

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria and Tasmania working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges the past and present traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Introduction

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on priorities for consideration by the Australian Government for the 2024-25 budget. Our submission is consistent with the five wellbeing themes of the *Measuring What Matters* Framework relating to good health; security; sustainability; cohesion; and prosperity. We have also applied an equity lens in developing our recommendations. The submission is informed by our members' firsthand experience of the challenges facing families experiencing hardship and/or with co-existing vulnerabilities.

The Centre also welcomes the Albanese Government's implementation of key reforms over the past twelve months. In particular, we support the abolition of the punitive ParentsNext scheme, establishment of the Housing Australia Future Fund, and increases in the rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance, JobSeeker payments, and the childcare subsidy for lower income families.

As the peak body for children, young people and families in Victoria and Tasmania, with member organisations also working in other jurisdictions, the Centre looks forward to future opportunities to work with the Federal Government on policies and programs aimed at creating a more equitable and just society where children and young people, no matter what their background, can thrive.

Cost of living support for Australians experiencing hardship

Taxation reform

At the time of writing, the Australian Government is considering ways of making the Stage 3 tax cuts – due to take effect in July 2024 – more equitable while maintaining a core election promise.

As conceived originally by the previous Federal Government, the tax cuts would benefit the richest 20 per cent of tax payers, giving a \$9075 tax break for those earning more than \$200,000 a year.¹ Australia Institute chief economist Greg Jericho highlights the true cost of these tax cuts in foregone income for Treasury (\$240 billion over the next ten years) while doing nothing for people on low income who are struggling with increased cost of living pressures.²

The details are still being worked out but it appears that the government will now halve the high-end tax cut and use the money to deliver a \$804 tax cut for most taxpayers. The government is to be congratulated on its efforts to produce something fairer and more sensitive to the nation's changed economic circumstances than the original proposal, but the Centre believes there is a lot more work to be done to support people through the current cost-of-living pressures.

Our members are keen to see meaningful cost-of-living relief for struggling families. We believe the Australian Government needs to review and reform Australia's taxation system so that all Australians can benefit, not simply the privileged few. There needs to be a tightening of the taxation system to ensure millionaires and high-salaried people pay their fair share of tax and that

¹ Devine, V. (2024). Stage 3 cuts overlook needy. *Sunday Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/money/tax/who-s-benefiting-from-stage-three-tax-cuts-not-those-who-need-it-20240119-p5eyow.html>

² Jericho, G. (2024). Stage 3 Better: A way for the government to deliver better, fairer tax cuts and save money. The Australia Institute. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/stage-3-better-a-way-for-the-government-to-deliver-better-fairer-tax-cuts-and-save-money/>

people on little or no income are supported to provide financially sustainable lives for themselves and their families.

Recommendation 1. Review the Stage three tax cuts specifically, and the broader Australian taxation system, to ensure a more equitable distribution of taxation relief, particularly for low to middle income earners.

Reforming the social security system

During March to June 2020, the Australian Government's introduction of the COVID Supplement payments successfully raised 646,000 individuals, including 245,000 children, out of poverty.³ While the impact of discontinuing the Supplement on poverty rates is not fully known yet, we know that a significantly higher number of individuals were dependent on the most minimal income support payments post-pandemic (1,950,000 in April 2021) compared to the pre-pandemic period (1,414,000 in February 2020).⁴

Research shows that the best way to reduce poverty and financial stress among low income households is to increase working-age payments, including JobSeeker.⁵ By positioning women as the primary recipients of JobSeeker, which is one of the lowest unemployment benefits in the OECD,⁶ the government is inadvertently contributing to the increase in poverty among women and children.⁷ To alleviate the financial hardship of women and children who are ultimately dependent on these support payments, the Government needs to increase the JobSeeker allowance. To maintain safety and dignity, the rate should be raised from \$45 to a minimum of \$78 per day.⁸

The families our members work with are already vulnerable across one or more domains, often with multiple, complex and co-existing challenges, of which poverty is a key driver and contributor. A significant proportion of these families depend on income support payments to make ends meet, or are engaged in low-wage, unstable jobs which do not enable cost-of-living increases to be covered. In November 2022, the Centre conducted a survey of our member organisations to determine the extent and impact of poverty on the children and families they work with across Victoria. This was during COVID and towards the start of the significant increase in cost-of-living expenses the nation is now experiencing. The most commonly reported impacts of living in dire financial need included the following:

- Skipping meals, going without food
- Inability to pay rent or energy bills
- Inability to meet basic educational costs for children

³ Davidson, P., Bradbury, B. & Wong, M. (2022). Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot. Australian Council of Social Service & UNSW Sydney. https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Poverty-in-Australia-2020_A-snapshot.pdf

⁴ Australian Institute of Health & Welfare. (2021). Social security & welfare. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/income-support>

⁵ Phillips, B. & Narayanan, V. (2021). Financial Stress and Social Security Settings in Australia https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/FS_and_OPM_paper_SVA_PDF_0.pdf

⁶ The Australia Institute. (2021). Unemployment payments and work incentives: An international comparison. p.3. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/P1035-Unemployment-payments-and-work-incentives-WEB.pdf>

⁷ OECD. (2022). Fully realising the economic potential of women in Australia. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/c5ebb5a1-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/c5ebb5a1-en>

⁸ Australian Council of Social Service. (2023). Raise the Rate. <https://www.raisetherate.org.au/>

- Inability to access specialist health clinicians for mental or physical health needs
- Being fearful of child protection involvement
- Staying in violent households
- Difficulty regulating emotions and related behaviour.⁹

There is a need for more robust support systems and policies – including welfare and taxation reform – to address the challenges too many Australian children, young people and families face. The Federal government has the policy levers to make decisions which would raise children and their families out of poverty.

The 2023-24 report of the Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee makes a series of recommendations designed to reduce poverty, improve the adequacy of income support and rent assistance, remove barriers to economic inclusion for families with children and support more Australians to participate in the economy.¹⁰ The Centre supports these aims and recommendations.

Recommendation 2. Raise the rate of JobSeeker to a minimum of \$78 per day.

Recommendation 3. Implement the findings and recommendations of the Economic Inclusion Advisory Panel, in particular recommendations one, two, four, 24, 25, 27, 28 and 31 in this Budgetary cycle to shape a more equitable income support framework.

Boosting the availability of affordable housing

Since its election, the Federal Government has introduced several key housing policies, laying a foundation for reform and fostering investment to expand social and community housing. The Centre has particularly welcomed the establishment of the Housing Australia Future Fund as a step towards tackling the acute shortage of affordable housing. The severity of the housing crisis is highlighted in Anglicare Australia's 2022 Rental Affordability Snapshot.¹¹ This report found that out of approximately 46,000 rental listings nationwide, only eight properties were affordable for individuals on JobSeeker Payment, and only one property was within reach of those on Youth Allowance.

Access to good-quality, affordable housing is fundamental to wellbeing.¹² High rental costs place a significant burden on young people and families experiencing financial disadvantage. In our child and family services sector, members work on a daily basis with families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness or living in accommodation that is inappropriate and unsafe because that is all they can afford. Recent media articles highlighted a number of families living in tents in a national park on the outskirts of Bendigo in regional Victoria, literally as a last resort.¹³ Mission

⁹ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. (2023). The extent and nature of poverty in Australia. Submission. https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CFECFW_Poverty-Submission.pdf

¹⁰ Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee. (2023). 2023–24 Report to Government. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/sites/ministers.treasury.gov.au/files/2023-04/eiac-report.pdf>

¹¹ Anglicare Australia. (2022). Rental affordability snapshot – national report April 2022. Anglicare Australia. p.9. <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-National-report.pdf>

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). Housing Affordability: Snapshot <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/housing-affordability>

¹³ D'Agostino, E. & Bonica, D. (2023). ABC Online. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-09/families-left-with-no-choice-but-to-live-in-tents-in-the-bush/103177116>

Australia's 2023 report on homelessness notes a significant increase in numbers of people living in improvised homes, streets, cars, parks and tents since 2022.¹⁴ Research shows particular cohorts are most at risk, with family violence being a key driver of homelessness, with some victim-survivors returning to violent partners due to housing insecurity.¹⁵

The Australian Government needs to implement rental assistance programs as a matter of urgency and create policies that address the underlying causes of housing affordability. By prioritising affordable and accessible housing, we can work towards a more equitable nation, where everyone can have somewhere safe and secure to call home, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Recommendation 4. Consistent with the Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee recommendations, increase the amount of Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments, and reform indexation of payments to better reflect the rising cost of private rental housing in Australia.

Investing in Medicare to boost accessibility

In Australia, individual out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare are high, accounting for 17 per cent of Australia's total healthcare spending, one of the highest proportions in the OECD.¹⁶ In 2020-21, nearly half a million Australians missed out on seeing a specialist due to cost barriers, and more than half a million deferred or did not fill a prescription due to cost.¹⁷ In 2022-23, over 1.2 million Australians did not go to a GP because of concerns surrounding costs.¹⁸

At the same time as cost-of-living pressures are increasing, the number of healthcare clinics offering bulk billing services is declining.¹⁹ While the federal government announced in 2023 that it would increase the incentives to doctors for bulk billing children, pensioners and concession card holders, there are many other Australians struggling with cost-of-living pressures who cannot afford to seek medical care or who are delaying seeking this care. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that in the 2022-23 financial year, people living in areas of most socio-economic disadvantage, and people living in outer regional, remote or very remote areas, were more likely to delay or not use health services than those living in areas of least disadvantage or metropolitan areas.²⁰

Some populations, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, have poorer access to quality health services. Asylum seekers in particular have limited access to

¹⁴ Pereth, C., Jagatap, S., Baird, V., et al. (2023). A Safe Place to Call Home: Mission Australia's Homelessness and Stable Housing Impact Report 2023. Mission Australia. <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/submissions-and-reports/housing-and-homelessness>

¹⁵ Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2019). Domestic and family violence, housing insecurity and homelessness: Research synthesis (2nd Ed.; ANROWS Insights, 07/2019). ANROWS. https://anrowsdev.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DV-Housing-Homelessness-Synthesis-2.Ed_.pdf

¹⁶ Duckett, S., Stobart, A. & Lin, L. (2022). Not so universal: How to reduce out-of-pocket healthcare payments. Grattan Institute. p.6. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Not-so-universal-how-to-reduce-out-of-pocket-healthcare-payments-Grattan-Report.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cleanbill. (2024). Blue Report: National General Practitioner Listings. <https://cleanbill.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Cleanbill-Blue-Report-January-2024.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid, p.10.

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Patient experiences. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-services/patient-experiences/2022-23#data-downloads>

primary healthcare (PHC) services due to Medicare ineligibility, health care costs, and often endure social, financial, and psychological stress.²¹

Unacceptably long outpatient wait times in public hospitals mean that many Australians find themselves seeking out private specialists, but specialist fees are unregulated and generally well above the Medicare schedule fee.²² The Grattan Institute has identified a suite of measures that could reduce outpatient wait times, make specialist care more affordable, reduce the number of specialist referrals, reduce pharmaceutical costs, and eliminate out-of-pocket payments for diagnostic services.²³ Such measures, which go beyond simply reforming Medicare, would help decrease the number of Australians who miss out on healthcare because of cost. There is an urgent need for funding reform so that the most vulnerable Australians, who are not able to access bulk billing services, can receive high quality, timely and affordable healthcare.

Recommendation 5. Review the Original Medicare Safety Net and the Extended Medicare Safety Net to enable greater access to timely, high-quality, and affordable healthcare.

Recommendation 6: Review and where feasible implement the Grattan Institute recommendations to reduce out-of-pocket healthcare payments.

Making dental care affordable for Australians experiencing vulnerability

Research shows the profound impact poor dental health can have on people's lives, including on social interaction, employment prospects, social and economic status, and mental health and wellbeing.²⁴ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that 39 per cent of people aged 15 and over avoided or delayed visiting the dentist due to the costs associated with dental care.²⁵ If people cannot pay for dental services, they either delay, miss out on dental care, or rely on the public system if they are eligible. For those eligible for publicly funded services, there are long waiting lists.²⁶

In 2013, the House Standing Committee on Health and Ageing's report, *Bridging the Dental Gap*, outlined steps towards improving dental services.²⁷ These included long-term funding, a national framework, and a phased approach towards a universal dental scheme. However, recent findings

²¹ Khatri, B. & Assefa, Y. (2022). Access to health services among culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the Australian universal health care system: Issues and challenges. BMC Public Health. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-022-13256-z>

²² Duckett, p.3.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ National Institutes of Health. (2021). *Oral health in America: Advances and challenges*. Bethesda, MD, USA: US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK576535/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK576535.pdf

²⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). Oral health and dental care in Australia: Costs.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dental-oral-health/oral-health-and-dental-care-in-australia/contents/costs>

²⁶ Australian Senate. (2023). The Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia: Interim Report. p.25.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000080/toc_pdf/Interimreport.pdf

²⁷ Standing Committee on Health and Ageing. (2013). *Bridging the Dental Gap: Report on the inquiry into adult dental services*. Commonwealth of Australia.

https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=haa/.dental/report.htm

indicate lack of progress in these areas, including the absence of a Chief Dental Officer and no definitive plan for universal oral health care.²⁸

The human impact of current system failings is significant. Dental problems represent the biggest cause of all potentially preventable hospitalisations in children up to nine years old and can adversely affect quality of life.²⁹ Many Australian parents are not aware of preventative dental care measures they could be implementing with their children, with one in three Australian preschoolers having never visited a dentist and many children only seeing a dentist when there are symptoms of more advanced dental disease.³⁰ Families would benefit from a national campaign focused on education about preventative dental care to support them in making healthy choices for their children. Given that treatment of dental disease costs the Australian economy over \$9.9 billion a year,³¹ the nation as a whole would benefit from cost savings associated with reduced dental interventions.

We believe the Australian Government should gradually work towards a federally funded universal oral health scheme by expanding current public dental funding and improving access for families experiencing vulnerability, aiming to reduce the period spent on long waiting lists.

Recommendation 7. As a step towards a universal system, increase public funding to reduce public waitlists, and remove the cost barrier for Australians experiencing vulnerability to have equitable access to quality dental services.

Recommendation 8. Invest in a national awareness campaign for families, focused on preventative dental health.

Safe and secure communities

Continued investment in early prevention to change children's life trajectories

The 2023 landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) highlighted the number of children and young people in Australia who have been exposed to different forms of harm and maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence).³² The study found that 40.2 per cent of young Australians have experienced more than one type of abuse, with 25.4 per cent having experienced three to five types of abuse. It also found that children who experience multi-type maltreatment are more likely to have a mental disorder and health risk behaviours as adults, and that child maltreatment dramatically increases the likelihood of self-harm and suicide attempts.³³

²⁸ Australian Senate. (2023). The Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia: Interim Report. p. 21.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000080/toc_pdf/Interimreport.pdf

²⁹ Department of Health. (2021). Ambulatory Care Sensitive Conditions: Victorian Health Information Surveillance System. Government of Victoria.

³⁰ The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. (2018). Child oral health: Habits in Australian homes. Poll report.

³¹ Ibid, p.6.

³² Higgins, D., Mathews, B., & Pacella, R. (2023). The prevalence and nature of multi-type child maltreatment in Australia. <https://www.acms.au/findings/>

³³ Ibid.

One of the emerging risks for children and young people is the perpetration of online sexual abuse, with the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation reporting that online forms of child sexual abuse have grown exponentially over recent years.³⁴ The e-Safety Commission has recently revealed the ways in which artificial intelligence (AI) poses real-world potential risks and harms to children, including providing opportunities for adults to sexually exploit children using harmful images and grooming techniques.³⁵ AI also has the ability to access children's data and can provide young people with harmful information, such as automatically generated responses to disclosures of imminent harm.³⁶ Australian parents need to be aware of these risks when their children are engaging with AI programs. In conjunction with the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, resources for young people and their caregivers could be shared on the risks of AI usage to keep children safe online.

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* sets out the shared goal of 'making significant and sustained progress in reducing the rate of child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts'.³⁷ The Framework focuses on four areas for collective effort:

- A national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage
Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems
- Improving information sharing, data development and analysis
- Strengthening the child and family sector and workforce capability.

If implemented, these priority actions could help address some of the challenges raised in our submission. However, the Framework is underutilised and the First Action Plan 2023-26 has not been widely promoted or embedded in practice. Further investment is needed to promote the core messages of these national documents and to support community services organisations and jurisdictions to implement the actions.

Recommendation 9. Invest in promotion of *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* and the *First Action Plan 2023-2026* to encourage take-up of the agreed principles and implementation of the actions.

Recommendation 10. Fund the office of the e-Safety Commissioner to develop resources to safeguard young Australians against generative AI risks, as part of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (2021-2030)*.

³⁴ Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation. (2022). 2021 ACCCE Statistics.

<https://www.accce.gov.au/resources/research-and-statistics>

³⁵ e-Safety Commissioner. (2023). Tech Trends Position Statement: Generative AI. Australian Government.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/tech-trends-and-challenges/generative-ai>

³⁶ Ibid. p.4.

³⁷ Department of Social Services. (2021). *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2021/dess5016-national-framework-protecting-childrenaccessible.pdf

Therapeutic services for victim survivors of abuse

Adults who have experienced maltreatment as children are 2.8 times more likely to have a mental health challenge.³⁸ A recent study by the Australian Institute of Criminology in relation to sexual exploitation identified symptoms in victim survivors of traumatic flashbacks, feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation.³⁹ While government-funded Medicare subsidies under a Mental Health Treatment Plan cover some costs associated with therapeutic services, victim survivors are often left with significant out-of-pocket expenses. Given the often-profound long-term impacts of maltreatment on people's lives, it is critically important that those who have been subject to different forms of maltreatment can access quality, timely and affordable mental health supports when, where, and how they need it to support their recovery.

As the First Action Plan of the *National Plan to End Violence against Woman and Children* (the National Plan) states, there is a need for further trauma specialist counselling support for victim survivors of abuse.⁴⁰ Currently, there are limited specialist family, domestic and sexual violence counselling services which are non-government run and based in community settings, such as women's health services, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCO's) or via the PHC setting. The expense of private therapy remains a significant barrier for victim survivors.⁴¹

Recommendation 11. Fund 10 additional Medicare-funded psychological therapy sessions for victim survivors of the types of maltreatment identified in the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study.

A national approach to raising the age of criminal responsibility

Many children involved in the criminal justice system come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have complex needs, including experiences of poverty, homelessness, educational exclusion, abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol issues, and health challenges.⁴² Children with disability are also overrepresented in the youth justice system.⁴³ There is a strong body of research internationally that supports the case for raising the age of criminal responsibility and the Centre calls for a nationally consistent approach, rather than leaving this decision and its implementation to individual jurisdictions.

In relation to children with disability in the youth justice system, the Centre calls on the government to implement all the recommendations made in the 2023 *Care criminalisation of children with disability in child protection systems* report, developed as part of the Royal Commission

³⁸ Higgins et al.

³⁹ Boxhall, H., Lyneham, S., Black, C., & Gannoni, A. (2023). Sexual exploitation in Australia: Victim-survivor support needs and barriers to support provision. Australian Institute of Criminology.

⁴⁰ Department of Social Services. (2023). First Action Plan & Outcomes Framework 2023–2027: National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. Australian Government. p.51.

https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2023/d23-1021308-first-action-plan-accessible-pdf.pdf

⁴¹ Full Stop Australia. (2022). Sexual Violence Reform Priorities. p.12. https://fullstop.org.au/uploads/main/Sexual-Violence-Criminal-Justice-Reform-Priorities_Full-Stop-Australia.pdf

⁴² Parnell, S. (2015). Too much too young: Raise the age of criminal responsibility. Jesuit Social Services.

http://jss.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2016/01/Letter_to_AGs_Age_of_Criminal_responsibility.pdf

⁴³ McCausland, R. & Baldry, E. (2017). 'I feel like I failed him by ringing the police': Criminalising disability in Australia. *Punishment & Society*, 19(3). pp.290–309.

<https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/exhibit/DRC.1000.0005.0732.pdf>

into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.⁴⁴ The report calls for greater consistency across jurisdictions, and for therapeutic and healing services to be fully funded and available to children with disability in child protection systems.

Recommendation 12. Adopt a national approach to reform the youth justice system, with a specific emphasis on raising the age of criminal responsibility to fourteen years of age.

Recommendation 13. Adopt fully the set of recommendations in the 2023 *Care criminalisation of children with disability in child protection systems* report.

A sustainable society

The current trajectory of climate change poses a significant threat to individuals' health, wellbeing, and overall quality of life, including their employment, living conditions, and actual survival.⁴⁵ The adverse impacts of climate change intensify existing vulnerabilities and inequalities and increase the risk of poverty traps and food insecurity.⁴⁶

Role of child and family services in climate emergency

Responding to climate-related disasters has become a fundamental role of community service organisations (CSOs). CSOs offer a suite of support including essential supplies, equipment, clothing, shelter, counselling, and guidance for individuals dealing with the aftermath of traumatic events. The need for such services persists not only in the immediate aftermath of a disaster but for extended periods afterward. Certain groups, such as First Nations peoples, individuals with disability, children and young people, people in rural and regional communities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, experience a disproportionately higher impact from these events.⁴⁷ Our members report that impacts on children are often not prioritised during climate emergencies.

The community sector, although crucial in responding to emergencies, is underfunded and often unable to meet demand. The 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey revealed that only three percent of the 1,470 organisations surveyed reported their main service can consistently meet demand, with 66 per cent of organisations having reported increased demand.⁴⁸ This gap in service provision is compounded as organisations and their workers face significant stress and often burnout from unmet need,⁴⁹ and often from being affected by these events themselves. The

⁴⁴ Baidawi, S. & Ball, R. (2022). *Care criminalisation of children with disability in child protection systems*. Research report. Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. p.290.

<https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-05/Research%20Report%20-%20Care%20criminalisation%20of%20children%20with%20disability%20in%20child%20protection%20systems.pdf>

⁴⁵ Pörtner, H., Roberts., D. et al. (2022). Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Summary for policymakers. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge UK. p.vii.

https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryVolume.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The World Health Organisation. (2023). Climate change: Impacts on health. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

⁴⁸ Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M. (2022). Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: Findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey. Australian Council of Social Service. https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ACSS_demand_snapshot_2022.pdf

⁴⁹ Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M. (2020). The profile and pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey. Australian Council of Social Service. <https://www.acoss.org.au/the-profile-and-pulse-of-the-sector-findings-from-the-2019-australian-community-sector-survey/>

social, financial, and economic costs are significant as seen in the \$3.35 billion cost of the 2022 Queensland and New South Wales flood disaster.⁵⁰ There is a pressing need for a dedicated funding stream to support the enhancement of the community sector's core capabilities, which is a current gap in the government's emergency strategy.

Recommendation 14. Fund development of a comprehensive climate action plan that keeps children, young people and families front and centre. This plan should include funding for climate resilience, emergency planning and response and support for child and family services in the context of climate emergency relief.

Diverse, inclusive and cohesive communities

Placing children at the centre of policy decisions

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive, child-centred policy approach in Australia. Traditionally, service systems have been siloed, generating and implementing policy decisions in different government departments and portfolios without a holistic lens or a lens on impact. To help address this, the Centre proposes the establishment of a federal ministerial portfolio for children, a National Aboriginal Children's Commissioner and the adoption of a Child Impact Assessment Tool.

In late 2023, the Victorian government established a Minister for Children, a significant step which is already contributing to more child-friendly policies. The Centre supports the establishment of a similar dedicated ministerial role at the federal level. Such a role would help generate a more unified, impactful approach to addressing the breadth of challenges that affect children – from child maltreatment to climate change. Additionally, bolstering the National Children's Commissioner's role with the creation of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner would be a positive outcome for First Nations children and young people. Consistent with Government commitments under Closing the Gap and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, the establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner would be an important mechanism for listening to and acting on the voices of children at the national policy level.

Drawing upon existing successful models in New Zealand and Canada, the Australian government could develop and implement a Child Impact Assessment Tool. Such a tool would mandate thorough assessment of likely impact and of potential unintended consequences of all current and proposed laws, policies, programs, or initiatives on children.

Recommendation 15. Establish a national ministerial portfolio for children and appoint a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner to ensure children's perspectives are front and centre of decision making.

Recommendation 16. Develop a Child Impact Assessment Tool to support a more cohesive, effective, and child-centric policy environment in Australia.

⁵⁰ Department of Treasury and Finance Victoria. (2022). Valuing the costs of natural disasters using the life satisfaction approach. Victorian Government. <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/victorias-economic-bulletin/valuing-costs-natural-disasters-using-life-satisfaction-approach>

Supporting First Nations children and young people in care

All Australian governments have committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031, as outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. However, not only is this target not being met, but the disparity is worsening, with Indigenous children now 10.4 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than their non-Indigenous peers.⁵¹ Significant reform and investment in ACCO-led family healing and support are essential if this trend is to be reversed.

Currently, there is a shortage of early support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across Australia. Funding and programs for prevention, family support, and intensive family support services vary widely among states and territories, with a particularly low investment in ACCOs relative to the over-representation in out-of-home care. SNAICC estimates the need for around 130 ACCO providers to offer quality family support and help reduce the number of children being placed in out-of-home care.⁵²

Recommendation 17. Continue investing in proven and promising Aboriginal-led programs and models to close the gaps in education and health outcomes for First Nations children, young people and families and reduce the number of First Nations children being removed from their families and communities.

Early childhood education and care is accessible for all families

The benefits for children attending early childhood education and care services in the year before they begin school is well documented, and these benefits are particularly evident for children experiencing vulnerabilities.⁵³ The government's decision to raise the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to 90 per cent for families earning up to \$80,000 marks a positive step towards more equitable access to early childhood education and care. However, this increase fails to reach the families most in need, who are limited by the current activity test's restrictions on hours eligible for subsidy. Without additional changes to provide more hours for low-income families with fewer than 16 hours of work, study, or training, this policy may intensify current inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes. The Centre advocates for a gradual shift towards a free, universal, high-quality early childhood education and care system.

Recommendation 19. Increase the Child Care Subsidy to 100 per cent for families with low incomes and remove the activity test requirement for families to gain access to this subsidy.

⁵¹ SNAICC. (2023). National Voice for our children. Family Matters Report. p.5. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Family-Matters-Report-2023.pdf>

⁵² SNAICC. (2023). Pre-Budget Submission. p.11. <https://consult.treasury.gov.au/pre-budget-submissions/2023-24/view/624>

⁵³ Victorian Government. (2017). Lifting Our Game. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>

A more equitable and productive society

Easing the financial burden of our foster carers

All Australian jurisdictions have responsibility under different legislative frameworks to care for and protect children at risk of significant harm.⁵⁴ Foster carers are a vital option for children and young people who cannot live safely at home with their parents, providing these children and young people with 24-hour care in their own homes. Currently there is a global shortage of foster carers, particularly in certain geographic areas and for certain groups of children – teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disability/ externalising behaviours/ complex needs.⁵⁵

At the time of writing, there is no recommended national minimum allowance for foster carers in Australia. There is disparity between state and territory allowances, with these payments often being inadequate and, in most cases, leaving foster carers with out-of-pocket expenses.⁵⁶ While the strongest motivation for fostering a child is altruistic rather than financial,⁵⁷ our members work with carers who are consistently out of pocket after paying for their child's educational, health and other expenses. The Centre recommends that the Australian Government establish a national minimum allowance, more closely aligned to the actual costs associated with caring for a child or young person.

The federal government also has at its disposal the means to minimise costs incurred by foster carers. The Centre sees opportunities for cross-government collaboration, using policy levers available to state and federal governments to ease the burdens faced by many carers and children in the current economic environment. Given the growing body of research relating to the barriers to and enablers of implementing a fully professional model of foster care, there would be benefit in the federal government exploring possibilities relating to taxation, OHS, industrial awards, superannuation, and national awards. We ask that the federal government works with the states and territories to determine what national enablers of foster care attraction and retention could be implemented and how foster care might be made more financially viable for carers.

Recommendation 20. Implement a national framework for payments that would address issues of adequacy and equity for all foster carers across Australia and better reflect the actual costs of caring.

Recommendation 21. Explore opportunities to work with the state and territory governments to identify what actions could be taken to reduce the financial burden on foster carers.

⁵⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). Child protection. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-system-in-australia>

⁵⁵ Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. (2023). *Foster carer recruitment and retention in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network.

⁵⁶ Feagan, E. (2021). The true cost of foster and kinship caring in South Australia. Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers SA Inc. p.21. https://cfc-sa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-True-Cost-of-Foster-and-Kinship-Caring-in-South-Australia_EFeagan_2021.pdf

⁵⁷ Smart, J., Muir, S., Hughes, J., Goldsworthy, K., Jones, S., Cuevas-Hewitt, L., & Vale, C. (2022). Identifying strategies to support foster, kinship and permanent carers: Final report. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/Identifying-strategies-better-support-foster-kinship-and-permanent-carers>

Adopt a national approach to support care-experienced students

To increase the number of care leavers who participate in Australian higher education, and to encourage successful course completion, the federal government should commit to the creation of a national database dedicated to tracking the progress of care-experienced students. This policy approach, extending from enrolment through to graduation, has been adopted in England with positive results.⁵⁸ By acknowledging care leavers as a distinct equity group, this database would enable the development of targeted support strategies and policymaking informed by those with lived experience.

In the current landscape, where federal data on care leavers in higher education is limited, the Centre's flagship Raising Expectations program brings together government, universities, TAFEs, and community organisations to support care leavers in their post-secondary educational pathways.⁵⁹ This program was recently evaluated and shows what can be done with a relatively modest budget to improve the life chances of young people who have been removed from their birth families and placed in the care system. The success of this model is evident: over the past seven years, the number of care leavers enrolled in higher and further education in Victoria alone has soared from 45 to over 650 students. The model not only facilitates academic success but also opens doors to meaningful employment opportunities in critical sectors.

The effectiveness of the Raising Expectations initiative and its innovative Game Changers and Level Up Peer Mentoring Programs was recently acknowledged in the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) *Let Us Learn* report.⁶⁰ The CCYP report specifically highlights the impact of these programs. The Level Up program currently receives 18 months of federal funding. A national approach to data collection, combined with the expansion of these successful models, would represent a significant step towards improving the educational and life outcomes for, and with, care-experienced young people across Australia.

Recommendation 22. Invest in the Raising Expectations program to support care-experienced students to access education, employment opportunities, and reach their full potential.

Recommendation 23. Establish a national database which can collect and monitor data on care leaver students, from enrolment to graduate outcomes.

⁵⁸ Harvey, A., Tootell, N. et al. (2022). Success, retention, and completion of care leaver students in Australian higher education. p.8. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Harvey_LaTrobe_Final.pdf

⁵⁹ The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. (2023). Raising Expectations has impact. <https://www.raisingexpectations.com.au/about>

⁶⁰ Commission for Children and Young People. (2023). *Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/let-us-learn/CCYP-Education-inquiry-report-FINAL.pdf>