. greater planning and coordination, including within and across jurisdictions
 - complex social, economic, cultural and environmental factors shape the lives of children and their families. Successful investment strategies acknowledge this context and implement ways of working collaboratively across various barriers including different levels of government and diverse service sectors
 - for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the rights to self-determination, cultural safety, and connection to Culture, Country and kinship need to be considered as an additional contextual factor.
3. increased preparation for, and communication about, change
 - long-term and sustainable funding and development support are essential to a successful strategy

- for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, systems must recognise the influence of intergenerational trauma, racism and discrimination, and that change allows for appropriate time to adapt.
4. more accountability and transparency to facilitate improved assessment and evaluation of system performance
- successful investment strategies are data-driven and evidence-based. They are constructed on a shared understanding - and agreement by all people involved - about the measurement of outcomes. They are

informed by recommendations and evaluations from other approaches that have worked well and learn from what has not worked well

- for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, place-based and collective impact approaches have the potential to achieve positive outcomes for children and families.

The high-level themes identified through the literature about approaches to investment strategies will be considered throughout upcoming stakeholder engagements and detailed discussions of what is currently happening in Australian jurisdictions.

Appendix 1: Australian child safety strategies, frameworks and plans

National

[Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031](#)

Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 is Australia's framework to reduce child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts. It builds on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020, which laid the foundation for national collaboration on protecting Australia's children. It will drive change through collective effort across governments and sectors that impact the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

[National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020](#)

National Agreement on Closing the Gap is to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians. It includes Targets to achieve this aim.

Target 12: By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent.

Target 13: By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero.

Australian Capital Territory

[Next Steps for our Kids 2022–2030](#)

Next Steps builds on the successful elements of the previous strategy, A Step Up for Our Kids 2015–2020 that responds to challenges in the out of home care system.

New South Wales

[Their Futures Matter 2017–2020](#)

A four-year whole-of-government reform, intended to place vulnerable children and families at the heart of services, and direct investment to where funding and programs deliver the greatest social and economic benefits.

Northern Territory

[Safe, Thriving and Connected: Generational Change for Children and Families 2018–2023](#)

The Northern Territory government's plan to implement reforms to better support children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability and to deliver the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory.

Queensland

[Supporting Families Changing Futures 2019–2023](#)

A whole-of-government strategy for the final stage of a 10-year child and family reform program, with a focus on children and families experiencing vulnerability

[Our way: a generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families 2017–2037](#)

A long-term strategy, developed with Family Matters, to improve life opportunities for Queensland’s vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by working together differently.

South Australia

[Safe and well: Supporting families, protecting children 2021](#)

A whole-of-government strategy for supporting families at risk of entering the child protection system to safely care for their children, protecting children and young people from harm including when they are in care, and investing in young people in care and leaving care to provide them with opportunities for a bright future.

[Roadmap for reforming the Child and Family Support System 2021–2023](#)

The Roadmap outlines the steps that the Department of Human Services is taking that will improve early intervention services for children and families with complex needs. These steps are in line with the whole of government strategy, [Safe and well: Supporting families and protecting children](#).

Tasmania

[It takes a Tasmanian village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2021](#)

A whole-of-government Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to improve the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people, with a focus on the first 1,000 days (pregnancy to 2 years of age), and a structure based around the six domains of wellbeing described in the existing Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework

[Strong Families Safe Kids: Next Steps Action Plan 2021–2023](#)

Next Steps Action Plan 2021-2023 builds on the Strong Families Safe Kids Implementation Plan 2016-2020 and exists within the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework. The Action Plan embeds a public health approach to child safety and wellbeing and has a focus on primary prevention and early intervention approaches.

Victoria[Roadmap to Reform: Strong families, safe children 2016](#)

A plan for reform of the child protection system that focuses on earlier intervention and prevention to reduce vulnerability and equip children and young people to reach their full potential. The Priority Setting Plan 2021-24 updates the Roadmap.

[Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and Strategic Action Plan 2018–2021](#)

A partnership between the Aboriginal community, government and community services organisations to commit to better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. The Strategic Action Plan details the steps which the sector needs to take in addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection and out-of-home care systems.

Western Australia[Building a Better Future: Out-of-Home Care Reform Program Roadmap 2019–2023](#)

The WA Department of Roadmap builds on a Reform Plan released in April 2016

[Early Intervention and Family Support Strategy 2016](#)

Building Safe and Strong Families: Early Intervention and Family Support is a WA government strategy aimed at redesigning the service system to deliver earlier intervention and family support services more effectively.

Appendix 2: Summary of key themes

- Children and their families have a full spectrum of social, economic, cultural and political rights.
- Human rights frameworks support universal welfare approaches to fulfilling economic and social rights, such as the provision of adequate housing and universal childcare, as it is these supports that are integral for keeping families and children strong and well.
- The rights to self-determination and cultural safety and connection to culture, country and kinship for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be incorporated into any strategies that impact them.
- SIAs are context-specific and may benefit from project-based opportunities and innovation to inform scale-up.
- Early childhood development is central to economic development, cutting across social issues, including education, care and gender.
- Universal social investment helps to reach the most marginalised sustainably, potentially minimising the risk of crisis interventions.
- A systems approach sees child wellbeing as the outcome of the interaction between of social, cultural, environmental and economic factors. Any solutions to wellbeing issues must thus be addressed holistically and with an intergenerational and intersectional lens.
- Shifting resources towards prevention and early intervention has the potential to mitigate issues before they arise. The value of early intervention lies in the ability to see how systems interact over time.
- At the core of a systems approach is partnerships and robust data systems that link the components of the systems to monitor and evaluate results for children. Effective data linkage will also assist in evidence-based decision-making.
- Place-based and collective impact approaches have the potential to achieve positive outcomes for children and families, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Place-based and collective impact approaches must be simultaneously aligned with broader initiatives focused on addressing the structural drivers of inequity.
- To be successful, place-based and collective impact initiatives need to have long-term and sustainable funding and development support, be data-driven and evidence-based and be based on a shared understanding and agreement by all people involved about the measurement of outcomes.

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Appendix 2: Presentation for roundtables with stakeholders

National Child and Family Investment Strategy Roundtables

17 and 18 April 2023



SLIDE 1

Overarching principles

- Empowerment, participation and self-determination
- Collaboration and partnership
- Sustainability
- Systems approach
- Evidence-based investment
- A human rights-based approach



SLIDE 2

1. Common language and definitions

- clear and consistent language
- definitions of key terms
- facilitate data collection and measurement and knowledge-sharing

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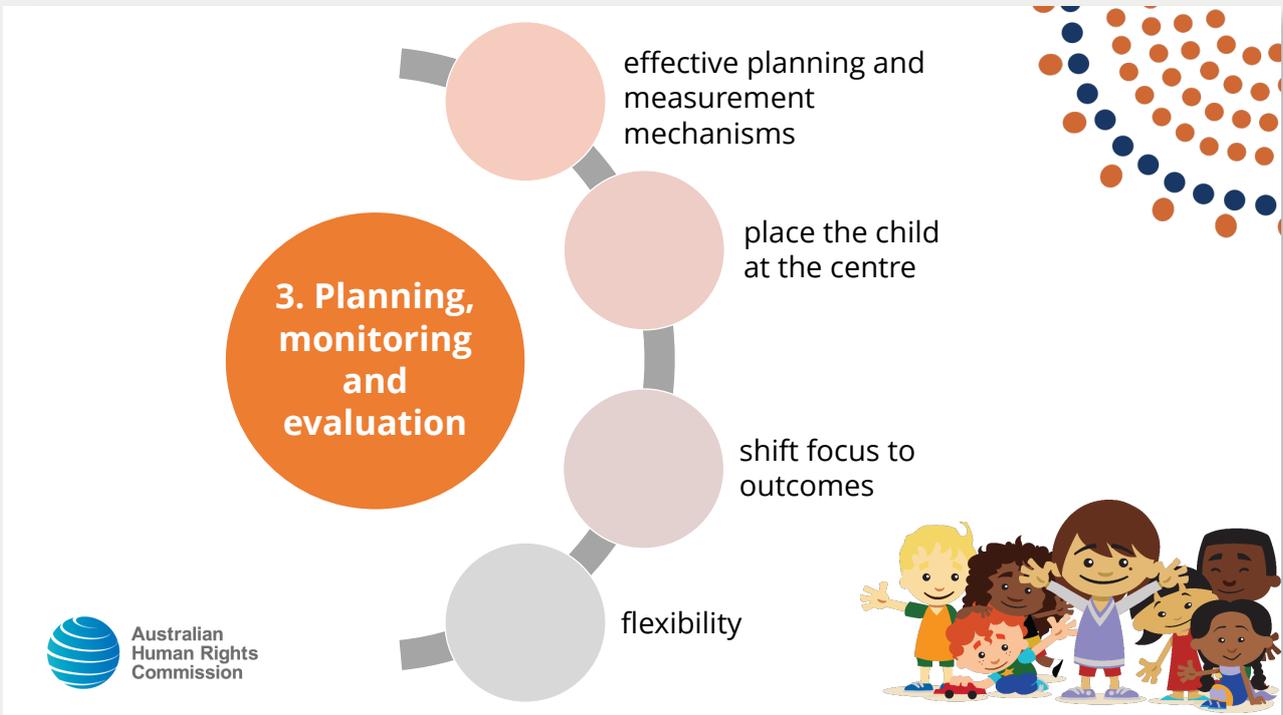
SLIDE 3

2. Data and evidence generation

- improve data sharing
- national minimum data set
- context-specific data and evidence
- data sovereignty

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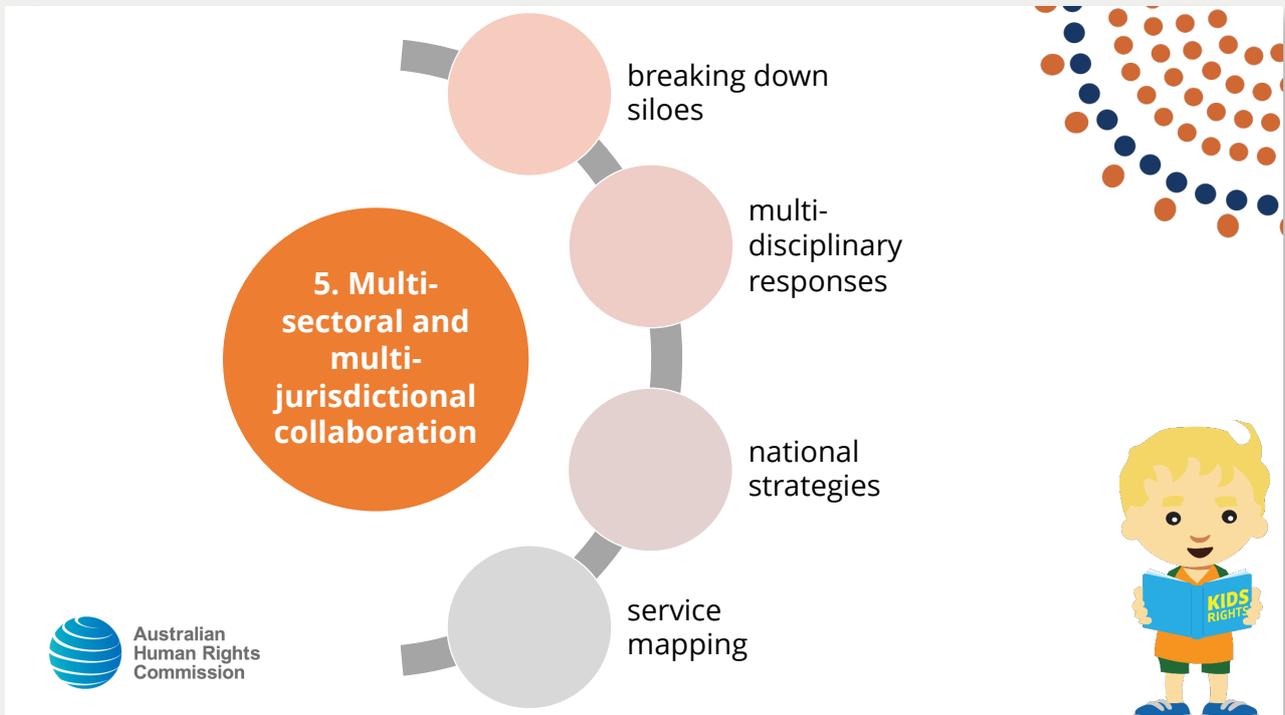
SLIDE 4



SLIDE 5



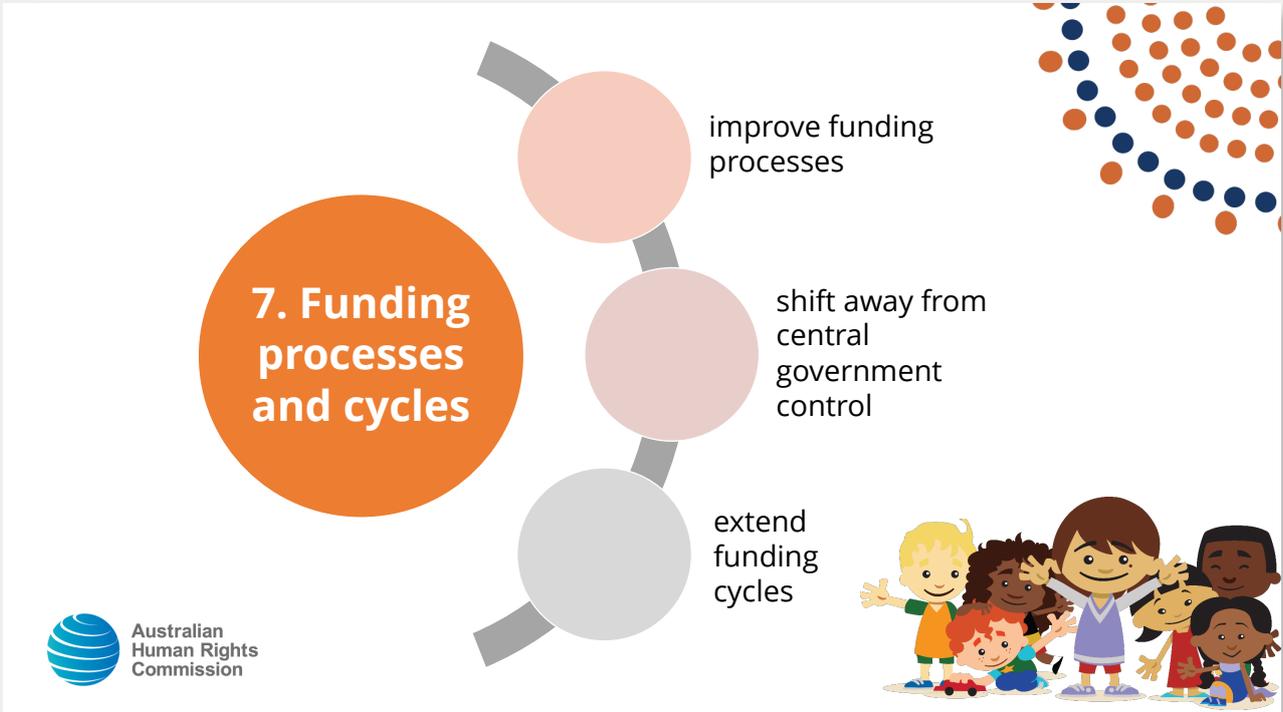
SLIDE 6



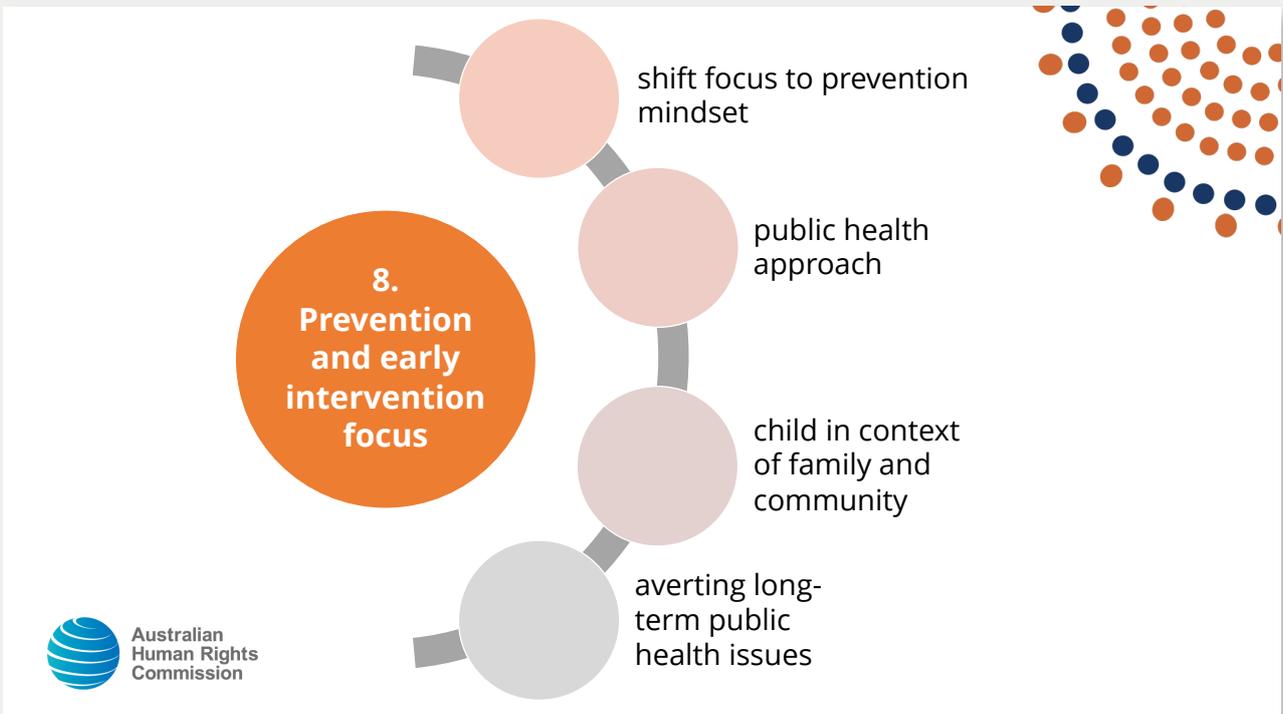
SLIDE 7



SLIDE 8



SLIDE 9



SLIDE 10

Further Information

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