

2020

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STATEMENT

**A Step up for Our Kids –
Snapshot Report April 2020**

**Presented by
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I am pleased to present the latest progress report on *A Step Up for Our Kids* Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020 (the Strategy), the fifth update since April 2018.

The Strategy aims to improve outcomes for children and young people in out of home care by providing more flexible, child focused services; and to reduce demand for out of home care places.

The Snapshot Report is one of a range of reporting and evaluation mechanisms that the ACT Government uses to monitor implementation of the Strategy. The report has point-in-time data on service demand, performance of the out of home care system and comparisons between reporting periods since July 2016.

The Snapshot Report has three full years of data being 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19 and the first half of 2019-20. This means we are in a better position to identify trends, or short-term fluctuations, and to continue improving the system response.

The headline measures in this Snapshot Report include:

- the number of children and young people entering care in that quarter;
- the number of children and young people exiting care;
- a comparison of the number of children being case managed by ACT Together and Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) to monitor service capacity and indicate the number of children on short-term orders versus long-term orders;
- the type of placements children are in at that time and the number of children in each placement type;
- the number of Enduring Parental Responsibility Orders and Adoptions completed;
- the number of newly approved carers and number of carers exiting; and
- the number of children and young people supported through prevention programs not entering care within six and 12 months of support commencing.

It is important to note that the data is internal operational data that can be updated and changed between reporting periods, and caution should be exercised when using and interpreting data in this report and comparing between reporting periods.

An important caveat to this particular update relates to the launch of Children, Youth and Families' new record management system, known as the Child and Youth Record Information System (CYRIS) on 1 October 2019. As a result of this transition some of the data could not be reliably updated for number of newly approved carers and number of carers exiting for these quarters for this report. These figures will be included in subsequent Snapshot Reports.

Reform and cultural change take time. A Step Up for Our Kids aims to create generational change, to break cycles of intergenerational harm, and improve long-term outcomes for families, children and young people. A key focus of the Strategy has been the investment in intensive parenting and family preservation supports. The data presented in this Snapshot Report shows that we continue to see positive progress in this area.

This Snapshot Report highlights the following:

- the new entries into care in the first half of 2019-20 have been at the same level as in the first half of 2018-19. That is 53 children entering care between July and December 2019 and similarly between July and December 2018. This was a decrease compared to 83 in the same period 2017 and 111 in the same period 2016.
- We continue to see a lower number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people represented 11 per cent of those entering care in the first half of the year. This compares with 13 per cent in the same period in 2018-19, 35 per cent in the same period 2017-18 and 32 per cent in the same period 2016-17. What this means in terms of numbers is six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care in the first half of 2019-20. This compares with 7 in the same period 2018-19, 29 in the same period 2017-18 and 35 in the same period 2016-17.

I am becoming more confident that this data does indicate we are making genuine progress on the challenge, and imperative, of reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out of home care.

We also continue to see an increase in the number of children and young people who were supported through prevention services and did not enter care.

Prevention services were one of the new investments introduced under the Strategy to keep children and young people with their families where it is safe to do so.

Between 1 July and 31 December 2018, consent was provided for 56 children and young people to commence in a Uniting prevention service. Of the 56 children and young people, 45 did not enter care within 12 months. This compares with 39 of 42 children and young people in the preceding 12 months.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people engaged with Uniting prevention services and not entering care within 12 months of consent being provided has also increased.

As at 31 December 2019, all 18 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who had consent provided to engage with Uniting services did not enter care within 12 months of support commencing. In the same period of in 2018, six out of seven children and young people remained home after 12 months. A long-term trend cannot be extrapolated from these numbers as they are small from a statistical perspective, however, represent improved outcomes for these children and their families.

Since the introduction of A Step Up for Our Kids, we have also established new supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families aimed at reducing the number of children entering care.

With the slow-down and what appears to be stabilising number of entries, the total number of children and young people in out of home care has decreased from the peak of 829 at the end of 2017-18 and stabilised around 810 children and young people since the end of 2018-19.

The majority of children and young people in out of home care continue to be children and young people on long-term orders (84 per cent).

The data on placement type continues to show that more than half of all children and young people in care are placed with their kin.

The majority of children and young people in residential care (91 per cent) are aged 12 and above. A key priority area for ACT Together and CYPS is to continue to work together to reduce the number of children and young people in residential care.

A total of seven Enduring Parental Responsibility Orders from out of home care were completed in the first half of 2019-20. ACT Together and CYPS continue to work to progress Enduring Parental Responsibility assessments for children and their carers where this is

considered to be the best way to achieve permanency. The final decision to make such an order is made by the Childrens Court.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care of the Director-General was 195 as at 31 December 2019 compared to 220 children as at 31 December 2018.

As at 31 December 2019, 181 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had a cultural plan in place. This is 93 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care of the Director-General.

CYPS remains committed to ensuring quality cultural plans are in place. The cultural plan has recently been improved through broad consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and input from members of the “Ngura Naraganabang” (Safety in the Pouch) advisory committee. The cultural plan has a strong emphasis on consultation with the child or young person and aligns with the participation, partnership and connection elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. A step by step procedure and practice guide to support staff to develop and maintain a cultural plan has also been developed.

The highlights from the Snapshot Report show that the rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are entering care has slowed. However, I remain acutely aware of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system and remain committed to driving change in this area.

In 2017, I announced an independent review into the circumstances of each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and young person involved in the child protection system, including those in out of home care. On 17 December 2019, the *Our Booris, Our Way* Steering Committee released their final report, and I wish to again personally acknowledge the work of the Steering Committee and everyone involved.

The *Our Booris, Our Way* Steering Committee provided 15 recommendations throughout the review period prior to the release of their final report in December 2019. A total of 28 recommendations were identified in the final report that has brought about a start of significant change to child protection, specifically the role culture and family connection plays in supporting and meeting the needs of a child, young person or their family when involved with child protection in the ACT.

The Community Services Directorate (CSD) has provided quarterly progress reports on the commencement and progress of work in response to the Steering Committee interim recommendations. The copies of *Our Booris, Our Way* reports and the progress reports are available on the Strong Families website.

In previous reports presented to the Assembly in April and October 2019, I spoke to the work the Directorate is doing to respond to the Committee's interim recommendations. These included engaging a designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Practice Leader and policy officer to support the CYPS to implement and embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle into policy and practice.

As part of the ACT Governments ongoing commitment to reducing the over-representation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, I am pleased to advise that CSD:

- Continues to support staff to undertake the CYPS Cultural Development Program. The Program is core training running over a three-month period, combining six face-to-face activities and utilising online training program developed by Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. CYPS has committed to a target of 80 per cent of case managers undertaking the Program within their first year of employment.
- Engaged two designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training officers to support the development and delivery of the Cultural Development Program.
- Finalised the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles Practice Guide for CYPS staff.
- Engaged SNAICC and Curijo to undertake training for CYPS staff on implementing and embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle into practice. This training will now form part of the core training program for CYPS.
- Established the "Safety in the Pouch" advisory committee comprising internal and external stakeholders to provide advice in relation to policy and resource development when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth, families and communities.

- Developed the e-learning on Finding Kin through a cultural lens as part of a small Finding Family Project. The launch of CYRIS as mentioned earlier will support case managers with the early identification of kin for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Continues its commitment to increasing all staff's cultural proficiency through the delivery of cultural safety masterclass by Associate Professor Richard Frankland, and viewing the documentaries including "After the Apology" and "the Final Quarter".

On 30 January 2020, SNAICC completed its annual review of the progress of all states and territories in implementing the full intent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. SNAICC's report acknowledges the efforts made in the ACT with the comment that "Child and Youth Protection Services...has demonstrated significant recent engagement with improving compliance with elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle".

Alongside the important work being progressed through the *Our Booris, Our Way* review, the Government has initiated Family Group Conferencing and Functional Family Therapy, key programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Both of these programs invest further in intensive parenting and family preservation support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

From the commencement of the Family Group Conferencing program in November 2017, up to 24 February 2020:

- 38 families have been involved in a family group conference, involving 82 children. That is, 38 families making decisions about how to keep their children safe;
- 53 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have not subsequently entered care following a Family Group Conference; and
- for the remaining 29 children, decisions about the best care arrangements, other than with birth families, have been made by the extended family.

The partnership between Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation and OzChild continues to deliver the Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at risk of ongoing involvement with the child protection system.

The aim of the program is to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care through interventions that strengthen families and communities.

Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare specifically targets families with children and young people aged 0-17 at risk of entering the out of home care system and to support reunification. Gugan Gulwan and OzChild commenced taking referrals at the end of 2018. As at the end of December 2019, the program was working with 30 families. The ACT Government has committed to ongoing funding to Gugan Gulwan and OzChild to increase capacity within the program over the next three years.

CSD remains committed to the monitoring and measurement of long-term outcomes of A Step-up for Our Kids. The Directorate continues to work on the key recommendations provided by the Mid-Strategy Evaluation report to identify implications for the ongoing implementation of the Strategy and areas for further development. Preparation has also commenced for the post-strategy evaluation at the end of the five-year term in December 2020.

As part of a best practice approach in preparation for the post-strategy evaluation, Children, Youth and Families has commenced a joint initiative with Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (CMTEDD) that supports building internal evaluation capability. CMTEDD has engaged Dr George Argyrous, Education and Research Manager, University of Technology Sydney to undertake a mentoring project for the Strategy evaluation.

Mentoring will provide a mix of activities including face-to-face workshops, advice on refining the existing evaluation framework for the post-strategy evaluation, evaluation tools as well as approaches that the ACT Public Service can use.

Children, Youth and Families is also working closely with partner agencies to ensure the post-strategy evaluation will contain qualitative data to provide more in-depth understanding of people's experiences of the service system.

I acknowledge the importance of *A Step Up for Our Kids* to the Canberra community and will continue updating the community on the ongoing reform of the out of home care system.