

COMMUNIQUÉ

5 March 2021

The Children and Families Tripartite Forum (the Forum) held its first meeting of 2021 in Darwin and via video conference on 5 March 2021.

The Forum was chaired by Ms Donna Ah Chee, who welcomed Forum members and observers from the Northern Territory and Australian Governments, Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APONT).

The meeting commenced with a Welcome to Country from Larrakia elder, Dr Christine Fejo-King who spoke about her family's seven generation plan and the opportunity and obligation for the Children and Families Tripartite Forum to support Aboriginal families' aspirations through its work.

The Tripartite Forum's Generational Strategy Working Group reported back to the Forum on their progress in developing the 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory. The Forum noted the progress of the working group and agreed to the high-level plan and the broad engagement approach. The Forum also considered the working group's proposal to establish an Aboriginal Expert Advisory Group and agreed to the establishment of the advisory group with twelve members appointed by APONT and NAAJA and two by the Northern Territory and Australian Government. The Aboriginal Expert Advisory Group will commence meeting in April 2021.

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities provided a briefing to the Forum on the ongoing child protection and youth justice law reform. The Department identified that the Northern Territory Government was working on priority amendments in response to the 2020 coronial inquests relating to suicide and volatile substance abuse while also progressing the single integrated act for children. The Department provided an update on the further development of the model and implementation of the Multi Agency Community Child Safety Framework, and members agreed to work with the Department on the implementation across the Northern Territory.

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities and the Department of Social Services briefed the forum on the progress on family support reforms. Forum members noted the design process and upcoming grant processes.

The meeting hosted Northern Territory and Australian Government Ministers:

- The Honourable Ken Wyatt MP, Australian Government Minister for Indigenous Australians
- The Honourable Michelle Landry MP, Australian Government Assistant Minister for Children and Families and Assistant Minister for Northern Australia
- The Honourable Lauren Moss MLA, Northern Territory Minister for Children and Minister for Youth



Minister Moss highlighted the recent release of the Generational Change Impact report, which describes the last two and half year's progress in the reform program and the positive outcomes emerging across the NT. The forum commended the Northern Territory Government on the 40 per cent reduction in the rate of substantiation of abuse and neglect for Aboriginal children in the NT over the last four years.

Minister Wyatt and Assistant Minister Landry spoke of the Australian Government's focus on the implementation of Closing the Gap and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy in partnership with Aboriginal people. Assistant Minister Landry spoke of the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Ministers emphasised the importance of all sectors and stakeholders working in partnership with families to improve outcomes in the Northern Territory.

The Children and Families Tripartite Forum briefed the Australian and Northern Territory Government Ministers on the work to develop the 10-Year Generational Strategy, including the establishment of an Aboriginal Expert Advisory Group to guide the development of the strategy.

The Reform Management Office presented on the Report on Government Services 2021 and the status of the Northern Territory compared to other Australian jurisdictions across key child protection and youth justice indicators. Members noted the continued progress towards reducing the child protection substantiation rate and reducing the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in the NT. Members also noted the significant reduction in the average daily incarceration rate for Aboriginal young people in the NT between 2015-16 to 2019-20.

Bernard Leckning from the Menzies School of Health Research presented on the recently published study investigating the risk of self-harm by young Aboriginal people with a history of child protection service involvement and identifying opportunities for prevention. Members noted the confronting implications of the strong relationship between abuse and neglect in early childhood and the middle years and rates of self-harm in adolescence. Members discussed the implications of the research with Mr Leckning and noted the opportunities for supportive interventions in early childhood and the middle years that may lead to decreased self-harm.

The forum briefly discussed the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in the Northern Territory and noted that the NDIS' focus on early childhood development presented an opportunity to better support early interventions. The forum will discuss the opportunities presented by the NDIS and the current uptake of the scheme at the next meeting.

The Northern Territory Department of Education presented on the NT Education Engagement Strategy. Members noted the declining attendance rate for Aboriginal students over the last ten years and discussed the historical policy decisions that have impacted on school attendance. Members supported the Department's commitment to engage across the NT on identifying better ways to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities, leaders and families; support mobile families; and create more flexible learning approaches. The Forum recognised the critical role education plays in generational change and agreed to oversee the Department of Education's Education Engagement Strategy.

The Forum was provided an update on the NT Aboriginal Justice Agreement and the Implementation of Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory by Northern Territory Government officials. The Forum expressed their support for the initiatives and acknowledged the progress so far.

The Forum considered a briefing from Making Justice Work identifying concerns relating to recent events in youth detention and raising concerns that recent improvements relating to youth justice in the NT may not be sustained into the future. The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities provided an update on current activities in youth detention and committed to provide a comprehensive response to the briefing. The Reform Management Office will work with the Department to develop a set of youth justice indicators to regularly report to the Forum.

The next Forum meeting is scheduled for 18 May 2021.