

Child and Family Focus SA Forum
“Improving Family Wellbeing and Child Protection:
What are our priorities for the next four years in SA?”
6 May 2022

Summary Report 1

Prepared by Forum Facilitator Julie McCrossin AM, 25 May 2022.

This is a summary overview of key themes discussed at the Child and Family Focus SA Forum held on 6 May 2022.

Sixty-eight participants attended from 28 organisations.

The format consisted of a series of interactive panel discussions with a wide variety of speakers.

There were also five video presentations recorded especially for the forum.

Fiona Endacott, CEO, Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers SA:

<https://youtu.be/01fwUZq2t3E>

Duration: 8.45 minutes.

Lindsay Wegener, Executive Director, PeakCare Inc. Queensland:

https://youtu.be/R7m6CTIND_w

Duration: 17 minutes.

Deb Tsorbaris, CEO, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Victoria.
Parts 1,2 and 3. Each part is on different topics as listed below.

Workforce, Keeping Children Safe in Care, Voice for Youth:

<https://youtu.be/hblwbGusmow>

Duration: 12.01 minutes.

Transition, Raising Age To 21, First Nations: <https://youtu.be/NUScRqe7OTU>

Duration: 8.37 minutes.

Positive Partnership with Government, Information Sharing Scheme, Listening to Children: <https://youtu.be/us8WqNETnyQ>

Duration: 12.30 minutes.

The YouTube links above can be shared.

Over the next eight weeks we will share with you four additional summary reports. These will outline in more depth the information discussed on a range of these topics.

The quotes included in this report are from the written feedback sheets completed by participants. They are answering the question: What should be our priorities for action?

If you would like to provide more feedback on key themes to share with the sector or key recommendations from the forum, please send them to julieccrossin@bigpond.com.

Key Themes

Opportunities to gather together as a sector to focus on solutions

The feedback on the value of the forum has been very positive. There is a strong interest in CAFFSA organising more opportunities for staff, at all levels in member organisations, to come together to discuss their work and how to improve it. There was a clear preference and request for a focus on positive solutions at future forums, not a reiteration of the problems. People want to hear what is working well in services. They want to discuss common challenges, but with the primary focus on how to address them. While the participants at the May 2022 Forum applauded the opportunity to hear panel members discuss a wide range of issues, they also want to have time to discuss issues in small groups.

"Support CAFFSA to hold these kinds of forums three or four times a year to provide continuous updates on achieving the key priorities and actions." Forum Participant.

"Continuous catch-ups and engagement with appropriate organisations." Conference Speaker.

Joint advocacy for positive reforms to improve safety for children and young people

Members are seeking an assertive, unified and evidence-based approach to advocacy from the sector to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Implicit in this call is a request for more opportunities to come together to share experience and develop consensus-based, joint positions on key issues to take to government and to implement in service provision.

"Use our sector strength to influence change in the protection and care of children and young people. We need to work together. Be one voice." Forum Participant.

"I want to see really brave advocacy prioritised. We have to be loud and adamant about the change that we want to see." Forum Participant.

“Advocacy - focus on contributing factors. There are increasing numbers of families living below the poverty line. The association of financial stress and DV was in the media this week. Housing affordability is a huge concern. The housing crisis is going to push more families into stress and crisis, which will ultimately impact on children and young people entering care. We need a universal income that allows people to live with dignity. We need a strong Medicare system that is all inclusive e.g. dental and mental health. To stop the cycle we need to invest in social policies and remove the poverty gap, and give equal opportunity for everyone to thrive.” Forum Participant

“I was keen to point out what I see as an inherent issue with advocacy in our sector which is a fear. Firstly we are trained to be modest and believe we are not experts. Secondly, we have seen so many things not work over the years, we are scared to put our name to something because we are not certain that it will work. And thirdly, we are still scared to bite the hand that feeds us, so we resist being critical of the Department and/or Ministers.” Forum Participant

“Review of the Child Safety Act. This will be an opportunity for CAFFSA and its members to examine policies, processes and approaches and advocate for more comprehensive improvements.” Forum Participant

“Lobby/advocate for social determinates to be addressed. Child and family wellbeing are directly affected by a range of social determinants and level of poverty. Poverty is a key driver of children being unsafe and neglected. Need to lobby for: Increase rate of social security payments (all of which are below poverty line); Increased public housing, housing affordability, secure and affordable rentals. Draw on data with evidence of improved wellbeing due to COVID supplement (i.e. increased social security payments, which enabled families to pay bills, buy more nutritious food and provide for children’s needs).”
Forum Participant

**First Nations peoples’ cultural authority:
Recognition, resourcing and implementation**

There is a great interest in the role of First Nations people as the source of cultural authority in decision-making about the care and welfare of the children in their communities. There was a strong message that First Nations people need the support of the most senior leaders in the sector’s organisations in order to obtain the resources, the First Nations staff and the cultural authority to promote the cultural safety and cultural identity of the First Nations children and young people in care. The need to maintain the cultural safety and general wellbeing of First Nations’ staff themselves within our organisations is also a key concern.

The forum heard from several First Nations speakers about initiatives in South Australia. We also heard presentations about the significant developments in Queensland and Victoria in relation to the transfer of decision-making authority to First Nations people within the child protection and family welfare systems in those states.

The Evaluation Sheets asked participants to nominate what they had found most useful at the forum. Many commented on the value of hearing the views of First Nations speakers. Here are some examples.

"Hearing from some of the First Nations leaders in the sector. Sarah from Relationships Australia and her ideas and passion for family consultation and comparing data and outcomes to NZ." Forum Participant

"Hearing the discussion from the First Nations women in the room." Forum Participant

"Listening to the cultural expertise and the importance of family relationships." Forum Participant

"Sarah's very powerful presentation on First Nations children and the importance of Family Group Conferencing and children's stories having the power to effect family change." Forum Participant

Participants nominated a range of priorities for action in relation to First Nations' issues in their worksheets. Here are some examples:

"Increased input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Considering the statistics of more Aboriginal young people coming into care, we need to listen to these voices. I feel there has been little meaningful change in this space. I'd love to see more resources and support for culturally safe and appropriate recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster and kinship carers." Forum Participant.

"Getting it right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Changing the way that society interacts with us to listen to us deeply and give us back the power and resources that we need to make the right decisions." Forum Participant.

"More resources towards reunification and support services to get more children and young people back home safely." Forum Participant.

"Stronger focus on the voices of key people in the young person's life. Young person's view on their family and where they want to live, particularly Aboriginal people. Ensure face-to-face visits happen regularly. Lower caseloads. Allow a greater focus on support and relationships. Consideration for private sector to take on case management." Forum Participant.

The next summary report will provide more information on First Nations issues as presented by the First Nations people at the forum.

Workforce development is the fundamental priority, including Foster Carer and Kinship Carer recruitment, engagement, training and support.

Every recommendation for positive improvement in the child protection and family welfare system that we discussed at the forum will only be possible if we have the right workforce and the right culture. There is no greater priority than the development of an effective workforce plan for the attraction, retention, professional development and supportive supervision of our people.

The key message from Fiona Endacott, CEO, Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers South Australia is the need to embed the full spirit of the South Australian Statement of Commitment with Foster and Kinship Carers into the culture of all sector agencies. Essentially, this means that foster and kinship carers are informed, supported, consulted, valued and respected. This will be more fully explored in a future forum summary.

The need to recommit to breaking down the silos between all the government and non-government organisations that play a role in child protection and family welfare was a recurring theme. The Victorian speaker, Deb Tsorbaris highlighted the significant legislative reforms in that state to foster the all-important information sharing that so many inquiries and Royal Commissions have emphasised is essential to save the lives of children.

"Child Protection Workforce – planning, training, sustainability and improvement of Aboriginal Controlled Organisations. Need trained and resourced DCP workforce and avoid using recruitment agencies to contract untrained care workforce." Forum Participant.

"Create a closer collaboration within the Family and Domestic Violence sector as there is so much overlap in our work."

"Adequate support, professional development, training and remuneration for workers, carers and organisations working in this space. Particularly for workers who are expected to work outside of 9 to 5 in order to be effective in regards to relationship building with clients and families." Forum Participant.

"We must understand how trauma and complexity intersect in the families we work with. We are so siloed, how can we understand complexity? We need to be more wholistic." Forum Participant.

"Increased workforce development to keep staff in their roles. Understanding that meaningful change occurs in the context of safe, supported relationships. So for client outcomes, staff retention is key." Forum Participant.

"Increasing the safety and stability for children in care. Grow family-based care. Reinvigorate Foster Care recruitment and retention strategies, including reviewing remuneration." Forum Participant

"Expansion and adequate funding of programs that we know work. Reduction in constant recommissioning, fighting for funding and grant applications. Short contracts result in the loss of good staff and contribute to instability for the kids."
Forum Participant

Value of all the voices of lived experience: children and young people; siblings; family; foster carers.

Participants emphasised the value of hearing the views of young people who had been in care. The key message from the young people was a profound yearning for stability. They spoke eloquently of the need for stability with their foster or other carers, support workers, schools and community connections. They want support workers to telephone and visit regularly, listen and develop relationships of trust and support. They want their concerns to be heard and investigated. They want to feel safe.

The issue of achieving sexual safety, while in care and after leaving care, was also raised by young adults who had grown up in care. Concerns were raised about the high rate of sexual assault experienced by young people who had been in care and the challenges of avoiding assault after leaving care.

A key message was the desire to maintain connection with their siblings and, if they aren't able to live together, then they need regular, reliable contact.

Several young adults, who had been in care for much of their lives, participated actively in the in-depth discussions at the forum. There was a keen interest in hearing how children and young people can participate and contribute to decision-making and improving services, both while they are in care, and also after they have left care. Representatives of the CREATE Foundation shared examples of the work they do to support young people as advocates for positive change.

In the Evaluation Sheets, many participants listed hearing the views of young people who had been in care as among the most useful parts of the day. Here are some examples:

"Hearing the voice of the young person. William and Felicity were so very powerful."
Forum Participant

"Hearing the voices of young people with experience of the system." Forum Participant

"Hearing from the young people's experiences." Forum Participant

"Hearing from the young people directly." Forum Participant

"The perspectives of the young people with lived experience." Forum Participant

"Hearing from young people who were in care and their perspectives which should be placed at the centre of all our efforts in this space." Forum Participant

The value of hearing the voices of all key people with lived experience in contact with the child protection system was also raised. The importance of hearing the voices of parents, siblings, extended family members and foster carers was emphasised. Family Group Conferencing and other strategies and systems for ensuring wide participation in decision making, to ensure the best possible results for the children and young people in need, were discussed.

"Parents' role in supporting young people in care. This is important for young people's stability. For parents to address concerns and have a positive relationship."
Forum Participant.

"Increased lived-experience voice, including children and young people, families, carers etc. New approaches to early intervention / prevention / foster care / kinship care / residential care. Models need to be co-designed with lived experience voice, especially regarding First Nations peoples." Forum Participant.

Family Group Conferencing

There is a great interest in Family Group Conferencing for ensuring all voices are heard and that children and young people and their families actively participate in finding sustainable solutions based on the primacy of family relationships. The value of Family Group Conferencing as a First Nations approach was highlighted.

“Family Group Conferencing training across the sector to assist the department to look at the model within their work.” Forum Participant.

“Family Group Conferencing - in every aspect of a child's life - entering care, 12-months plan led by the child, child centred, the voice of the child. Asking the child what they need, what do they want their care to look like? Restorative Practice. Reinvestment in Children Restorative Circles with everyone in the child's life.” Forum Participant.

“Family Group Conferencing – Place emphasis on FGC being introduced and used earlier, as a preventable and supportive measure before using more interventionist approaches or a child is removed. Organisations such as RASA (Relationships Australia South Australia) and AFSS (Aboriginal Family Support Services), who are intended to address ‘imminent risk’ could be further supported and funded to intervene earlier and play a more immediate/responsive role, which could include FGC whenever appropriate.” Forum Participant.

Resourcing early intervention, prevention of abuse and deaths and keeping families together

This was a primary concern of everyone at the forum. Speakers discussed services that are achieving good results and there was a universal desire to see more resources invested in early intervention and prevention. A common demand, including from First Nations’ speakers, was the need for more time to be given to efforts to support families and build the capacity for positive change, before children were removed for long periods of time.

“Invest in prevention and early intervention strategies, in particular keeping Aboriginal families together. Expand Family Group Conferencing to include early, middle and end stages of care.” Forum Participant.

CREATE Foundation’s advocacy: voice, siblings, and integrated support

The contribution of representatives from the CREATE Foundation was warmly received. It was notable that CREATE provides opportunities for children and young people in care to gather together at safe community events with their siblings and that family members, foster parents and other friends are welcome to attend. This inclusive, integrated approach was strongly supported by the young people. The role of CREATE in supporting young people to speak up and be heard and to advocate for themselves was also endorsed in a heartfelt way by the young people present. In a child protection system where foster carers, kinship carers and some professionals report that they struggle to have their views heard, respected and taken into account, it is clear that agencies building the capacity of self-advocacy for young people play a vital role.

Taking responsibility for taking evidence-based solutions to government

The video presentations, recorded for the forum, by the leaders of the Queensland and Victorian peak agencies, Lindsay Wegener, Executive Director, PeakCare Inc and Deb Tsorbaris, CEO, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare each placed great emphasis on the importance of taking solutions to government, not problems. Each emphasised that the key to effective advocacy to improve policies and funding for the child protection sector, and thus to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, was evidence-based recommendations for reform. The taking of responsibility for finding and implementing effective solutions to entrenched problems was seen as the key to attracting the attention, respect and support of ministers, Treasury officials and departmental staff.

Building an effective working partnership with the Department of Child Protection

The sector is crying out for a more effective, mutually-respectful working partnership with the Department of Child Protection (DCP) in order to improve the experience and safety of children and young people, as well as their carers and families.

The leaders of the Queensland and Victorian peak agencies, Lindsay Wegener, Executive Director, PeakCare Inc and Deb Tsorbaris, CEO, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare outlined their approaches to achieving this goal in their states. Links to these video presentations are included above.

In the Evaluation Sheets completed by attendees, we asked: How could we improve a forum like this in the future? The responses included requests to involve DCP staff.

"Find ways to bring Government departments into the conversations. Speakers today were fantastic but I felt there was a lack of representation from DCP. If we want to achieve meaningful change, in the system and in the lives of children and young people, we need to come together across sectors and NFP/NGO and government."
Forum Participant.

Increased collaboration and partnership with interstate colleagues

Participants welcomed the opportunity to hear high level briefings from interstate colleagues. There is support for more effective collaboration, communication, sharing of resources and research and contact between staff within interstate peak agencies and service providers.

The Evaluation sheets asked participants to nominate what was most useful about the forum. The answers included:

"Hearing people from interstate, who had information on HOW we could advocate for change, was most useful." Forum Participant.

"The learnings from Victoria and Queensland." Forum Participant

"Hearing content from different states." Forum Participant.

"Hearing from other states. Loved hearing from Lindsay Wegener." Forum Participant.

"Hearing what the other states are doing in child protection, including with Aboriginal children." Forum Participant.

"Deb Tsorbaris' clear and concise information." Forum Participant.

How do we know we are making a positive difference?

Building the evidence base through research and evaluation

The call to focus on solutions and to take responsibility for advocating for evidence-based reforms from government raises the obvious question: how do we know we are making a positive difference in our work? There is an interest in building capacity within the sector for assessing our own effectiveness through research and evaluation, not only for the purpose of attracting funding, but to ensure we are doing effective work.

"We need to invest in genuine, robust impact measurement. We need to know what actually works to make a meaningful difference." Forum Participant.

"Data collection. Reporting on whether things are working. DCP Practice Principles Approach." Forum Participant.

Primacy of mental health and need to improve every aspect of support.

The first call for the need to improve mental health support for children and young people in care came from the young people themselves at the start of the forum. This theme was affirmed by other participants. The need to improve the experience of young people attending Emergency Departments was highlighted. The need to do more to prevent self-harm and suicide among young people in care was strongly affirmed.

"Address the system gap in the interface between the health and child protection systems to ensure children and young people with mental health issues and trauma-related behaviour receive the mental health services they need." Forum Participant.

Increasing the age when a young person leaves care and improving the availability of on-going support.

There was strong support for increasing the age at which a young person leaves care. There was also strong support for continuing to improve the provision of “wrap around services” and networks of support in the lead up to leaving care and in the months and years to follow.

“We need to improve the experience of young people leaving care. Better planning, support, resources extending to 21.” Forum Participant.

“Increase the age for remaining in care to 21 years and ensure wrap-around services are in place for each young person.” Forum Participant.

“Push for children’s age to 21 re legislative care. But build into this a clear pathway for kids. How to get electricity on, how to book appointments. Bigger stuff like self-care. Otherwise 21 becomes the new 18 and young people are no better off.” Forum Participant.

“Raise leaving care age to 21-25 years. Decrease the risk of homelessness. More natural experience for young person. Support transition to independent living. Ongoing support for young person.” Forum Participant