Dear Solicitor,

Re: Issues Paper 3: Child Safe Institutions

NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Royal Commission’s call for submissions on ‘Child Safe Institutions’.

NAPCAN is a national not for profit organisation that advocates on behalf of children and young people to promote positive change in attitudes, behaviour, policies, practices and the law to prevent abuse and neglect and ensure the safety and wellbeing of all Australian children.

NAPCAN’s strategy is to bring about the changes necessary in individual and community behaviour to stop child abuse and neglect before it starts by:

Promoting quality child abuse prevention research:
Promoting quality research so that the causes and impact of child abuse and neglect can be better understood and effective ways to prevent it can be developed and measured.

Advocating for child safe policies and strategies:
Advocating for changes in policies and strategies that place the wellbeing of children and young people first.

Coordinating National Child Protection Week and promoting the PLAY YOUR PART initiative:
Informing public awareness and attitudes to shift the thinking, so providing a safe community for children and young people is a concern shared by all Australians. To provide educational information and resources to ensure everyone has the knowledge and skills needed to take action in small or large ways to support children and families and reduce child abuse and neglect in Australia.

Demonstrating good practice:
Developing and promoting community led prevention programs and initiatives that are evidenced based and effective in reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect.
This submission is informed by NAPCAN’s work with communities across Australia and the knowledge and expertise of staff. It also draws on findings from NAPCAN’s recent consultations with organisations across the Northern Territory and Queensland around child safe practices.

NAPCAN’s key recommendations are:

- a national Working With Children check system
- adoption of a national Child Safe Organisations Framework, supported by a range of tools and resources accessible to all organisations
- child safe principles be embedded and annually reviewed as part of service / licensing agreements.
- a standardised Code of Conduct for working with children and young people.

NAPCAN appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this process. We would be pleased to provide more information should you require it.

Yours Sincerely,

Richard Cooke
CEO
Response to Issues Paper 3: Child Safe Institutions

1. The essential elements of establishing a ‘child safe organisation’ that protects children from sexual abuse in an institutional context. In particular, are there core strategies that should be present and others that are less critical?

It is NAPCAN’s position that there are specific elements that need to be established in order for an organisation to be able to function as ‘child safe’. To support this perspective we have developed a framework for organisations which include the essential 8 elements for establishing a core strategy (see Annexure 1), based on and adapted from the Australian Childhood Foundation, Australian Red Cross and Childwise.

The NAPCAN child safe organisation framework includes the following principles:

1. Develop and maintain a strong and clear organisational commitment to safeguarding children and young people
2. Implement clear and consistent roles and conduct
3. Maintain safe recruitment and supervision practices for staff
4. Provide all staff with induction and training
5. Engage children, young people and parents in processes
6. Implement protocols for responding to and reporting child abuse
7. Support a child safe culture
8. Safe and secure physical environment

Each of these elements is elaborated upon to assist organisations with implementation.

While each of the strategies in the checklist may alone have the capacity to increase children’s safety, the integration of all seven into practice systems provides a stronger platform for recognising and preventing child abuse from within the organisation. The organisation then can develop and define procedures that both meets legislative and practice requirements for keeping children safe and well.

The checklist creates shared responsibility within all levels of the organisation, and requires regular review to ensure all child safe systems are being implemented and updated.

NAPCAN’s experience is that there will always need to be a degree of flexibility and capacity for adaptation based on contextual issues such as size and location. It isn’t feasible, or desirable, for all organisations to maintain the same systems nationally but to adhere to the same frameworks and principles is imperative. The interpretation of the key principles of the framework will vary depending on the client focus of the organisation, for example there is a difference between a school and an RSL club.
Screening processes need to be present in the recruitment phase for new staff, and the same process should be replicated Australia wide. Significant weaknesses in the current Working with Children Check (WWCC) state-based system have been identified. It is a flawed system that doesn’t always filter information to the benefit of the children.

2. **The evidence base for the range of strategies associated with making an organisation ‘child safe’. Does this evidence base extend to the physical environment?**

NAPCAN’s consultations with young people across Australia have highlighted physical environment as an important element to be included in the review and maintenance of child safe organisations. Where possible children and young people should be consulted in the design of service spaces to ensure that they feel comfortable and safe in them.

3. **How should the effectiveness of ‘child safe’ strategies be tested?**

Compliance of an organisation to these child safe principles can be embedded and annually reviewed as part of agency service agreements or licensing agreements.

Child safe strategies in an organisation can be assessed by consulting with staff and the families, children and young people who access the services. This can include ensuring all parties understand their rights and responsibilities, and complaints mechanisms, both within the organisation and externally.

An open culture should be encouraged within organisations, which includes an ongoing internal review of policies and procedures at regular intervals to ensure that all ‘child safe’ strategies and mechanisms are working as intended.

NAPCAN has considered the proposition of an external monitoring body or an accreditation system but believes the most cost effective, user friendly and sustainable model would be to use the current service and licensing agreements to review organisational compliance with the principles. This would need to be supported by a suite of accessible online resources (for example, sample policies and procedures of similar sized organisations in the same sector), and face to face and online training, with some level of ongoing mentoring and support available for smaller organisations or those operating in remote locations.

4. **How ‘child safe’ policies and procedures work in practice.**

NAPCAN has worked across many social service sectors: early childhood, schools, family support, youth and crisis accommodation in particular. Findings from our consultations suggest that there are limitations to the implementation of child safe policies and procedures in practice.
Larger organisations have the capacity to implement child safe practices but may not invest if not required by legislation or service/licensing agreements. Smaller organisations struggle with capacity and skills to assess the risk to children in their services, and then to design and implement appropriate policies and practices.

Services in remote locations are particularly vulnerable. Many members of staff lack formal qualifications and organisations may not be able to provide professional supervision for staff. This exposes organisations and their clients to increased risk due the absence of checks and balances around best practice.

There is no consistently clear direction for organisations on how to achieve child safe practices. There is substantial goodwill by organisations and this has seen a haphazard and fragmented response, often at substantial expense to organisations. Even organisations with the capacity to implement change still require a range of supports, information and guidance to manage risk to children and young people.

NAPCAN has worked with a number of Domestic Violence crisis accommodation services in rural and remote locations to assess the needs of children accessing these services. Children were not regarded as clients in their own right and consequently were not in a child safe environment. An independent evaluation undertaken by Menzies School of Health on this project (see Annexure 2) made a range of recommendations to improve the child safe policies and practices of remote crisis accommodation.

5. Should there be a universal framework for a ‘child safe organisation’ or should strategies be specifically tailored to particular types of institutional settings?

NAPCAN supports both approaches to guide the creation and maintenance of child safe organisations. A broad framework applicable across sectors is a useful guide to promote child-centered planning and practice, however this needs to be supplemented with specifically tailored strategies and tools which are relevant to specific institutional settings.

Through our consultations we identified that there are particular complexities to working in rural and remote settings, where small organisations have limited resources (including staff) to implement expansive procedures. The protocols and practice tools need to be relevant to the context in which particular organisations operate. NAPCAN’s consultations with organisations indicated that having access to a range of templates/policies from similar organisations is particularly helpful, rather than universal proformas.

There is also a need to consider child safe processes for organisations who don’t have children and young people as their core clients. For example, places such as RSL clubs, shopping centres and gyms which provide crèches and children’s rooms with toys and activities to occupy children and young people while parents access their services. There needs to be appropriate standards, policies and processes established to ensure that these organisations are not overlooked in a review of child safe practices.
6. The role of staff performance management systems and disciplinary processes in a ‘child safe organisation’.

NAPCAN recommends a standardised Code of Conduct for working with children and young people. (See Annexure 3: “Code of Ethics for Working with Children and Young People” developed by NT peak bodies.) The onus is then on each organisation to adhere to the Code of Conduct. Where a staff member does not meet the standards, the organisation has the responsibility to remove the worker from any direct contact with children and young people until the issue has been satisfactorily resolved. Child safe practices should form part of regular staff performance reviews.

A review of child safe processes needs to be incorporated into regular supervision with staff, to provide staff and management with an opportunity to raise and address any concerns as they arise. It is important that all staff are inducted into child safe practice, with relevant training and support provided and ongoing supervision integrated into performance management systems.

7. The role and characteristics of governance and management leadership in creating and maintaining a ‘child safe’ organisational culture.

It is evident from research and practice that children are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect if they are kept within a closed system and culture where it is difficult for them to access other individuals or external assistance. A robust governance and management structure needs to be in place to create effective child-centered and friendly culture in which particular standards of behaviour are expected and modeled by all.

8. Should there be any additional enforceable requirements for institutions or particular institutions to maintain a ‘child safe’ environment?

NAPCAN supports the implementation of one national WWCC system.

While enforceable requirements may be necessary, they should be a part of a wider more holistic approach to creating and maintaining a child safe environment.

Annexes:

1. Child Safe Principles (framework)
2. Evaluation by Menzies School of Health Research: Child Friendly Safe House Project.
3. “Our Kids, Safe and Strong: A Code of Ethics for Working with Children and Young People in the Northern Territory”
### ANNEXURE 1:

**CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS: PRINCIPLES**

1. **a)** Develop and maintain a strong and clear organisational commitment to safeguarding children and young people
   - Moral and legal responsibility (State Legislation)
   - Understand aetiology of child abuse and neglect
   - Create an open and aware culture
   - Commit to prioritising children’s safety

   **b)** Identify a prevention team
   - Consider a new (or established) OHS team

   **c)** Identify existing risks and protective factors
   - Direct risk e.g. exploitation, bullying
   - Indirect risk e.g. lack of implementation, training or accountability
   - Across program areas
   - Consider the impact of services on children

2. Implement clear and consistent roles and conduct
   - Code of Conduct based on organisational values
   - Media photography and filming
   - In-program/out-of-program child contact
   - Parents and visitors
   - Partner organisations
   - Premises and technology

3. **a)** Maintain safe recruitment and child safe screening practices
   - Reference and identity checks,
   - Criminal History and Working with Children Checks
   - Ads, job descriptions, interview questions

   **b)** Staff support and supervision
   - Ratios when working with children
   - Formal - accountability & encouraging self-care

4. Run programs for staff induction and training
   - Regular and comprehensive
   - The issue, indicators, early intervention, mandatory reporting
   - Roles and responsibilities: code of conduct
   - Reports and allegations; responding to disclosures

5. Engage children, young people and parents
   - To inform about existing policies
   - To develop policies and processes that affect them
   - To gain feedback about service delivery

6. Implement clear protocols for responding to and reporting child abuse
   - Mandatory reporting
   - Internal complaints procedures

7. Support a Child Safe Culture
   - Meet the challenges/address barriers
   - Review, implement, build capacity, monitor and prioritise

8. Ensure a child safe physical environment
   - Assess compliance with state/territory standards

**Content adapted from NAPCAN Child Friendly Safe House research, Australian Childhood Foundation, Safeguarding Children; Childwise, Choose with Care; and Australian Red Cross, Ten Steps to Creating Safe Environments for Children and Young People**

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**NAPCAN - PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE**

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Child Friendly Safe House Project: Review of Documents

For NAPCAN the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN)
Child Friendly Safe House Project: Review of Documents for
The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN)
26 August 2013
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Executive Summary

The report outlines the steps and principles that would inform a more child friendly and focused service, and this content was covered in detail. It reflects and builds on existing knowledge. The reviewers found the report to be well written, coherent and comprehensive.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the need for children to be recognised as clients in their own right. The report is consistent with this move to regard children as clients and makes feasible suggestions for how this could be implemented in the Safe House context.

There is very little research that refers or relates specifically to Safe Houses. This report contains unique content specific to the role and context of Safe Houses in remote Aboriginal communities, which is regarded as likely to be appreciated by practitioners and other stakeholders. Reviewers were of the opinion that the combination of evidence from a review of relevant studies and personal voices makes the report appealing to lay audience. This combination lends the report credibility and fills in some of the gaps related to the paucity of published material.

Overall the report was found to provide extensive information to guide Safe House program managers and inform the development of evidence based protocols and standard operating procedures. The information is context specific, speaks to the experience of workers in remote services and contains many practical suggestions supported by evidence where it exists. The report includes recommendations considered useful for Safe House staff as well as program staff. Some of these recommendations that could be implemented by either the Operations Team or at the service level include, for example:

- Women’s Safe House Workers are able to run locally developed activities in the Safe House that are healing and culturally appropriate, such as, dancing, singing, bush medicines, bush tucker, art and crafts.
- Posters are placed around the safe house that express feelings and activities that children can point to that may match their need e.g. food, bed, shower, feeling sick etc. as many children may not be able to verbalise how they feel and what would help them.
- Women’s Safe House Workers talk with women about the appropriateness of informing children about what is happening with their father after incidents involving police or other services, situations.

The report fills a gap in literature that is currently available, and it is likely to have a broad audience. The material is relevant to an agency responsible for designing, managing and strengthening the capacity of Safe Houses to increase their child friendliness.
The reviewers found the report responds to the social and cultural context of Aboriginal family violence and upholds children’s/human rights.

It features examples that are likely to resonate with or reflect the lives of people using NT safe houses, which is likely to make it accessible and appropriate. The way the report is framed is consistent with current thinking which proposes that children are best served when they are perceived to be affected members of the family/community.

The scope of the report and recommendations go beyond making the safe house child friendly to offer evidence based suggestions for how to work with children in family violence related distress. This was intended to inform the development of a training manual for Safe House workers. The reviewers found that the section related to the principles of working with families and specifically children affected by violence section is very good. Several reviewers noted the thoroughness with which the authors approached the work.

The report thoroughly addresses the kind of support the workers need to be able to continue to do their jobs well if they are regarding children as clients in their own right with specific needs. These include the need for training, regular opportunities for reflective supervision and mentoring, recognition of the demanding nature of the work, staff trauma and triggers etc.

The recommendations related to the needs of children in a safe house environment are consistent with the report findings. Most of the published significant and relevant research is included and the report presents the major schools of thought, although there are a few recent studies on the impact of exposure to family violence on children that are not included. However the reviewers described the report as containing too many recommendations and a mixture of long and short term recommendations.

Possible improvements to the report include differentiating between aspects relating to policy, those referring specifically to workplace practices and recommended changes in the organisational procedures. The recommendations for next steps are focused on ensuring the critical information contained in the report is made accessible to Safe House staff and other interested people.
BACKGROUND:

The NAPCAN Child Friendly Safe Houses Project

The Child Friendly Safe Houses Project is a NAPCAN initiative to strengthen the capacity of Women’s Safe Houses in remote areas to create child friendly environments. The project aims to develop resources and training materials for safe house staff to enable them to welcome children, meet their immediate short-term needs and provide them with appropriate support whilst they are staying at a safe house in a remote community.

Safe Houses enable women and children who are experiencing violence to remain in their community whilst they are getting assistance and making decisions about what steps to take following family violence. In the past many women and children had to leave their extended family and other critical supports to get the help they needed – this was often traumatic and placed additional pressure on families already in crisis.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA) released a Family Support Package as part of the Northern Territory Emergency response (NTER) that allocated $12.3 million in 2007-8 to support families and children in the Northern territory to June 2012. The Northern Territory Government, Department of Children and Families (now known as The Office of Children and Families) were given responsibility for the establishment, implementation and management of the eleven new Women’s Safe Houses in remote communities. One safe house was converted from a men’s cooling down place to a women’s safe house in Beswick, so in total there are twelve women’s safe houses.

The project has identified the types of good practices that are recommended in working with children affected by family violence who come into remote safe places with their mother or caregiver. The good practices have been identified through a review of available literature and interviews/discussions with experienced staff from safe places/women’s refuges including: Dawn House, Darwin Aboriginal and Islander Women’s Service, Katherine Women’s Emergency Accommodation Service, Elliott Safe House, Tennant Creek Women’s Shelter, Alice Springs Women’s Shelter and Women’s Safe Houses in remote localities of Kalkaringi and Maningrida in the Northern Territory.

The Child Friendly Safe House Project Goals and Objectives

The Project goal is to contribute to ensuring children are appropriately supported by Safe House staff, who are working in ways that may help children to:

• Feel welcome at the Safe House and know where everything is
• Feel they are safe and are able to tell their story if they want to
• Talk about what may help them to keep their spirit strong or have less worries
• Talk about ways of keeping safe when they are ready to go home
The aim of the project is to develop training and resources related to the needs of children in Safe Houses in collaboration with Safe House staff.

The specific objectives of the Project are to:

1. Undertake research and identify best practice for working with children in remote Safe Houses and related issues (supporting children affected by violence)
2. Deliver training and materials for safe house workers to familiarise them with the best practices for working with children in Safe Houses
3. Produce a Child Friendly Safe House Planning tool for use by Safe Houses which identifies the resources and practices required to support the immediate needs of children in remote Safe Houses

Brief Project Description

Background on the Safe House Project

The project was initiated and implemented by NAPCAN NT (Ms Lesley Taylor - NT Manager, Ms Toni Woods – Project Co-ordinator, Mrs Faye Parriman – Trainer. The project was conducted in 2012.

Safe House workers often have a deep understanding of the children in their communities and extensive cultural knowledge. Therefore the project team collaborated with women from Kalkarinji and Maningrida communities. The project aimed to gain insight into the knowledge, skills, experiences of safe house staff to inform the development of practice guidelines that are practical and added to staff’s existing skill sets. Danielle Bachelor, Kadeja James and Maree Keogh assisted in the arrangement of visits to the communities of respectively.

The development phase of the project has been funded by the NTG Office of Children and Families Safe Places Team (Remote Services Branch). They provided $270 000 for the project. The project intended to follow through on the research and production of materials by providing training and mentoring to Safe House staff to support them to makes changes that would make their Safe Houses more child-friendly. This was not possible due to changes in the contract and other arrangements made by the Office of Children and Families. In June 2012 the Safe Places Team indicated they did not intend to facilitate the roll out of the training or the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Planning Tool.

Although the resource documents have been researched, developed and drafted, the project remains incomplete and without further NT Government support and resources. The project staff were not afforded the opportunity to pilot any of the training materials or gain feedback from the intended target audience prior to a change of government in 2012.
Despite the investment of considerable time and other resources, the documents and the training have not been made available to safe house staff and other interested parties by the Office of Children and Families. The feedback indicated that The Women’s Safe Houses Operations Team hoped for something less comprehensive than what had been produced. NAPCAN would never the less like to make use of the research that has been undertaken to date and have committed to provide an external evaluation to the funding body.

THE DOCUMENT REVIEW SCOPE OF WORK:

The purpose of the Review

The purpose of this document review is to provide an independent assessment of the relevance, cultural appropriateness and comprehensiveness of one of the major resource documents produced by the Project. The review will also identify potential pathways forward for future development and use of the report and relevant information related to child friendly practices.

The report being reviewed was developed to provide evidence on good practices in Australia that best meet the needs of children accompanying women in safe house accommodation. The report is titled: The report on Good Work Practices for Children Exposed to Family Violence Staying in Safe Houses in Remote Communities. This report was produced in conjunction with The Child Friendly Safe Places Resource Book and a draft training curriculum.

In order to get the best possible return on investment in the project, NAPCAN intends to establish what independent experts consider to be the strengths and weakness of the resource document and solicit feedback in order to revise (where necessary and feasible) and finalise the documents. This will enable NAPCAN to decide what steps to take in order to complete the project and distribute the resources developed out of the research.

The Review Aims and Objectives:

The review will address the following questions:

1. In the opinion of relevant experts, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the draft resource documents?

2. How can the relevance, appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the resource documents be strengthened with minimal additional investment?

3. What steps should NAPCAN take to ensure the resources are accessible and able to influence policy and practice?
Information and assessments related to the secondary questions below will be gathered in order to answer the evaluation questions:

- Are the resources relevant to the target audience?
- To the best of your knowledge, do the resources reflect and build on or strengthen existing knowledge?
- Are they culturally appropriate?
- How easily understood are the materials, would you use them, how, in what circumstances? Considering the intended audience for each document, do they seem to be pitched at the right level?
- Creditability – have the right people been involved in the development, have the right processes been followed?

**METHODOLOGY:**

This review was coordinated by Ms Jenne Roberts (the evaluator). The Evaluator conducted a brief literature review to identify the appropriate criteria for conducting independent appraisals of resource materials. Based on the findings, the Evaluator designed a *reviewers guide*, which was provided to all reviewers. The guide draws upon validated tools for assessing Information, education and Communication materials to be used with low literacy audiences, including the Standard Questions for Use in pretesting of health messages (Hawe, Degeling et al. 1990) and other guides (Rychetnik, Frommer et al. 2002) (Coombes 2011).

The evaluator asked four independent experts to review the documents against the following four criteria:

1. **Relevance:** The extent to which the good practices and evidence for providing child friendly spaces are tailored to the interests, needs expectations and physical environment in which Safe House workers operate.

2. **Social and cultural appropriateness:** The extent to which the resources and practices respond to the social and cultural context of Aboriginal family violence while upholding human rights, a gender equality perspective and ethical considerations.

3. **Content:** The extent to which the resources a) reflect a comprehensive approach and best practice in relation to the needs of children affected by family violence, b) demonstrate cognizance of the expertise and role of the Safe House Workers and c) (for the training materials) address specific learning targets.
4. Style: The extent to which the resources demonstrate appropriateness of language, pitch, emphasis and messaging.

The materials have not been through a process of graphic design or illustration yet and therefore the graphic design was not subject to review.

Data Collection

People recognised as having relevant expertise as well as experience in the Northern Territory remote community context were selected by NAPCAN and the Evaluator and asked to review the materials using the reviewers guide (including checklists) developed by the Evaluator. Each reviewer was contacted by the Evaluator, and they were provided with copies of the report and the draft training manual based on the good practice findings.

After the reviewers had read through the report and the draft training manual and the reviewers guide, the evaluator met with each reviewer and discussed and documented their feedback. The reviewers focused on the report, because the training manual was found to be entirely consistent with the best practices identified. Reviewers thought that the content seemed appropriate, and the best way to test it would be to pilot the training if the opportunity arose.

All reviews and feedback were submitted directly to the evaluator, to maintain the confidentiality of the assessments. The appraisal comments and feedback were collated and reviewed by the evaluator.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of the qualitative data from the reviews was undertaken to document the findings and identify similarities and consistent themes across accounts. The data was categorised into recurrent themes and topics that seem relevant to answer the evaluation questions and to develop new insights.

Reporting

The evaluator provided a verbal feedback of findings to NAPCAN NT on two occasions, and facilitated discussions of the next steps. This report documents the overall findings in relation to relevance, social and cultural appropriateness, content and style and recommendations as to how the materials could be improved and used.

The review was conducted in Darwin during the period January to April 2013.
FINDINGS

The review primarily addressed the following questions:

1. In the opinion of relevant experts, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the report in relation to its relevance, appropriateness, content and style?
2. How can the document be strengthened with minimal additional investment?
3. What steps should NAPCAN take to ensure the resources are accessible and able to influence policy and practice?

The response to the “Report on Good Work Practices for Children Exposed to Family Violence who may be staying in Safe Houses in Remote Communities” (‘the report’) from the reviewers was very positive overall. The reviewers found the report to be well written, coherent and comprehensive. The report outlines the steps and principles that would inform a more child friendly and focused service, and this content was covered in detail. It reflects and builds on or strengthens existing knowledge.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the need for children to be recognised as clients in their own right. The report highlights the recent findings from a report on mental health services for children in Western Australia, where Aboriginal families identified not responding to children as individuals in their own right as poor practice. (Scott, p.35) The reviewers recognise the value of including mental health literature related to the needs of children into the discussion.

The report frames the discussion so as to encourage remote Safe House staff to recognise each child as a client with his/her own story and needs. Currently children are not regarded as clients, but rather as ‘accompanying children’. The mother/caregiver is considered the client. This means that individual assessments are not recorded for children and the Safe House staff do not keep any documentation on the needs of specific children. Historically, the core focus of domestic violence services in Australia and elsewhere has been to support and empower women. Children’s needs have been seen as secondary to their mothers’, although services have generally provided opportunities for play and recreation.

Some recent family violence literature implies there is a case for focusing on children as an important element of good practice in interventions due to an increasing recognition of the direct effects of family violence on children. (Brown 2006; Byrne-MacNamee 2009). This, combined with increased monitoring and reporting of client numbers, has created an opportunity for services working with children who experience domestic or family violence to examine and appraise the nature and scope of their work. Bell sees the child as a client in its own right, and argues that services need to take a client-centred approach to meeting the child’s needs. She argues that this approach should be individualised, culturally appropriate, non-judgmental, based on sound theoretical understandings of domestic violence, and delivered by qualified and well-equipped staff.
(Bell 2006) The report is consistent with this move to regard children as clients and makes feasible suggestions for how this could be implemented in the Safe House context.

There is very little research and other material that refers or relates specifically to Safe Houses. This report contains unique content specific to the role and context of Safe Houses in remote Aboriginal communities, which is regarded as likely to be appreciated by practitioners. Reviewers were of the opinion that the combination of evidence from a review of relevant studies and personal voices makes the report appealing to lay audience. This lends the report credibility and fills in some of the gaps related to the paucity of published material.

Overall the report was found to provide extensive information to guide Safe House program managers and inform the development of protocols and standard operating procedures. The information is context specific, speaks to the experience of workers in remote services and contains many practical suggestions supported by evidence where it exists.

There were some aspects of the overall report where suggestions were offered for improvement. For example the name of the report is quite long. It could be shortened to something like Good Practices for meeting the needs of Children in Safe Houses, or even Child Friendly Safe Houses.

Possible improvements to the report include differentiating between aspects relating to policy, those referring specifically to workplace practices and recommended changes in the organisational procedures. In general the most commonly recommended improvement is greater clarity about the intended audience. The recommendations for next steps are focused on ensuring the information contained in the report is made accessible to Safe House staff and other interested people.

The report is “designed to inform The Women’s Safe Houses Operations Team about Good Practices in Child Friendly Safe Houses in Remote areas” (p 5). While the findings and recommendations could be utilized for evidence based decision making, the report includes recommendations that could be implemented by Safe House staff directly. Some of these recommendations that could be implemented by either the Operations Team or at the service level include, for example:

- Women’s Safe House Workers are able to run locally developed activities in the Safe House that are healing and culturally appropriate, such as, dancing, singing, bush medicines, bush tucker, art and crafts.
- Posters are placed around the safe house that express feelings and activities that children can point to that may match their need e.g. food, bed, shower, feeling sick etc. as many children may not be able to verbalise how they feel and what would help them.
• Women’s Safe House Workers talk with women about the appropriateness of informing children about what is happening with their father after incidents involving police or other services, situations.

The report, which includes a literature review and interviews/discussions with relevant key informants, fills a gap in literature that is currently available, and it is likely to have a broad audience. The information has been researched to inform the development of the training for women working in Safe Houses. Specific comments related to relevance, appropriateness the content and style are outlined below.

Relevance

The material is relevant to an agency responsible for designing, managing and strengthening the capacity of Safe Houses to increase their child friendliness. However, the report suffers from ‘scope creep’. That is, the report addresses areas beyond those that the commissioning agency (The Women’s Safe Houses Operations Team) was interested in. The feedback received by NAPCAN seems to indicate that the commissioning agency wanted a small number of key actions they could take to make the physical changes to the Safe Houses in remote areas. This report is far more comprehensive and it discusses the needs of children exposed to family violence.

In the opening paragraphs of the report it refers to a body of work being undertaken by NAPCAN in partnership with the Office of Families and Children. The report represents only one aspect of that work.

As part of the project, NAPCAN were contracted to undertake research into the types of good practices that are recommended in working with children who are living with or exposed to family violence who come into remote safe places with their mother or caregiver. The report correctly finds that there is a paucity of research or reference materials to draw on that examines the roles and responsibilities of remote safe places in general and even less that examine the needs of children in those services. Therefore what was intended as a guide to making Safe Houses more child friendly became a review of literature on children in Safe Houses. This was later expanded to include children in all emergency accommodation or crisis services across Australia. Even so relevant research remained limited. NAPCAN also found that only a few research or reports included the voices and thoughts of children who have been in shelters/crisis accommodation.

As a result of the limited published information NAPCAN expanded the scope of the project (and therefore the report) to include interviews with people with related expertise. With the support of the NT Safe House Program Manager Subsequent interviews were conducted with Safe House staff at two sites and staff at other women’s shelters across the NT.
The scope of the report and recommendations go beyond making the safe house child friendly to offer evidence based suggestions for how to work with children in family violence related distress. This was intended to inform the development of a training manual for Safe House workers. The report extends beyond a quick over view of good practice in and around the Safe House and discusses Safe House policy and program design. NAPCAN have interpreted the scope of the work more broadly than the client/funder seems to have intended. Several reviewers noted the thoroughness with which the authors approached the work and all could understand how the ‘scope creep’ came about.

The section covering the Background to the Safe House program and the context for reviewing the needs of children is incorporated into an informative Background, Structure and Staffing section at the beginning of the report. All reviewers found this section well written and helpful.

The report is ostensibly a literature review, however it also combines some elements of a study (for example analysis of data obtained through interviews with some stakeholders) however it doesn’t contain either a full and detailed literature or a study with a clear hypothesis and protocol. The reviewers suggested that in future if further research be conducted NAPCAN determine a suitable methodology and scope, then the format and structure will follow.

The report is based on a solid foundation of well researched information however to be regarded as literature review it would need some revisions so as to include a methodology that outlines a search method (including search terms). A literature review needs to scrutinise the literature (studies) to see the quality of the work, examine the rigour of methods etc. in this document the emphasis on policy documents and other ‘grey’ or non peer reviewed literature. For a comprehensive and up to date literature review the scope would need to be further expanded to include recently published journal articles. The reviewers are not proposing that the work be re-conceptualised as a literature review, just making comment on this as a lesson learned.

**Social & Cultural Appropriateness**

The reviewers found the report responds to the social and cultural context of Aboriginal Family Violence and upholds children’s/human rights. It features examples that are likely to resonate with or reflect the lives of people using NT safe houses, which is likely to make it accessible and appropriate to The Women’s Safe Houses Operations Team. The way the report is framed is consistent with current thinking which proposes that children are best served when they are perceived to be affected members of the family/community.
Some of the material covered in the report is likely to be easily understood by women working in Safe Houses, recognising that this is not the intended audience. The Training Manual that accompanies the report is clearly evidence based. It has successfully converted the evidence from the published literature into training that is likely to be easily understood and relevant. The training manual seems to be full of practical activities and pitched at the right level.

Content

In terms of the content the report addresses the key needs of children affected by family violence while they are in a Safe House. The reviewers found that it includes most of the published significant and relevant research and presents the major schools of thought, although there are a few recent studies on the impact of exposure to family violence on children that are not included. This does not significantly alter the reliability of the contents.

The report thoroughly addresses the kind of support the workers need to be able to continue to do their jobs well if they are regarding children as clients in their own right with specific needs. These include the need for training, regular opportunities for reflective supervision and mentoring, recognition of the demanding nature of the work, staff trauma and triggers etc.

The recommendations related to the needs of children in a safe house environment are consistent with the report findings. However the reviewers described the report as containing too many recommendations and found that they address the program staff, the safe house staff, the parents and community leaders and are a mixture of long and short term recommendations. The many recommendations also have many resource implications.

The recommendations related to the needs of children in a safe house environment are consistent with the report findings. The reviewers found that the section related to the principles of working with families and specifically children affected by violence section is very good.

The reviewers were asked to consider what else, if anything, could be expected to be included in the report. They found that there could be more explicit recognition that the parent is the best person to support the child. More content about supporting the parent to think about the children’s needs, despite her being stressed, could be useful, for e.g. making a regular parent and children’s time together at the Safe House. These suggestions may be particularly helpful for the Next Steps. There was also a suggestion that the material, if made available as training, could include a few suggestions on what to do if the child can’t speak for themselves and the parent is not available emotionally, with the training encouraging Safe House Workers to think about whether there someone else that can speak for the child or help them to make their needs known.
**Style**

The report is comprehensive, however in several parts it is not easy to read – although the writing style is good, it’s too long, too dense. The report utilises appropriate language and messaging, however the emphasis is not clear, for example is the focus on evidence based policy, program or practice. Overall the language is appropriate (it displays the right level of sophistication, accessible vocabulary etc) however the report provides too much information for the target audience.

Overall although the content is informative the report is too long and as is usually the case, it would greatly benefit from professional editing and formatting to improve it’s readability. There is very little ‘white space’ on the draft pages. This puts the reader off starting to review the findings and may have contributed to the difficulty the client had in reviewing and commenting on the draft report prior to the project coming to an end.

**Next Steps**

In the opinion of the expert reviewers, the strength of the document lies in the fact that it is a comprehensive and tailored appraisal of actions and capacity building that could increase the child-friendliness of Safe Houses. Although some of the recommended actions would require additional resourcing to implement, there are also many changes that require only a re-orientation of service delivery. The document includes the main schools of thought to be found in the literature and the consultation that has taken place draws on the considerable expertise and lived experience of women’s shelter and safe house workers with a deep understanding of the relevant issues.

The current report is quite long. In order to strengthen the relevance of the document it could be broken up into several shorter papers, each of which targets a specific and narrow audience (for example ‘safe house workers’, ‘mothers of children seeking temporary shelter from family violence’).

Sections of the report could also be reproduced as advocacy documents or policy briefs that familiarise the reader with the range of current thinking in relation to a specific issues or area, and provides alternative courses of action they may wish to consider.

The document contains extensive content that is considered to be appropriate for informing the development of child friendly services, which is likely to be appropriate for program designers and Safe House managers.

This review considered what steps could be taken to maximize the return on investment in this project. Some suggestions include:

- Ensure the information is accessible and positioned to influence policy and practice
• Disseminate the information to interested stakeholders – the information is useful, new, fills a critical gap, will be of interest and valued by services providers working with Indigenous women and children, especially Safe House staff
• Don’t re-do the document as an academic lit review, instead publish in ‘trade’ journals and other accessible places
• Use the information and findings to inform advocacy
• Re-write as separate documents, for e.g. Safe House practical checklists, Working with Aboriginal Children in community based services, supporting staff to support children during their time in Safe Houses (mum’s are the first line of support for children) Making the physical environment safe and friendly
• Publish and circulate an advocacy piece on an appropriate forum on ‘Recognising children as clients’ with practical recommendations including doing their own assessment and file, memory box, safe people for support etc
• Develop and distribute Policy Briefs for e.g. Children as clients in their own right

Research Opportunities

The report identifies several areas where additional research is warranted. NAPCAN is in a key position to advocate for this research. Partnership research applications with Menzies School of Health Research (for example the Centre for Child Development and Education) could be pursued.

There are very few research reports available in relation to what children in remote areas of Australia think about family violence, the impact is has had on them and their relationships with their parents, what it is like to stay at a women’s shelter, and what it may be like to either return home in a period of uncertainty or to have to re-establish a new life in a different location. NAPCAN has found this fact quite remarkable considering how many children come into women’s shelters across the Northern Territory and other localities in Australia.... p 32

“This is a vital piece of research that needs to be undertaken as a priority or else how will we all know as adults if we are really providing at a crucial time in children’s lives what they really need.” p 34
Works Cited


A CODE OF ETHICS FOR PEOPLE WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

1. I commit whole-heartedly to caring for all children according to their needs. I will not discriminate for or against any child due to family, friendships, language or skin group, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, sexuality, religion or disability.

2. I will never knowingly harm a child physically or emotionally. I will never behave in a sexual way towards or in the presence of a child, and shall protect them from sexually inappropriate material.

3. I commit to being polite and respectful talking with and around children, and will listen to their stories and ideas about their own care needs.

4. I commit to respecting the many different ways of bringing up children. I will support families to make decisions about their children and keep them informed and involved in their child’s ongoing care.

5. I will seek to keep children connected to family, community, language and culture in the interests of their well-being, to benefit them now and throughout their life.

6. I will try to be a good role model for children and be my best self in their presence. I will promote the care and protection of children in my community and seek to be a role model for others in the way I live my life.

7. I will be respectful towards my colleagues, seeking their guidance and offering my assistance. I will respect my teachers, leaders and Elders, and will be open to a lot more learning.

8. I commit to respecting the privacy and dignity of children and their families and will keep a high level of confidentiality in relation to information shared with me.

9. I will put the best interests of children ahead of the interests or reputation of others, including my own family, friends, community members and people in authority.

10. I commit to upholding the law in relation to reporting child abuse and neglect and will raise any concerns about the safety of children to an appropriate supervisor or legal authority. I will follow and promote the policies for the safety of children as required by my organisation.

This code of ethics was initiated by NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Children Abuse and Neglect) and developed in partnership with other NT Peak Bodies SAF.T (Safe Aboriginal Families, Together) and NTCOSS (Northern Territory Council of Social Services) in 2012. It was inspired by: • the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 • the NT Aboriginal Health Worker Code of Ethics • the Hippocratic Oath • the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007.

Contact: nt@napcan.org.au. Research undertaken by Black Wattle Consulting