

# A BLUEPRINT FOR A NATIONAL CHILDREN'S PLAN

## Policy Briefing

### Key points:

- 1 Children's rights, interests and needs should be central in our society.
- 2 Children should be a primary focus in all government policies and actions that affect them
- 3 Childhood is a unique opportunity to set the foundations for positive lifelong outcomes
- 4 Early investment in children produces significant individual, social and economic benefits for society as a whole
- 5 A National Children's Plan would establish a clear vision for children in Australia and a practical roadmap to achieve it
- 6 The Plan would establish a long-term and comprehensive framework for how governments organise all policies, services, investments and decisions that affect children
- 7 The Plan would aim to ensure that all children in Australia can fully exercise their rights and develop to their fullest potential
- 8 The Plan would drive a fundamental shift in how childhood is viewed, so that children's views are respected and their strengths and ability to shape their own lives are valued and capitalised upon
- 9 The Plan could underpin a society-wide approach to shifting disadvantage and promoting wellbeing, including intergenerationally
- 10 Children themselves would be at the centre of the Plan in every sense, and would participate meaningfully at every stage of the Plan's development and implementation
- 11 There are practical steps that Australian governments can and should take towards developing such a Plan

This Blueprint describes the value and need for a National Children's Plan. It outlines the key elements of such a Plan and the steps required to create and implement the Plan. It is intended as a resource for governments, civil society and everyone who is interested in improving children's outcomes and protecting, promoting and fulfilling children's rights in Australia.

This Blueprint has been developed by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce. The Taskforce is the peak body for child rights in Australia and includes over 100 organisations and individuals with expertise in children's rights.

For a short summary version of this Blueprint, please visit <http://childrightstaskforce.org.au/>.

For more information on the Blueprint, please contact Howard Choo, Save the Children & 54 reasons ([howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au](mailto:howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au)) or John Livingstone, UNICEF Australia ([jlivingstone@unicef.org.au](mailto:jlivingstone@unicef.org.au)).

## A. Policy context – the value and need for a National Children’s Plan

Every child in Australia should have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential and thrive. To enable this, children must have access to the conditions and standards of living that they need to grow and develop healthily throughout their childhood, from birth to age 18. This extends well beyond the material basics. To fully flourish and be able to participate in their communities and in the economy across their lives, children should be valued, respected, supported, included, and have their views heard and taken seriously.

These basic entitlements, and others required to support them, are rights that all children possess. Promoting those rights should be a paramount purpose for our society.

For many children, Australia is one of the best countries in the world to grow up in. When we provide children with the support they need to thrive, children and society more broadly benefit. Well-established evidence, across diverse fields of biomedical science, social sciences, economics and public policy research, shows the value of setting children up with the best foundation possible for life.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which enshrines children’s rights, is the most ratified treaty in the world because there is a near global consensus on the importance of childhood. Childhood should be a time of curiosity, exploration, optimism, discovery and hope – for individual children and for society as a whole. A period of life where our best selves and highest hopes are nurtured and realised.

Yet, for many children and communities across Australia, this promise is not being met.

Persistently and unacceptably high numbers of children in Australia live in poverty (1 in 6 of all children), reach school developmentally vulnerable (1 in 5 of all children), and experience the dire consequences of our failing child protection and youth justice systems (nearly 180,000 children receive child protection services each year, while over 9000 children are under youth justice supervision each year with many more in other contact with the criminal justice system).

Significant – and, by many measures, growing – socio-economic inequality divides our nation, with intergenerational disadvantage entrenched in many communities.

These harms are felt inequitably. Most shamefully, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be disproportionately removed from their families (10 times more likely than other children), in contact with the criminal justice system, and incarcerated (18 times as likely as other children).

Despite significant effort over many decades, existing systems continue to reinforce these challenges. In policy, budgets and services, children are consistently overlooked, dealt with in responses designed primarily for adults, or responded to through uncoordinated and fragmented approaches that do not recognise or respect their actual experiences and needs. It remains commonly assumed that child development is best supported through a purely protective approach that emphasises children’s vulnerability rather than by meaningfully supporting children’s agency, participation and rights – an outmoded assumption long discredited as erroneous.

## There is an opportunity for a fundamental shift in how we value childhood

The challenges for children and their rights in Australia are long-standing, as described on the previous page, but they are solvable if we:



Governments have the opportunity and the responsibility to drive this fundamental shift in how children – and childhood – are understood, approached and invested in across Australia. This will require a clear shared commitment and coordinated action at a national level. The natural vehicle for such action is a National Children's Plan.

A National Children's Plan would:

- Establish a clear vision for children and childhood in Australia
- Provide a long-term, comprehensive and overarching framework for all policy and decision-making that affects children
- Drive an unwavering focus on children and their rights, and enabling all children to thrive in childhood and throughout their lives
- Shape how governments organise all policies, services, investments and decisions affecting children, whether those effects are indirect or direct
- Set out clear policy and investment commitments and implementation plans to ensure these commitments are translated to effective action.

The Plan would centre, and take as its starting point, children themselves – not existing ways of doing things or discredited assumptions about childhood and children's experiences of their lives. It would be squarely grounded in child rights and child development, and the insights from those bodies of knowledge about the importance of:

- Focusing on children themselves, rather than treating them as adjuncts to adults or 'adults in waiting'
- Understanding children holistically and in the contexts of their ecologies – their families, schools, communities, and broader contexts
- Recognising and valuing the crucial role of families as children's first and best advocates, supporters and teachers
- Coordinated approaches to addressing underlying causes and changing systems that shape children's outcomes and lives
- Ensuring the availability of accessible, integrated and, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, culturally safe services and supports that respond to individual circumstances and needs.

Critically, the Plan would be deeply and directly informed by children themselves. It would reflect children's own experiences and views on what will make a difference for their development in services, supports and material conditions.

## **A National Children's Plan can underpin a society-wide focus on wellbeing**

A National Children's Plan would address the individual, social and economic dimensions of childhood, including the macro forces and structures that shape and determine children's experiences and outcomes in childhood and throughout their lives. It would explicitly encompass an intergenerational lens.

By connecting a clear vision for childhood in Australia with a comprehensive plan for achieving it, a National Children's Plan could make Australia a world leader.

By focusing on underlying causes and structural and systemic issues, the Plan would establish the cross-portfolio and multidisciplinary arrangements needed to promote children's wellbeing and flourishing, prevent harm before it arises, intervene early where required, and support and build on children's and communities' strengths – rather than responding and intervening only late, at or after the point of crisis.

By putting children at its centre, the Plan could enable the voices, experiences and perspectives of children themselves to be at the heart of all decisions made about them, bringing their lived experiences and expertise in their own lives to the fore. In giving effect to children's right to be heard and taken seriously, and to shape their own lives, the Plan would directly enhance children's wellbeing and enable better policy-making and more effective implementation.

The Plan could also underpin a collective approach by Australian governments to breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and harm, and driving a whole-of-society focus on equity and wellbeing.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new economic and political reality and a fundamental shift in how on which our society operates. Australia is not immune from these global forces, and in some respects is particularly affected by them. COVID-19 has made it clearer than ever that traditional approaches do not suffice, especially in the context of the extraordinary technological and environmental changes also underway – the existential threat of climate change foremost among these. As always, those facing the greatest existing disadvantage have been hardest hit, increasing the already significant inequality that persists in Australia.

As we move into an increasingly post COVID-19 world, cost of living pressures, an emerging mental health crisis, and the ongoing effects of the educational disruption caused by the pandemic will continue shaping the experiences and outcomes of a generation. A comprehensive and fully joined-up response is required to meet the needs of families and children in the face of these challenges.

In this context, a National Children's Plan would provide a vision and roadmap for Australian society as a whole. It would enable the realisation of the enormous and compounding human, civic and economic benefits of early investment, prevention of harm, and targeted early intervention for greater collective wellbeing. Ultimately it would provide the pathway to improved quality of life and prosperity in all their dimensions for all members of our society – a truly transformative change for this and future generations.

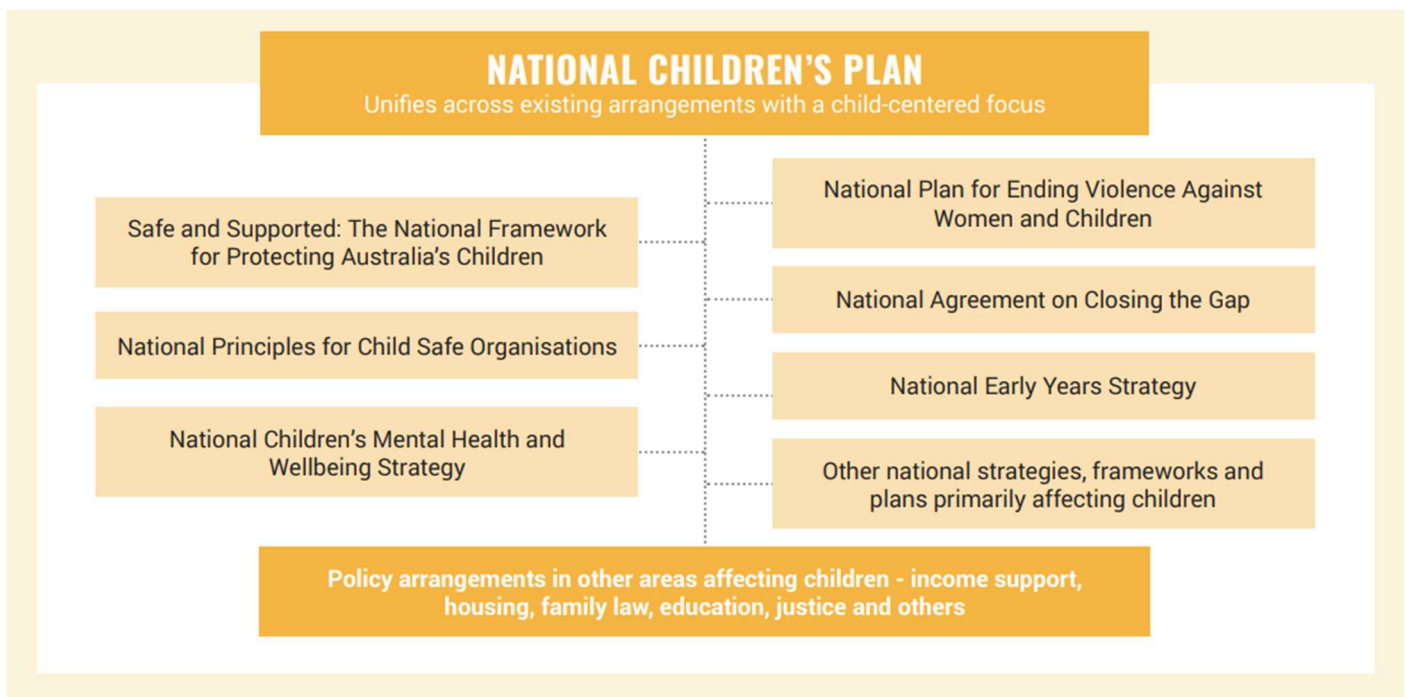


## A unified national vision and plan for children

A National Children's Plan would provide a long-term and comprehensive plan for protecting, promoting and fulfilling children's rights in Australia, extending for at least 10 years.

The Plan would establish overall outcomes, priorities, and accountabilities in relation to children, supported by specific investment, action plans and oversight.

A National Children's Plan would provide an overall vision to unify the various existing and forthcoming national plans, frameworks, strategies and agreements relating to children. The Plan would also connect – and fill the gaps between – those existing arrangements. It would create a cohesive, coordinated and joined-up system that is organised around children. It would unify what is currently a siloed set of arrangements organised around jurisdictional responsibilities, departmental portfolios, and existing service delivery structures.



It would achieve this in three key ways, which existing national arrangements are not delivering. It would:

1. Be child-centred above all else and genuinely underpinned by a child rights approach, and therefore truly holistic and focused in its response to children, as well as meaningful in its engagement with children's voices, perspectives and experiences. This would extend to the outcomes that the Plan prioritises.
2. Illuminate and address underlying causes, and structural and systemic issues, providing the impetus for a genuine shift to prevention and early intervention that is widely recognised as the best, and most cost-efficient way to achieve better outcomes, but rarely realised.
3. Adopt a comprehensive and practical approach to implementation and action, recognising that too often there is an enormous gap between the stated aspirations of government plans for children and the reality of how they are implemented.

For State and Territory governments, the Plan would provide the vehicle for coordinated effort and joint investment by all levels of government. It would connect disparate policy, service delivery and funding levers that are critical to addressing root causes and enabling systems change:

- Across jurisdictions, recognising the different roles and responsibilities of the Federal, State and Territory governments while highlighting their shared objectives and interests, and opportunities for collaboration, coordinated investment and shared accountability for relevant outcomes
- Across portfolios, including connecting portfolios that are not usually thought of as 'children's portfolios', including social security, income support, housing and economic portfolios to the large, State-run service systems directly affecting and dealing with children
- Through levers that are commonly underutilised or tacitly treated as 'too hard' to use to their full potential, such as those relating to workforces, data, and oversight and accountability.

## B. Objectives of a National Children’s Plan

The overall objectives of a National Children’s Plan would be to:

1. Ensure all children aged up to 18 years in Australia understand and can fully access and enjoy all of their rights, as enshrined in the CRC and other human rights standards
2. Promote the wellbeing and safety of all children in Australia, enabling them to develop and thrive to their fullest potential
3. Through its implementation, both begin and outline a clear pathway to comprehensively incorporating the CRC into Australian policy and law and meet Australia’s other international human rights obligations relating to children.

## C. Children’s involvement and participation in a National Children’s Plan

Children would be meaningfully and actively involved in all elements of a National Children’s Plan. This includes the Plan’s development, implementation, governance, monitoring and evaluation.

The meaningful involvement of children in the National Plan is more than just the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. Policies designed in consultation with those they are made for are more tailored to need and fit-for-purpose, producing better outcomes, improving efficiency, and saving resources.

At all points, children’s involvement needs to be meaningful, safe, and supported by appropriate resourcing. It should not be tokenistic. There should be clarity at each stage about the extent of children’s participation and influence, taking into account children’s evolving capacities, and with explicit discussion of the potential for change and limitations on influence arising from their involvement.

There would be a focus on enabling participation that is representative and reflective of the diversity of children and their experiences in Australia. In particular, this should include children who are commonly marginalised and whose experiences are typically not represented in processes such as these.

This would include children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability of various kinds, and particular challenges in accessing their rights. It would include children who experience significant challenges in sharing their views, and being heard, such as those living with disability or working through trauma. It would also include younger children – preschool and primary school aged – with appropriate mechanisms in place to support their meaningful involvement.

Achieving this will require:

- A commitment to, and investment in, the specialist expertise required to genuinely engage children in the ways needed for two-way learning
- Structured involvement of trusted adults in children’s communities to enable engagement by children facing barriers to participation
- Involvement by the relevant expert institutions and organisations in Australia, including in the non-government sector, State and Territory Children’s Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates, and the National Children’s Commissioner
- A national roll-out of education on children’s rights to adult stakeholders, creating common ground on the expectations around children’s rights and the meaningful and ethical participation of children from a rights perspective.



## D. Principles underpinning a National Children’s Plan

A National Children’s Plan would be grounded in a small number of overarching principles reflecting a child rights framework.

The principles would be based on the CRC, including the four general principles of the CRC itself – freedom from discrimination (article 2), the best interests principle (article 3), the right to life, survival and development (article 6) and the right to be heard (article 12) – in the context of the overriding purpose of implementing the CRC as a whole in Australia.

The principles would also be shaped by other key human rights statements, especially the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and reflect a contemporary understanding of child development and wellbeing, as well as children’s own perspectives on what is most important to them.

The principles could include:



### 1. Decisions and actions affecting children are truly child-centred and in children’s best interests.

This means:

- Ensuring all actions affecting children take children themselves as the starting point – their rights, interests, experiences and priorities, including the right to develop to their fullest potential
- Ensuring children’s best interests are a primary consideration in all actions that affect them, with the concept of ‘best interests’ understood in a way that is not paternalistic or welfarist
- Developing transparent and objective processes to assess children’s best interests in all decisions made by authorities that affect the children
- Understanding children ecologically, in the context of their families, communities and cultures
- Understanding children and their development holistically, which requires adopting interdisciplinary and cross-portfolio approaches
- Addressing the deepest underlying causes of harm to children, including entrenched poverty, racism, intergenerational trauma, and the continuing legacy and impact of colonisation and dispossession on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Departing from the status quo – radically where required – in order to respond to children’s holistic developmental and wellbeing needs, through accessible, integrated, culturally safe and child-friendly services, systems and strategies.

### 2. Children are recognised as inherently equally worthy to adults and as agents in their own lives.

This means:

- Recognising and supporting children’s right to participate in decisions about them, from decisions affecting them individually to state and national policy-making
- Recognising and respecting children as active subjects with distinct rights and interests
- Recognising the intrinsic worth and value of children and childhood in their own right, not just as a period leading up to adulthood

- Being accountable to children for decisions affecting them
- Engaging and communicating directly with children about issues that matter to them, with a two-way flow of information that recognises children's expertise and stake in the issues
- Recognising children as experts in their own experience with rights and evolving capacities and acting accordingly, and avoiding seeing children primarily as vulnerable objects of action and decisions made by others who require protection or 'intervention'.

### **3. All children are guaranteed access to the same rights without discrimination on any basis.**

This means:

- Guaranteeing children's entitlement to access the support they require to enjoy their rights
- Providing services that are individualised and appropriate to children's needs
- Addressing the impact of historical and structural factors on children's lived experiences of their rights, including prospectively to avoid further intergenerational impact.

### **4. Governments uphold their particular responsibility for ensuring children's rights.**

This means:

- Creating the necessary conditions for children and families to thrive, including addressing underlying causes and drivers of risk and harm
- Supporting and empowering families and communities with the resources they need to do the right thing by their own children, make decisions about their children, and give their children the best chance to thrive
- Respecting parents' and families' responsibilities, rights and unique expertise in supporting their children's development
- Prioritising children's best interests in all decisions affecting them
- Educating children and adults on the rights of children, and associated responsibilities.

### **5. A public health model guides the promotion of children's wellbeing and safety.**

This means:

- Adopting a comprehensive and contextual approach to improving children's outcomes, including promoting positive wellbeing
- Prioritising measures to prevent harm and intervene truly early, rather than responding only when harm has already occurred or is at acute risk of doing so
- Ensuring that children receive appropriate, safe, effective and integrated support that meets their individual needs as required through a proportionate universalist approach
- Particularly focusing on children who are vulnerable or marginalised and require additional support that is appropriate to their needs and circumstances
- Addressing social and cultural determinants of health outcomes and root causes.

### **6. The right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fully supported.**

This means:

- Respecting and supporting the collective right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which underpins and contextualises the realisation of all other rights
- Giving effect to self-determination in a comprehensive and not tokenistic way
- Implementing all necessary financial, policy and legislative measures to enable self-determination and effective transfer of power, authority and control
- Ensuring the right to self-determination can be exercised in all relevant decisions and contexts, including in relation to families' and communities' own children.

## E. Policy focuses of a National Children's Plan

A National Children's Plan would focus on the areas of greatest importance to upholding children's rights in Australia. The following policy focus areas are highlighted as indicative priorities for addressing the most significant underlying drivers of children's rights violations and impediments to better outcomes for children in Australia. They are not listed in order of importance, many are interrelated, and some are of different types than others. They are intended only as a starting point, and to highlight the importance of a comprehensive approach to identifying the policy areas that most matter to children's outcomes and experiences of their rights.



1. Ensuring all children live free from poverty
2. Ensuring all children can access the material basics and an appropriate standard of living
3. Enabling all children to grow up in a supportive family environment
4. Enabling all children to grow up connected to their culture
5. Securing children's right to safety and freedom from violence and all forms of exploitation
6. Ensuring all systems that affect children are integrated and child-centred, including child protection, family support, domestic and family violence, housing and homelessness, and family law systems
7. Protecting the rights of children who are in contact with youth justice or at risk of contact
8. Supporting children's physical and mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional development, especially those experiencing individual and communal adversity and trauma
9. Supporting children's access to, and engagement with, education at all ages, including ensuring education equips them holistically to be active and effective agents in their lives
10. Securing children's right to a healthy environment and addressing the impact of climate change on children's rights
11. Securing children's rights in the digital environment
12. Ensuring children's meaningful participation in all decisions affecting them and accountability to children for all actions relating to them



**A specific focus is required on the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The arrangements supporting this focus should be determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations through an appropriate process and with meaningful involvement by children. This may include the development of a specific national strategy or plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This could be informed by and align with the National Children's Plan, allowing for the necessary knowledges, approaches and perspectives being fully embedded in all relevant policy and action from an appropriate basis of strengths, expertise and community involvement.**

Consideration would also be given to specific focuses on any particular groups of children requiring specific or special measures to promote better equity of outcomes to realise their rights, such as children with disability or children with asylum-seeking, refugee or migrant backgrounds.

### **Policy implementation**

Detailed action plans would be agreed by governments, containing specific investments and policy actions and implementation arrangements to give effect to the policy focus areas.

In developing these action plans, consideration would be given to key enablers that cross and underpin some or all of the policy focuses. These would include data, research, workforce and practice development (particularly child-centred, trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice).

The action plans would include measurement, evaluation, reporting and accountability arrangements aligned with the overall arrangements for the National Children's Plan and providing greater specificity and detail.

## **F. International human rights obligations**

A National Children's Plan would establish children and their rights as a clear national priority. It would also outline clear commitments to the key focuses, investments and associated arrangements to realise children's rights and give them real effect in Australia. In this way, the Plan would, in itself, represent significant progress towards meeting Australia's human rights obligations relating to children.

Ideally, the Plan, or its key elements, would itself be included in Federal, State and Territory legislation.

In addition, the Plan would establish a clear pathway and timeline to comprehensively incorporate the CRC into Australian policy and law. This would include extensive consultation and expert involvement to assess the desirability and feasibility of different models, approaches and sequencing for incorporation of the CRC, followed by a detailed action plan to move towards incorporation.

The Plan would also establish a clear pathway and timeline to meet Australia's other international human rights obligations relating to children. These include:

- Ratifying the Third Optional Protocol to the CRC, which enables individual communications by children to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
- Removing Australia's reservation to Article 37(c) of the CRC, which prohibits detention of children in the same facilities as adults
- Providing for a comprehensive review of Australian legislation and policy for compliance with the CRC and other relevant international human rights instruments, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention against Torture and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture
- Establishing appropriate monitoring, reporting and accountability arrangements for recommendations on children's rights made to Australia through Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and other UN mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review, in all cases ensuring accessibility to all people, including children.

The Plan would recognise the importance of Australia's compliance with these international obligations and include commitments relating to the practical processes, investments and other arrangements needed to move towards full compliance.

## **G. Education and communication**

A National Children's Plan would include commitments by the Federal, State and Territory governments, along with local governments, to:

- Establish a National Research Centre and Centre of Excellence for Children's Rights, responsible for developing and sharing best practice about children's rights in Australia, including a focus on applied participatory rights and child voice and agency – including in Australian policy development, in children's communities, and through involvement in UN reporting processes

- Establish comprehensive public education and awareness processes about children's rights, targeting both children (including through school curricula) and adults (with specific dimensions for those working with children, and those in positions of responsibility for children)
- Build the capacity of children and adults to act on children's rights, including training, resources and other support
- Specifically communicate with children through child-friendly information and engagement on the CRC, the National Children's Plan, what children's rights mean in practice, and how children can be involved in learning about, advocating for and enjoying their rights.

## H. Governance and accountability

A National Children's Plan would establish governance and accountability arrangements that ensure monitoring and oversight of:

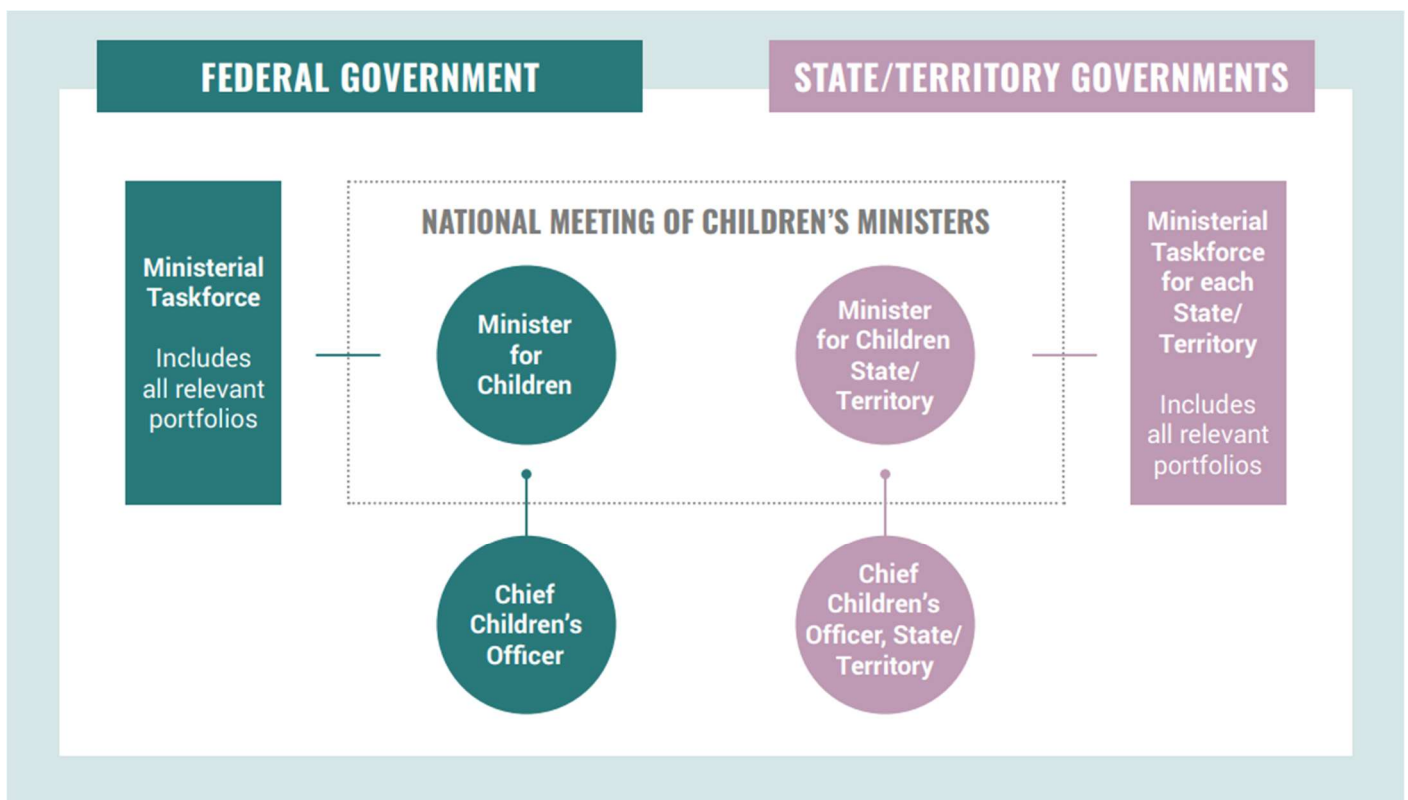
- Children's rights across Australia
- Implementation of the Plan itself.

### Institutional arrangements and oversight

A National Children's Plan would include commitments by the Federal, State and Territory governments to each appoint a Cabinet-level Minister for Children or Minister for Children's Wellbeing.

This Minister would be responsible for the wellbeing of children aged up to 18, including leadership and coordination at Ministerial level across other portfolios affecting children, through a Cabinet Committee, Ministerial Taskforce or similar. The Minister would be supported by an appropriately resourced departmental unit or office located in a central agency (First Ministers and/or Treasury Department), potentially including a Chief Children's Officer with an independent coordination and leadership role within the public service, reporting directly to the Minister.

A regular Ministers' Meeting, Council or similar could be established to provide a mechanism for meaningful oversight and collaboration between jurisdictions at Ministerial level. This would be supported by well-resourced inter-jurisdictional and inter-departmental arrangements.



Consideration should also be given to the involvement of the National Children's Commissioner with these mechanisms, as well as that of the Australian child rights sector, including civil society and research-focused organisations. This could include formalised involvement, reporting and attendance at meetings, including by representatives of child rights-focused organisations, and children themselves.

This Ministerial forum would be accountable for the National Children's Plan and ensuring its objectives and outcomes are delivered, as well as reporting on progress towards those objectives and outcomes through the Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard (see below) and other mechanisms.

### **Budgeting and accountability**

A National Children's Plan would include commitments by the Federal, State and Territory governments to establish whole-of-government mechanisms in their jurisdictions to ensure strong accountability for delivering improved children's wellbeing, development and access to rights, including at the local government level. The Federal Government would also have a specific responsibility for ensuring a national perspective.

This would include:

- Mechanisms to systematically consider the impact of all government decisions on children (including policy, legislation, budgeting and other government actions), including: child rights impact assessments; public consultation, options analysis and reporting mechanisms; formal and standing institutions for direct consideration of proposed decisions by children, such as Children's Parliament-type institutions; and child impact evaluations of actual impacts
- Making children visible in budgets, including through child-responsive budgeting and specific analysis of impacts on children and their wellbeing
- Seeking and making publicly available authoritative legal advice about the scope of governments' legal duties to children
- Facilitating platforms and training for children to evaluate public services, including providing children with the tools they require such as scorecards, feedback forms, and constituency dialogues through child-friendly materials and facilitation.

These whole-of-government arrangements would provide the overall context within which reporting and accountability arrangements relating to outcomes and progress under the Plan itself are conducted.

## **I. Outcomes, measurement, evaluation and data**

A National Children's Plan would set out clear, agreed outcomes and actions to be jointly pursued by all Australian governments and regularly reported on, through an Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard.

The Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard would be comprehensive and include:

- An explicit outcomes and measurement framework for children's rights, including ultimate and interim outcomes, as well as lead indicators, to measure and monitor the realisation of children's rights and their wellbeing and development
- A detailed framework of specific policy, budgetary, institutional, and service delivery and implementation actions, including in relation to workforces and capabilities, needed in each jurisdiction in order to fully give effect to children's rights, aligned to the outcomes and measurement framework.

The development of the Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard would consider, and be informed by, the substantial existing relevant work in Australia, including as embodied in relevant work of the National Children's Commissioner and State and Territory Children's Commissioners, ARACY's The Nest wellbeing framework and other sources such as the National Youth Information Framework (NYIF) indicators.

It would incorporate child-centred indicators of rights fulfilment and child wellbeing that are co-designed with children and reflect children's experiences of their rights and children's own priorities. Existing examples of child-centred indicators that have been developed and proved effective, including globally, could assist.

Progress against the Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard and its associated frameworks would be regularly and transparently reported on, with oversight from an appropriate, fully resourced, independent entity or group. The reporting would be in an accessible form, including child-friendly reports.

The Australian Child Rights Index and Scorecard and its associated frameworks would provide the basis for ongoing and transparent monitoring and evaluation of the Plan's implementation over its lifetime. Evaluation would include child-appropriate, developmental and participatory evaluation approaches, and be culturally responsive and strengths-based to the greatest extent possible.

The Plan would include a specific focus on addressing the significant data gaps relating to children, as identified by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and others, including agreeing priorities in this respect and providing adequate resourcing accordingly.

## J. Role of civil society and Children's Commissioners

### Civil society and the child rights sector

For the purposes of a National Children's Plan, Australian civil society would include all non-government organisations, networks and other actors with an interest and expertise in children's rights and child-related issues. This would include focuses in policy, advocacy, research, legal and human rights, child and family services, other child-related services and sectors, and oversight and monitoring.

Collectively, civil society would play an important role in developing and implementing the Plan and ensuring accountability by governments for effective overall implementation and achievement of the Plan's outcomes. Its involvement in the governance, oversight, review and evaluation of the Plan should be formalised and appropriately resourced.

As the peak body for child rights in Australia, the Australian Child Rights Taskforce could play a convening and connecting role in supporting civil society's involvement.

### State and Territory Children's Commissioners

State and Territory Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates have a critical role in monitoring, protecting and advocating for children's rights. They should be consulted and involved in all relevant arrangements under the National Children's Plan, while recognising that this may vary depending on individual jurisdictions' arrangements.

### National Children's Commissioner

The National Children's Commissioner has a unique role, as the independent Commissioner and member of the Australian Human Rights Commission – Australia's national human rights institution – with a focus on children's rights. This role should be recognised and promoted in the National Children's Plan, and embedded – with appropriate resourcing – across all aspects of the Plan, with advice from the Commissioner themselves.

## K. Next steps

To create a National Children's Plan, Australian governments should:

1. Commit to developing a National Children's Plan
2. Establish appropriate ministerial responsibility in each jurisdiction, including national leadership by the Federal Government and a national ministerial forum to drive the National Children's Plan
3. Allocate dedicated funding for:
  - (a) a secretariat housed within a suitable Department, ideally including seconded representatives from both the Federal and State and Territory Governments, to support administration and coordination in developing the National Children's Plan
  - (b) an advisory group or guiding coalition of expert non-government organisations and individuals, to bring technical and practical expertise in child rights and work closely with governments in developing the National Children's Plan
  - (c) specific support and arrangements to enable children's meaningful participation and involvement in developing the National Children's Plan
4. Engage in an extensive process of co-design with children themselves, as well as civil society, Children's Commissioners and others with expertise in children's rights, to develop the National Children's Plan, with a

particular focus on addressing children's rights holistically and supporting those facing the greatest barriers to accessing their rights

5. Prepare action plans containing specific policy actions and investments, with clear commitments and roles and responsibilities for each level of Government, including both immediate and long-term budget commitments.

This Blueprint can be used as a more detailed guide to the objectives and contents of a National Children's Plan, including its associated arrangements.

Importantly, rigorous and detailed implementation arrangements should be developed in parallel with the Plan itself. This is critical to ensuring that the vision and commitments established by the Plan are followed through and lead to real change in children's enjoyment of their rights, and their outcomes through childhood and across their lifetimes.



## Acknowledgements

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- James McDougall, consultant
- Jacqui McKenzie, ChildFund Australia
- Dr Fiona Robards, University of Sydney

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