



Northern Territory Council of Social Service

**NTCOSS Care and Protection Engagement Strategy
July 2010 – June 2011**

Interim Report June 2011

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Introduction

The position relating to the service agreement Care and Protection Engagement started in October 2010, just prior to the Growing Them Strong Together Report was published. The funding was provided for 6 months but we have been able to keep the position going for 9mths. The service agreement was developed and signed before the Report was published and so required some anticipation or guess work around ensuring the service agreement would link in well with the report recommendations.

The main Service Activity was described as 'design and lead the development of a Care and Protection Strategy with the NGO sector'.

Once the report was published the Department immediately set about implementing change particularly internally and managed to cover an enormous amount of ground in implementing recommendations of the report, changing its own structure and generally reinventing itself.

We recognise the pressures on the DHF during this time and the complexities of the change process being undertaken. It is a massive challenge to implement the recommendations in the report particularly in the timeframe required. It has also been a challenge for NTCOSS to develop a new project and define along the way, the most effective ways for us to work with both the department and the sector.

The following suggestions might be helpful in achieving greater outcomes of this service agreement:

- Clearer deliverables in the funding agreement
- Consistency in Direction
- Realistic expectations around both NTCOSS and the Department's involvement
- Easier information flow to the NGO sector
- Open and transparent communication

Context and Background

The context of the position was strongly aligned with the recommendation of the Board of Inquiry Report. The Report recommended fundamental changes to the child protection system itself, and asked for the development of a new role of the NGO sector in the early intervention and prevention arena to ensure the wellbeing of Northern Territory children. The report also highlighted the need for greater involvement and control of Aboriginal communities and organisations within the child and family sector, such as the establishment of an Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Peak Body and ACCAs as a top priority. While this task was given to AMSANT, NTCOSS's role was identified as engaging the NGO sector in the design and implementation of the new system.

NTCOSS developed strong and productive working relationships with the Darwin based Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Peak Body Working Group, NAPCAN, Menzies School of Health Research, the

Office of the Children's Commissioner and many service organisations and individual service providers.

As part of the reform agenda of the newly established Department of Children and Families new networks were established to break down the silo approach in government and also to encourage collaboration between government and the NGO sector. The following committees and working groups have been established as a consequence: Child Safety and Wellbeing Director's Network, with representation of every government department and NGO representation, the Information Sharing and Legislative Reform Reference Group, ensuring legislative changes allow for better functioning of information sharing in referral processes and joined case management. The Integrated Family Services Working Group is led by DET with a focus on Early Childhood and was established before the BOI report was published. The Integrated Family Services Working Group is embedded in the broader context of the Working Future strategy and Closing the Gap initiative and is part of the Local Implementation Plans.

The Child and Family Development Advisor represents the sector as a member on these committees and working groups. While the non-government sector appreciates the intention to include the NGO sector in the Child Safety and Wellbeing Director's Network, the question has arisen if this is a fair representation of the sector or if the membership needs to be broadened to include other NGO. Concerns have been raised by the sector about a possible imbalance between strongly represented government agencies and an under representation of non-government sector. While NTCOSS represents the sector on a policy level, all Networks and committees could benefit from the expertise and knowledge that professionals on the ground from other NGOs bring. Also there is the recognition that the NGO sector is not a cohesive entity but consists of a multitude and variety of organisations,

NTCOSS also continued as a member of the Northern Territory Families and Children Advisory Group, whose function it is to provide advice to the Minister but changed our representative to Lava Kohaupt.

This is not the place to elaborate on the broader issues of Aboriginal disadvantage in the Northern Territory which is very well documented elsewhere, however it is important to understand that traditionally Aboriginal children made up 77% of notifications to the statutory child protection system. Issues around neglect, lack of education and employment, overcrowding and poor health outcomes are still prevalent in remote communities. (See [Dr Howard Bath: Disparity and Disadvantage- The context of Child Protection in the NT](#))

The broader political context the reform of the child protection system is situated in relates the Northern Territory Emergency Response, also known as the Intervention, the Local Government Reform, the Closing the Gap and the Working Futures Initiatives. All of these focus on the Aboriginal population of the territory mostly in remote communities and the so called growth towns. The multitude of initiatives highlights the need for better collaboration between the 3 tiers of government and the community sector to address the complexities of the issues in an integrated way. The challenge the Department of Children and Families faces is to ensure that the child protection reform can take the already occurring developments on board and complement them in a

productive way, without doubling up, adding confusion in communities and people becoming 'reform- tired'.

Activities

NTCOSS undertook extensive consultations through forums, conference, smaller meetings and individual sessions in Darwin, Katherine, Tenant Creek, Alice Springs, Ntaria, Galiwin'ku, Maningrida, Ngukurr and met with individuals from Gunbalanya and Yirrkala in Darwin. Meetings and individual sessions were with a variety of people, such as staff from the big NGOs (NTG or Federal funded) as well as staff from small local Aboriginal corporations, also some community leaders in remote communities. Government workers such as the General Business Manager and the Families as First Teachers Educator and School Teachers or School Counsellors were also involved; so were Clinic staff, which could be an Aboriginal controlled health clinic or a clinic run by the Northern Territory Department of Health.

The response to the newly created role of Child and Family Development Advisor was varied. In Darwin the first forum found an enthusiastic response with over 70 people attending, while the Alice Springs community sector took a little longer to become engaged. Remote communities in general welcomed the opportunity to bring their concerns forward.

Some of the issues brought forward varied in particular between urban and remote settings , however the main concerns were shared by all service providers and community members across the board:

- Relationship NGO-DCF
- Infrastructure in remote
- Capacity building NGO sector to take on new role including Remote workforce issues
- Evidence base

It also became evident that the sector is not a cohesive group, but rather diverse. A child and family sector was near to not existent, most services providing a child and family support services as part of a broader range of services.. Apart from the only recently funded targeted family support services there doesn't appear to be a specialised family support service within the Territory.. The clinical knowledge within the Territory around family support, parenting and child development is underdeveloped compared to other states. The project so far has worked to build a stronger and more cohesive child and family services sector.

Relationship NGO - DCF

Historically the relationship between the Department and the NGO sector was often characterised by distrust and misunderstandings. Communication has been perceived as being one way, the sector providing information to the Department due to the mandatory reporting requirements, but not

receiving any information back about the whereabouts of children or families or the development in their investigations or interventions. While most community service workers recognise that one of the reasons for the unequal relationship between the Government and NGO sector is the immense pressure that Department workers are under due to caseloads and child protection legislation, community workers often felt they were treated with contempt and disrespect.

The difference in the philosophical underpinning between a risk management and a therapeutic or strength based approach of intervention also added to further misunderstandings, as NGO workers and child protection workers almost speak different languages and go about the relationship building with families in a different way. (See Growing Them Strong Together Report p. 669)

The difference is also reflected in the two work cultures which easily clash, the NGO sector being more informal, relying more on personal relationships and being more process orientated. The need for formalised processes is foreign to most community workers whose first priority is the wellbeing of the client. Often they have felt as being seen as unprofessional by Department workers for their informal approach.

Many service providers also expressed concern about the lack of information flow regarding the reform process.

The history of the stolen generation, the often cultural ignorance of child protection workers and the disempowerment of Aboriginal workers and clients by the child protection system have only further exasperated the feeling of disengagement and alienation. The lack of consultation when the Federal Emergency Response or Intervention was introduced has added another layer to the feeling of disempowerment and frustration.

This history of child removal and some current out of home care processes and practices have led to a big proportion of the Aboriginal population feeling traumatised by the system, requiring more than reassurance to trust the current reform will respect their rights. Often department staff do not understand the impact of traumatisation or how to apply this knowledge in the interaction with families. At times there is a lack of awareness of the power differential between the department and the client and/or the community sector.

To build a new system to protect children in the Northern Territory we will need collaboration between government and the community sector. This will not be achieved unless past hurt and distrust has been addressed.

Possible Solutions

- Providing joint training and professional development between Community and DCF worker might build not only personal relationships but can assist in developing a common language and understanding. While the approach of intervention will still differ between statutory functions and family support, both approaches could be recognised, valued and understood as two parts of the same coin, to achieve best outcomes for families.

- The use of a common assessment tools will support joint case planning and management, Training in the use of this tool should be a joint event to ensure DCF and NGO workers are on the same page.
- The planned changes to the information sharing legislation will also assist in breaking down some of the barriers of equal, reciprocal communication.
- The Department has managed to reduce caseloads for individual worker by recruiting more staff. This will also assist in building new relationships as staff members will have more capacity to work collaboratively with the NGO sector. However there needs to be mechanisms in place to ensure that the cultural shift which has been initiated by the leadership of the Department trickles down to the front line workers.
- The planned regular newsletter will assist in keeping the sector informed about the progress of the reform.
- An agreed aim to change the relationship between the two sectors into one of trust and support where weaknesses or difficulties can be acknowledged and worked with in a productive manner.
- The building of new and trusting relationships between DCF and NGO workers will require strong leadership from the top of the department side and the establishment of formal structures for ongoing dialogue. A healing forum has been suggested as a mechanism to allow past trauma to be addressed.

Infrastructure in remote communities

While the housing shortage is not directly the responsibility of the Department of Children and Families it is evident that overcrowding in houses in remote communities will lead to a continuation of neglect, physical abuse of children and children being exposed to family violence and sexual behaviour. As mentioned by community workers in Galiwin'ku some people sleep in shifts, as there is not enough room for beds, making it hard for students to get enough sleep to attend school. While the SIHIP funding provided for building of a considerable number of new houses overcrowding is still a reality and the new infrastructure is not keeping up with population growth and is only partly rectifying past neglect. Also there have been no new houses built in non Growth Towns such as Yarralin or Barunga.

The lack of staff accommodation is a major barrier to service delivery in the regional centres (Tenant Creek) and remote communities. Most funding agreements do not allow for development of infrastructure which often means that services cannot fill positions due to the lack of housing for staff or lack of premises for service provision. NGOs cannot access housing that is leased by government departments even if it is vacant.

Possible Solutions

- More housing development is needed in remote communities, growth towns as well as other communities, to ensure housing is to a standard that allows for children to thrive, including enough bedrooms, functional bathrooms and food preparation areas.
- Review land release policies in regional centres with a view to opening up more opportunities in regional centres.
- Options such as incentives for private housing development, affordable housing and social housing in regional areas such as Tennant Creek could be explored.
- A system that allows for infrastructure including housing and vehicles to be used between government departments and the NGO sector would use limited resources more productively.

Capacity Building within the NGO Sector

Historically the NGO sector in the Northern Territory has been underdeveloped considering its particular needs due its high percentage of vulnerable population, remoteness and lack of infrastructure. The variety of specialised services being taken for granted in other jurisdictions is not available within the Territory. Workers within the Territory are more often a 'Jack or Jill of all trades' rather than a qualified specialist. While this skill set can be beneficial to the situation in remote communities which require the ability to provide end to end services, it might restrict the variety of service provision required. Families miss out on specialised intervention, which raises the question of standards and consistency between different locations.

Attracting qualified staff into the Territory community sector is difficult. In a survey of the community sector undertaken by NTCOSS in 2007 71% of the respondent indicated that they had experienced difficulty attracting appropriate qualified staff (compared to 58% in a national ACOSS survey). Many people shun the frontier experience as the local infrastructure and services in the Territory are underdeveloped. Many workers hesitate to expose their families to live in isolated, 'third world conditions' with little educational opportunities and lack of health services. For some professionals family commitments down south make it hard to move into the NT or require them to leave before the timeframe they initially intended.

Accommodation issues are another reason for leaving the Territory as people identified in the above mentioned survey. While accommodation shortage is severe in remote communities, house prices and rent in Darwin have skyrocketed, and have made it impossible for some NGO workers to afford to buy or rent a home. Some community workers have left interstate due to the housing crises.

As a consequence staff turnover is high and at a rate of 36.3% much higher than the national average of 14.3%.

Ad hoc, short term funding agreement do not allow for job security or long-term strategic program development, therefore creating restlessness in the workforce.

There is a lack of training opportunities and a lack of supervision. The physical isolation contributes to the lack of exposure of professionals to peers. Often services are small and one person being on leave, recreational, study or sick leave, leaves the service vulnerable and under pressure.

High cost of living in the Territory and low wages within the sector are other barriers to attracting and retaining qualified staff as long as the wages disparity between government and the NGO sector stay at the current scale. The NGO sector is also often plagued by a lack of resourcing such as infrastructure and professional development opportunities due to lack of funding.

Many of the smaller locally grown service providers do not have the management structure in place to fulfil government requirements around accountability and governance. Local workers have not the appropriate formal qualification or might not have the educational background to acquire the formal qualifications. Not all people in remote communities have the level of functionality required to take on a demanding job.

Possible Solutions

Recommendation 10 of the BOI report specifies the development of the NGO sector to provide an early intervention and prevention family support system and requires significant new investment into the sector to fulfil this role. The sector is already struggling to fulfil its current role, so a new approach is needed to build its capacity into the future.

The wage equity claim currently under review might alleviate the issue around low wages as long as the Australian and the Northern Territory Government come on board with increase in funding. Alternatively, if the wage claim is successful but added funding is not provided, many organisations may be forced to cut back on current levels of service provision and reduce staff hours.

Longer funding cycles creates more job security as well as job satisfaction as long term planning can achieve long term goals.

The quick fix to the workforce issue is often seen as bringing qualified staff from interstate or international to the Territory to ensure quality of service provision. Often this is interpreted as a continuation of a colonising approach by the local community. It has also been proven to be problematic in terms of sustainability, what happens if the qualified worker leaves. Also developing cultural competency takes time, and is not often achieved if people only stay for a short period of time. Investment in training local staff proves to be much more worthwhile and sustainable than training transient workers.

This raises the question of how can we better build the capacity and train local staff to marry the

concept of local ownership with the need to high standards in service provision.

More VET opportunities are required in regional and remote communities. Once local people are employed, consistent support and mentoring should be available to develop further skills. The model of working in pairs, one Non-Aboriginal worker with an Aboriginal worker has been very successful, the professional knowledge being complemented by local cultural expertise, ensuring a two way learning process.

Undertaking a workforce survey such as the National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census might be helpful.

The option of developing an accredited training body to ensure ongoing, up to date, consistent and quality training and professional development for community service workers should be explored. This body, funded by DEEWR, could run along similar lines as the Professional Support Coordinator NT for Early Childhood Workers or CRANA for nurses.

Many community workers bring with them extraordinary enthusiasm and commitment to their work and have learned to adapt to the most physically and emotional difficult and complex situations, which require a high degree of independence, resilience and innovation. Many community workers also have intimate knowledge of their communities and clients. Supporting those workers with quality supervision and debriefing opportunities to prevent burnout and offering flexible working conditions is essential to retain valuable social capital.

The exploration of the issues around capacity building of the sector and workforce development will be a major part of future work for NTCOSS. We anticipate that we will discover two distinct areas which require support:

1. Direct service provision including workforce development
2. Organisational capacity including governance, business and financial management.

Evidence Based Practice

Currently there are a variety of programs focusing on children and families implemented within the Northern Territory, some by Government such as the Families as First Teachers, some by NGO and some are driven by the local communities. Most of these programs are within the early intervention and prevention level, but some have a therapeutic approach or are about providing out of home care services. Services currently are uncoordinated and funded randomly without an overall strategic direction.

A new investment framework obviously will be guided by the principle of value for money, which leads to the question of evidence based practice. While some of the programs implemented in the Territory come with a wealth of research and evidence others have been grown locally with little research apart from case notes and observations by local workers.

The well researched programs such as 'Families and Schools Together' have often been developed overseas, mostly in the United States. This obviously opens up the question: 'how do they translate into remote communities'? Is the current practice informed by evidence of remote service provision? So even if programs have been well researched their appropriateness for Aboriginal families in remote communities might not be proven. However in the case of FAST the evaluation framework readily translated into remote communities and has shown excellent results. Consideration needs to be given to that fact that local engagement and ownership are one of the prerequisites for positive outcomes and change.

So far the community sector in particular in remote communities has been under- resourced and has not had the capacity to do its own research or outsource research. In most cases workers also have been so pressed that only little meaningful internal evaluation of programs has been possible.

Possible Solutions

Menzies School of Health has successfully engaged local Aboriginal communities in research and also has expanded its corporate knowledge into the child protection arena. One of the solutions could be to involve an organisation such as Menzies into developing a framework for remote services to evaluate their programs or fund an organisation to research some of the home-grown services. Once a local evidence base is established it can serve as a reference point for future work. It could also assist in the establishment of a quality assurance mechanism, which could be applied to all DCF funded services within the Territory.

Ideally the Department could provide a funding stream for research and innovation to allow local organisations greater access and ability to evaluate programs.

Funding agreements need to be more rigorous to ensure quality and fidelity. Documentation and monitoring of what is being developed need to be part of performance measure.

Considering the uniqueness of the situation in the Northern Territory it would be desirable if organisations had the space to explore and develop innovative and creative approaches to the complexity of issues and challenges they face.

Conclusion

Many changes have been implemented by the department since the Report was published nine months ago, one of them being the engagement of the sector in the discussion relating to the reform. NTCOSS values the shared understanding between the department and the community sector of a new beginning. Covering new ground has been challenging at times but has also opened up new directions in working together.

Overall the position has made considerable progress in engaging the community sector in the design

and development of a care and protection strategy. The level of engagement varies between different localities and regions, and depends partly on locations travelled to and consulted with but also partly on community sector's readiness to engage.

Consultations have also highlighted the diversity and lack of cohesion within the sector and the importance of building stronger relationships within the sector and with the department. There is still a lot of changes to be put into place until we can work collaboratively within the sector and with the department to fulfil the enormous task of protecting children.

NTCOSS welcomes the Department recognising the importance of building the capacity of the sector as a key area of the reform. We are looking forward to being involved in the development of the strategic investment framework and believe that NTCOSS is well placed to identify the capacity needed and workforce issues. The fact that the sector has been underdeveloped historically brings with it its own challenges in building its capacity.