

ACCG Meeting Communiqué

15 and 16 November 2017
Melbourne, Victoria

The Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG) comprises national, state and territory children and young people commissioners, guardians and advocates.

The ACCG aims to promote and protect the safety, wellbeing and rights of children and young people in Australia. The ACCG strives to ensure that the best interests of children and young people are considered in public policy and program development across Australia. The ACCG:

- promotes the rights of children and young people, including their right to participate in decisions relating to them, as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- ensures the best interests of children are considered in the development of policies and programs;
- gives voice to the views of, and encourages direct consultation with, children and young people on matters that affect them; and
- encourages systemic improvement, informed by evidence-based research, in areas that impact on the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people.

The ACCG met in Melbourne, Victoria on 15 and 16 November 2017. Members warmly welcomed four recently appointed commissioners and guardians to the group, and the return of the New Zealand Children's Commissioner as an observer.

This was the last meeting for Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Andrew Jackomos PSM. Members gave thanks to and acknowledged the significant work done by Mr Jackomos, who was Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and who has advocated tirelessly for Aboriginal children and families in Victoria across a range of service systems. The value of his role is demonstrated by the fact that in his final presentation to the ACCG, Mr Jackomos advised that Victoria has recently recorded for the first time more Aboriginal children being returned to their families than entering out home care.

Discussions continued to focus on issues relevant to the ACCG's key priorities, which were developed at the May 2017 meeting. Members affirmed their commitment to these priorities.

Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

A clear theme in the meeting was that self-determination leads to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Members heard from Muriel Bamblett AM, CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Raylene Harradine PSM, CEO of Bendigo District Aboriginal Corporation about the transfer of guardianship for Aboriginal children in child protection to Aboriginal community controlled organisations. The presentation highlighted the benefits for Aboriginal children and families when they are cared for by their own community and maintain connection to culture and Country.

Members also heard from Mallee District Aboriginal Service (MDAS) about their Bumps to Babes and Beyond program, a parenting program developed to respond to the particular needs of the Aboriginal

community in Mildura. Staff from MDAS advised the ACCG that no families who have participated in the program have had children permanently removed from the care of their parents. The program's positive results highlight the value of Aboriginal controlled and led organisations intervening early to support Aboriginal children and families.

A presentation from Natalie Lewis, co-chair of the National Family Matters Campaign and CEO of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protection Peak, also highlighted the importance of Aboriginal led responses to reducing the disproportionate disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia and to address the vast and increasing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection.

Promoting children and young people's engagement and participation

Members affirmed their commitment to ensuring that the voices of children and young people are actively sought and taken into account. Since the last meeting of the ACCG in May 2017, many ACCG members have undertaken significant work engaging and consulting with children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, about a range of issues including safety online, bullying, schooling and education, ending violence against children and young people, homelessness, their experiences of child protection and youth justice, and their hopes for the future.

Upholding the rights of children and young people in youth justice detention

Relevant members endorsed a position statement on conditions and treatment in youth justice detention. The position statement articulates a set of positions ACCG members consider should guide improvements and national consistency in the conditions and treatment of children and young people in youth justice detention.

Improving the safety of children and young people in organisations

Megan Mitchell, the National Children's Commissioner, presented on the draft National Statement of Principles for Child Safe Organisations (the Principles), which were endorsed by community service ministers across federal, state and territory jurisdictions in October 2017. The Principles take a child-rights, strength-based approach, and are designed to be applied in a wide range of organisational settings.

Senior representatives from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse (Child Abuse Royal Commission) presented to ACCG members about the Child Abuse Royal Commission's processes and the upcoming delivery of the report to the Governor-General. Members are looking forward to the release of the Child Abuse Royal Commission report, and to working together following its release to ensure the work of the Child Abuse Royal Commission results in lasting benefits for children and young people.

Ending violence against children and young people

Karen Flanagan, Child Protection Advocate from Save the Children and Dr Bernadette Saunders from Monash University briefed ACCG members on the impact of physically punishing children, the current state of the law in Australia, reforms in overseas jurisdictions to prevent the use of physical punishment against children and addressing this form of violence through education, awareness raising and positive parenting support.

Promoting children and young people's safety and wellbeing

Members discussed work completed by South Australia's Guardian for Children and Young People regarding the principles and essential characteristics of therapeutic residential care and agreed to draw on this work in their own jurisdictions and as part of developments at a national level.

Members also heard from the Australian Centre for Child Protection, which has been commissioned to conduct a project to identify the core components of evidence-based practice in child protection. The research completed to date shows there are some clear and concerning gaps in Australian and international frameworks for child protection practice, particularly in relation to culturally safe and appropriate ways of

working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Members expressed their continuing support for the research project and will discuss further in May 2018.

The next meeting of the ACCG will be held in Perth in May 2018.

