

Meeting Communiqué - 4 April 2023

The Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG), a subset of the broader Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners and Guardians network, met in Brisbane on 4 April 2023. Over the course of the meeting, members discussed and agreed their priorities for collective advocacy in 2023.

The meeting commenced with a Welcome to Country from Aunty Debbie Sandy, together with her children and grandchildren.

The Success with Attitude organisation then presented on their work to reframe how young people see themselves and engage in positive thinking.

Members shared recent jurisdictional achievements and activities, including advocacy action on behalf of Australian children and young people especially those in child protection or youth justice systems, experiencing homelessness, or struggling with cost of living. Emerging issues were also raised, prompting shared learnings and discussion about collective opportunities for advocacy.

Members reaffirmed their commitment to promote and protect the safety, wellbeing and rights of children and young people in Australia. The ACCG members discussed alignment between their advocacy priorities, and those of the First Nations Caucus, and agreed to adopt the 11 key priorities of the Caucus for 2023:

1. Advocate for, and support the introduction of, a National Commissioner to advance the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people across Australia, in collaboration with jurisdictional first nations Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates. Alongside this, we will also promote the need for consistency of independence, powers and commensurate resourcing for dedicated Commissioners and Guardians for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in each jurisdiction.
2. Lend our authority in the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart including discussions about a Voice to Parliament and make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's voices heard.
3. Influence the Closing the Gap agenda at a national and jurisdictional level on relevant targets concerning children, young people, and families; ensuring that we lend our legislative powers to leverage systemic change for better outcomes.
4. Support a strengthening of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector that is equitably resourced to design and lead child protection and youth justice responses for our children and families, and develop culturally appropriate models to improve family-led decision making at the community level.
5. Implement a nationally consistent approach to monitoring over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in child protection and youth justice systems, applying Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles.
6. Commit to ongoing advocacy to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years nationally highlighting that detention in youth and adult facilities or watchhouses is harmful and re-traumatising to children and young people, can increase criminogenic behaviours, is inhumane, and deprives children and young people of their basic rights.

7. Advocate to end harmful and inhumane practices that violate the human rights of children and young people detained, including solitary confinement, the use of spit hoods and detention in adult facilities.
8. Monitor the interpretation and application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, with a particular focus on consistency of approach on a national basis. Primacy must be placed on the preservation and reunification of families to prevent children being removed, including babies taken from hospital and birthing units, and being placed with non-Indigenous carers and in residential care facilities.
9. Raise the visibility of missing children and young people, including those who are self-selecting or self-placing from child protection systems and advocate for a nationally consistent approach in how we identify and publicly report on these children and young people.
10. Promote the difference between poverty and wilful neglect, highlighting that poor families love their children too. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing poverty are reluctant to seek help when the consequence is often removal of their children.
11. Advocate for greater investment in support services for vulnerable and impoverished families, highlighting that structural disadvantage, prejudice, systemic discrimination and diminished support services exacerbate the marginalisation of impoverished families and lead to increased levels of child removal.

Members discussed the findings of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), noting it as a landmark study with profound implications for Australia. Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates agreed to promote and advocate for actions to address the issues identified in the research.

Members discussed their views on their role during the Voice Referendum and noted the importance of children and young people having a say despite not being able to vote. Members agreed that we have a role in raising public awareness of the issues and protecting children's exposure to narrative that may include discriminatory or racist views and language.

The meeting was attended by the following Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates:

- Jodie Griffiths-Cook, Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner (ACT)
- Barbara Causon, Aboriginal Children's Advocate (ACT)
- Anne Hollonds, National Children's Commissioner (Cth)
- Zoë Robinson, Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW)
- Stephen Kinmond OAM, NSW Children's Guardian (NSW)
- Nicole Hucks, Children's Commissioner (NT)
- Luke Twyford, Commissioner (Qld)
- Natalie Lewis, Commissioner (Qld)
- April Lawrie, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (SA)
- Shona Reid, Guardian for Children and Young People (SA)
- Leanne McLean, Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tas)
- Liana Buchanan, Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People (Vic)
- Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA)