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australia

NATIONAL COMMISSION OF AUDIT

**Submission to the Treasury and the
Department of Finance**

FAMILIES AUSTRALIA

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About Families Australia

With 600 member organisations around Australia, Families Australia is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation that works at the national level to promote family wellbeing.

Families Australia focuses especially on seeking policy solutions to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised families and individuals.

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Summary

This submission addresses the importance of an ongoing Federal Government leadership role, in conjunction with the community services sector, on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, Australia's first-ever plan to tackle the problems of child abuse and neglect.

1. Introduction

Families Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the National Commission of Audit. Established in 2001, Families Australia is Australia's national peak body representing and promoting the needs and interests of families. On behalf of 600 member organisations, it works to improve national-level policies and programs relating to families. Families Australia's member organisations operate in a diverse range of fields, such as community and family support work, program management, disability, research, children's services, counselling, and youth work.

2. Issues

Over the past decade, all Federal Governments have played a strong leadership role in efforts to tackle Australia's current appalling rates of child abuse and neglect. In the mid-2000s, the Federal Government responded to Senate reports on child protection and children's institutions (three reports were issued between 2004 and 2009) and to child safety concerns in the Northern Territory (Babington, 2011; Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, 2005, 2009).

In 2009, all Federal, State and Territory Governments agreed to establish the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 (the 'National Framework'). The National Framework was to be a twelve year plan for tackling child safety and wellbeing; and, it was to achieve 'a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia over time' (COAG, 2009). The National Framework is an overarching mechanism, supported by governments at all levels. It contains high-level commitments to develop a comprehensive framework based on a public health concept that emphasises prevention and early intervention measures, as well as intensive family support and services targeted at the most vulnerable families and children.

Under the National Framework, the role of the Federal Government is defined as supporting and helping to strengthen jurisdictional and community service efforts, to achieve the shared goal that Australian children have a safe, healthy and happy childhood (Australian Government, 2009). The Federal Government was clear from the outset that it did not intend to duplicate roles played by States and

Territories, and the community sector always envisioned a clear demarcation in roles and responsibilities between all levels of government on these matters. These demarcations remain in place. States and Territories, rightly, have responsibility under their respective laws, for the day-to-day handling of child protection matters. Under the National Framework, the role of the Federal Government was defined as supporting and helping to strengthen jurisdictional efforts by helping to build greater community awareness about the challenges, to support innovative child and family related practices, and build greater consistency in approaches to helping children and families.

There have been considerable achievements under the National Framework to date in setting new standards, promoting innovation, and raising awareness. Federal leadership and investment in the National Framework is important in helping to overcome the inconsistencies and unequal treatment accorded to children and their carers across State and Territory jurisdictions. The development of the first ever National Standards for Out-of-Home Care (2011) represents a major advance in generating greater consistency across the nation (Australian Government, 2011), particularly for children and young people in foster care and residential care settings.

Significant advances have also been made to encourage and recognise innovative child and family-related practices, for example, through the 'Building Capacity, Building Bridges' project and the national Child Aware Approaches initiative, including the inaugural Child Aware Approaches Conference in 2013, which have contributed to improved service integration and collaboration as well as identifying innovative approaches to seemingly intractable social issues. Finally, the National Framework is helping to create greater awareness about child safety and wellbeing. The appointment of Australia's first National Children's Commissioner was an important direct outcome of the National Framework.

These achievements have been made possible by high-level collaboration established between all Federal, State and Territory governments, and the community and research sectors as represented by the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children. The Coalition comprises over 120 major non-government community service organisations and prominent academics and is a cost-effective way of marshalling the views of the entire community sector in fields such as health, social services and education to assist governments in designing and

implementing the range of measures encompassed in the National Framework (coordinated by Families Australia) (Coalition, 2013).

It is important to note that the National Framework has the full support of all State and Territory governments who also look to the Federal Government to continue to play a leading catalytic and coordinating role in this important area of social policy. All Federal political parties have indicated support for the principles underlying the National Framework. The current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is in many ways a companion Federal policy response to the issues of child abuse and neglect, and one that also signifies the importance of Federal Government leadership.

Such a Federal Government leadership role has been viewed by governments and the community and research sectors as being not only socially, but fiscally, responsible. Failure to effectively address present-day problems of child abuse and neglect, which are driven proximally by substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence problems, inevitably leads to greater, and reducible, burdens on taxpayer funded Federal universal support systems, in particular, in health, social welfare and education. The 'down-stream' financial effects of failing to address problems such as child abuse early have major financial implications later on for all governments. We know, for example, in the case of those abused in institutions that they impose a disproportionately higher financial burden on taxpayer funded health systems compared with other population cohorts. The provision of greater support to carers of children in the out-of-home care system is another instance where Federal involvement is valuable: by providing greater assistance to foster and other carers, there is greater likelihood that they will remain engaged, or seek to re-engage, in employment, thus adding to the nation's net economic productivity while adding important social capital.

3. Conclusion

This brief submission has outlined the vital coordinating and leadership role played by the Federal Government, as well as the community sector, in making a fundamental change in the way that child abuse and neglect is addressed in Australia. We strongly commend the Federal Government to remain a lead player in this important policy field in the future. Experience after four years strongly indicates that the National Framework is on-track: it remains conceptually sound; it is delivering in important areas; and it offers a robust and achievable vision for the nation.

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