

COMMUNIQUÉ

20 February 2020

The Children and Families Tripartite Forum held its first meeting of 2020 in Darwin. The meeting was chaired by Ms Donna Ah Chee, who welcomed members and observers from the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments, Northern Territory Council of Social Service, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency and Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory.

The meeting commenced with a Welcome to Country from Larrakia elder and Director in the Reform Management Office, Dr Christine-Fejo King who talked about the Nation's Dance in December 2019 which called on ancestors to bring rain across the country. Dr Fejo-King extended an invitation to all Aboriginal children in care in the Northern Territory to attend the next Nation's Dance in May 2020.

The Forum discussed recent data reports regarding the wellbeing of children and young people in the Northern Territory. Professor Steve Guthridge from Menzies School of Health Research presented the recently released Story of Our Children and Young People Report. The Forum emphasised the importance of this Report in providing baseline data on the wellbeing of children. The presentation highlighted the level of housing need in the Northern Territory and the forum affirmed that addressing housing overcrowding is a major priority. The forum requested the Northern Territory Department of Chief Minister engage with the forum to ensure that gaps in data and the format of reporting Aboriginal data is considered for the next Story of our Children and Young People Report due in 2021.

The Tripartite Forum also considered data on child protection and youth justice rates in the Northern Territory in comparison to other Australian jurisdictions recently released by the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services. The Forum noted progress in key indicators including the significant reduction in child protection substantiations in the Northern Territory, increase in the number of Aboriginal children in the care of kin, and improved results from diversion programs for young people in contact with police.

The Forum focussed on a recommendation from the Royal Commission into the Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory which tasked the Tripartite Forum with developing a 10-year Generational Strategy for Children in the Northern Territory. There was strong consensus that the Tripartite Forum would develop a Generational Strategy that would incorporate and extend on work the Forum has already commenced, particularly the Coordinated Funding Framework which seeks to improve coordination of funding between the two levels of government for children and family services. The Forum commissioned working groups to progress the development of the Generational Strategy.



The Forum welcomed the Hon. Michelle Landry MP, Federal Assistant Minister for Children and Families and Northern Australia, and the Hon. Dale Wakefield MLA, the Northern Territory Minister for Territory Families. Assistant Minister Landry acknowledged the crucial role of the Forum in overseeing the reforms for children and families. Minister Wakefield also highlighted the importance of the Tripartite Forum and encouraged the continuation of this important collaboration. The Hon. Ken Wyatt MP, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs sent his apologies and a statement was read on his behalf. The statement highlighted Minister Wyatt's three priorities for 2020; being the finalisation of the Closing the Gap strategy; a Voice for Indigenous people and decreasing the high rate of suicide among young Aboriginal people. All three Ministers noted the important work of the Forum and highlighted that the Tripartite Forum is a primary source of advice to both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments on children and families in the Northern Territory.

The Forum was briefed on a range of initiatives and reforms underway relevant to children and families. This included the proposed rollout of the Cashless Debit Card where the Forum agreed to gather further data to ensure that people entitled to income support payments are receiving these entitlements. The community sector members of the reform expressed strong opposition for the continuation of mandatory income management.

The Forum was also updated on legislative reforms led by Territory Families particularly the legislated requirement for Territory Families to make every attempt to support families to stay together. The forum applauded the significant legislative amendments and the contribution to a family focussed child protection and youth justice system. The Forum also heard of the progress of the establishment of Child and Family Centres led by the Reform Management Office and endorsed the community-led process; the progress of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and the Northern Territory's Bushtel website.

The Tripartite Forum will meet again in May where the Forum will consider the Final Report of the Productivity Commission's study into expenditure on children and family in the Northern Territory and progress of the development of the 10 year Generational Strategy for Children.