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***Keep Them Safe* and interagency collaboration**

In this section you will find information about:

- the principles behind *Keep Them Safe*
- the legislative framework for a partnership approach to child protection in NSW
- a collaborative approach and an integrated service system
- working in partnership with Aboriginal families and communities
- resolving differences between agencies
- complaints by children, young people and their families

Keep Them Safe is the NSW Government's five year action plan to reform child protection in NSW.

The central vision of *Keep Them Safe* is that child wellbeing and child protection is a collective or shared responsibility. In recognition that child protection is not the sole responsibility of Community Services, *Keep Them Safe* has changed the way that child abuse and neglect concerns are reported and responded to in NSW.

This change represents an important step towards an integrated system that is concerned both with child safety and the promotion of child wellbeing. All stakeholders – government, non-government, community, families and parents must work together to support vulnerable children, young people and their families.

***Keep Them Safe* principles**

The collaborative approach of *Keep Them Safe* is underpinned by eight principles set down by Justice Wood in the final report of the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW*:

1. Child protection is the collective responsibility of the whole-of-government and the community.
2. Primary responsibility for rearing and supporting children should rest with families and communities, with government providing support where it is needed, either directly or through the funded non-government sector.
3. The child protection system should be child focused, with the safety, welfare and wellbeing of the child or young person being of paramount concern, while recognising that supporting parents is usually in the best interests of the child or young person.
4. Positive outcomes for children and families are achieved through development of a relationship with the family that recognises their strengths and their needs.
5. Child safety, attachment, wellbeing and permanency should guide child protection practice.
6. Support services should be available to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young persons are safe and connected to family, community and culture.
7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should participate in decision making concerning the care and protection of their children and young persons with as much self-determination as is possible, and steps should be taken to empower local communities to that end.
8. Assessments and interventions should be evidence based, monitored and evaluated.

Legislative framework

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (the Act) provides the framework for promoting a partnership approach to child protection. The legislation recognises that this responsibility is shared.

The principles contained in Sections 9 and 10 of the Act guide government and non-government agencies in exercising their responsibilities under the Act, and in dealing with each other and with children, young people, their families and communities.

Sections 11 to 14 of the Act contain important additional principles for government and non government agencies in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, their families and communities.

The foundation for the mandatory reporting framework is provided by Section 27 of the Act. Mandatory reporting places an obligation on a range of professionals who work with children to report concerns of risk of significant harm.

The Act also provides for the development of coordinated strategies for the care and protection of children and young people. This includes strategies such as the provision of assessment and support services to strengthen families to look after children and young people.

Finally, the Act introduces new provisions for the exchange of information among agencies. Chapter 16A allows prescribed bodies to directly exchange information relating to the safety, welfare and wellbeing of a child or young person without relaying this information through Community Services.

A collaborative approach and an integrated service system

Working together is crucial to achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families. No single worker, agency, service, program or profession has the knowledge, skills or mandate to promote the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people and protect them from harm.

An integrated system relies on individual agencies and professionals working in collaboration with others in the service system, regardless of differences in size, individual philosophies, structures or funding sources.

Strengthening the role and capacity of non-government agencies in providing services to children, young people and their families is a critical component of *Keep Them Safe*.

This is about making sure that there are responsive and sustainable services in place to support them. Significant funding has been provided to support the expanded role of non-government agencies in delivering early intervention and prevention services as well as out-of-home care.

In order to facilitate collaboration and create an integrated system across government and non-government agencies, *Keep Them Safe* has introduced new reporting and referral arrangements that provide an alternative way for children and families to access the support that is appropriate to meet their needs.

All mandatory reporters in NSW, regardless of whether they work for government or non-government agencies have access to the *Mandatory Reporter Guide* to help them assess whether a report to the Child Protection Helpline is required, or whether some other form of action would better assist the child or young person that they are concerned about. The use of this common tool is fundamental to facilitating a shared approach.

In addition, all government agencies with a role in child protection are developing five-year plans to move towards more collaborative agency and interagency cultures. This includes a

plan to strengthen workforce development across child and family services.

Collaboration in child protection occurs on three levels:

- **policy level** – where agencies at all levels of government (state, federal and local) work together with non-government stakeholders to establish clear goals and objectives for the prevention of harm to children. Policy can be delivered through legislative change, the development of statements and principles that set out the responsibilities and actions of all stakeholders, and guidelines to apply those statements and principles in practice.
- **program level** – where service delivery is managed by more than one agency, with each of the participating agencies bringing their expertise and skills so that clients receive a coordinated and integrated service response without the need to move between agencies and programs. Joint Investigation Response Teams (JIRTs) are an example of interagency practice through cross-agency programs. They link the risk assessment and protective interventions of Community Services with criminal investigations conducted by NSW Police and medical examination, counselling and therapeutic services from NSW Health.
- **direct service level** – where agencies work together to address the needs of individual children, young people and families through shared case planning, management and coordination efforts. The practice of interagency case management to build a common case plan and goal improves the quality of the service outcomes received by the child, young person and family, and are an example of interagency practice at the direct service level.

Other ways in which government and non-government agencies can facilitate an integrated service system include:

- **building better local networks** which foster an understanding of the agencies that are operating in the local area. Getting to know the types of services they offer and the expertise of their workforce could be achieved by establishing a program of interagency network meetings, or information bulletins to share information; identifying interagency issues early; and to gain a better understanding of roles and responsibilities.
- **agreeing on better ways to work together to support shared clients** might involve establishing a formal or informal network of service providers in a local area and actively undertaking joint case planning, case conferencing, or cross-agency referrals. These types of activities help providers to consider information about a child or a family from their respective professional disciplines, and to work out the best mix of supports for those clients.
- **establishing partnerships** to develop integrated responses and address service delivery gaps. Through these partnerships a number of organisations can pool their resources and consolidate their efforts to responding to complex client programs that one agency alone cannot resolve. Existing partnerships can be built on to incorporate the principles of *Keep Them Safe*.
- **establishing formal protocols** to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all parties are clear in supporting children and families in the local community by using Memoranda of Understanding to establish the basis for interagency collaboration where the interdependencies between agencies are accounted for and facilitated. Protocols can provide guidance for workers to engage with one another across agency and program boundaries. Further information is available at the section on [exchanging information](#).
- **creating opportunities for shared training** which provide a strong foundation for interagency practice would improve understanding of agencies' respective roles and

responsibilities, as well as promoting a shared language, knowledge and awareness between agencies.

- **recognising the function of strengthening relationships** between agency partners within 'position descriptions'. For instance, Community Services requires that managers in Community Services Centres establish and facilitate collaborative and innovative partnerships with community partners towards an integration of service delivery at the local level.

Working in partnership with Aboriginal families and communities

Keep Them Safe incorporates a number of strategies designed to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system, and to secure greater participation of Aboriginal agencies in child wellbeing services.

Key principles in *Keep Them Safe* include:

- Empowerment of local Aboriginal communities to participate in decision-making concerning the care and protection of their children,
- A focus on local circumstances including the composition of individual Aboriginal communities,
- The strength and capacity of local leadership and the physical availability of government and non-government resources; and
- The need for integrated locally based services being able to provide a full continuum of care – ranging from prevention/early intervention through to targeted and specialist support services.

To monitor *Keep Them Safe's* activities the Government has developed an Aboriginal Impact Statement that will be used by all government agencies to assess how each action under *Keep Them Safe* will contribute to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young persons and their families.

The Statement aims to ensure that NSW Government agencies incorporate the needs and interests of Aboriginal children and young people in the implementation of *Keep Them Safe* actions and that, as a result, the current over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system is reversed and the outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people are improved.

Resolving differences between agencies

Effective collaboration requires all partners to be committed to working together and being open to challenges and feedback received from interagency partners.

Different perspectives and competing priorities will occur from time to time, for example:

- decisions in relation to a particular child or young person
- roles, professional and organisational philosophies, priorities and cultures
- systems issues
- status and real or perceived power issues
- communication
- level of commitment to the interagency approach and group dynamics
- attitudes and beliefs about families and community standards.

Where differences arise, these should be acknowledged and discussed as soon as possible so that each party can consider ways of resolving the issue that is in the best interests of the children or young persons concerned and that may inform more effective practices and procedures.

Where a fundamental difference is identified, an interagency review of the matter may be necessary. It is expected that all agencies will have clear policies and procedures on review and resolution of concerns raised by or in relation to agency partners.

Effective collaboration requires that resolution is reached and agencies work together in the best interests of children and young people.

The flowchart, [A model for resolving interagency differences](#), provides a generic model for resolving differences between agencies (noting that other dispute resolution processes may need to be followed depending on the nature of the dispute). The model is not designed to assign fault but rather to improve both processes and outcomes.

The key proposed steps are:

- Identify the issue and the outcome sought. This may be done in consultation with your line manager.
- As appropriate to the circumstances, approach the worker concerned and talk directly with them about the dissatisfaction. Personal skills of negotiation and active listening will assist in developing a timely resolution.
- If there is still dissatisfaction or complaint, then consider an approach to the worker's line manager. This may be undertaken by the respective line managers. If a review of a decision is being sought, it may be appropriate to document the issues and/or concerns in writing so that the process has added clarity and accountability.
- If this doesn't help, then approach the next most relevant senior officer in the organisation or that agency's specialist complaints officer or unit, if and where this option exists. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level resolution should be considered in cases where protracted cross-agency differences are impeding the ability to deliver an efficient and effective response to clients.
- If this doesn't help, then CEOs may consider it appropriate to go to an independent body or a mediation process.

Complaints by children, young people and their families

Children, young people and their families must be fully informed of how they can make complaints. Agencies must have open and transparent complaints processes. They must promote these processes within their agencies and demonstrate how they follow due process and ensure procedural fairness.

The NSW Ombudsman provides guidelines on effective complaint handling. These include a useful complaints handling system checklist. The Ombudsman also has guidelines to assist with dealing with youth complaints.

Children, young people and their families may also choose to take their complaint to the NSW Ombudsman's Office.

It should be noted that complaints can be a useful source of information and are an opportunity to learn from service users and clients to improve practice.

For further information about collaboration:

- [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth](#)
- Council for Australian Governments, *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*

NB: the views expressed in these documents and website(s) are not necessarily those of the NSW Government.