

## Change for Children – Tasmania’s 10-year Strategy – September 2024

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Tasmanian Government’s draft version of the Change for Children 10-year Strategy (the Strategy).

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. We represent around 180 community service organisations, students and individuals working across child and family services in both states. Our services provide wrap-around supports to children, young people, and families experiencing co-occurring forms of disadvantage, including sexual abuse, family violence, neglect and interactions with the child protection system.

### *Strengths of the strategy*

The Centre welcomes the Strategy and the Tasmanian government’s recognition of the need for substantial, system-wide reform to guard against the sexual abuse of children. The Strategy consultation draft has clearly defined objectives that aim to uphold the rights of all children, including victim survivors – whether their experiences have been disclosed or not – and ensure that children are safe in all the places where they live, play, learn and heal.<sup>1</sup> These goals are central to the success of a strategic plan of this nature, and the Strategy recognises that keeping children safe is an ongoing, community-wide commitment.

### **Recognising child maltreatment**

The Strategy recognises the long-term need for addressing child sexual abuse in developing its ten-year plan. Research and evidence suggest that this is a necessary approach, given that one in four Australians aged over 16 years of age have experienced some form of child sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup> The most prevalent forms of child maltreatment are significant public health concerns: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to family violence. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study shows that, previously, the extent of damage caused by these abuse types was not fully understood, and that certain cohorts of children are more vulnerable to experiencing them than others and that the consequences can be lifelong.<sup>3</sup>

### **Identification of at risk-cohorts**

The Strategy highlights how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children with disability, gender diverse children, and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, face significant risk of abuse. It is important that the Strategy recognises these cohorts and the need for unique supports that can improve their outcomes.

### **Child rights**

The commitment to building a system that upholds and centres children’s rights, and values the expertise of victim survivors is a commendable vision for Tasmania.<sup>4</sup> The Strategy commits the Government to

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<sup>1</sup> Tasmanian Government (2024), Change for Children 10-year Strategy – Consultation Draft [https://keepingchildrensafe.tas.gov.au/documents/32/CONSULTATION\\_DRAFT\\_Change\\_for\\_Children\\_Strategy.pdf](https://keepingchildrensafe.tas.gov.au/documents/32/CONSULTATION_DRAFT_Change_for_Children_Strategy.pdf), pg. 3

<sup>2</sup> Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J.G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D.J., Erskine, H.E., Thomas, H.J., Lawrence, D.M., Haslam, D.M., Malacova, E. and Dunne, M.P. (2023), The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Med J Aust*, 218: S13-S18. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>

<sup>3</sup> Haslam D., Mathews B., Pacella R., Scott J., Finkelhor D., Higgins D., Meinck F., Erskine H., Thomas H., Lawrence D., Malacova E. (2023). The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>4</sup> Tasmanian Government (2024), Change for Children 10-year Strategy – Consultation Draft, [https://keepingchildrensafe.tas.gov.au/documents/32/CONSULTATION\\_DRAFT\\_Change\\_for\\_Children\\_Strategy.pdf](https://keepingchildrensafe.tas.gov.au/documents/32/CONSULTATION_DRAFT_Change_for_Children_Strategy.pdf), pg.3

upholding ‘the right to be protected from sexual abuse,’ as stated in Article 34 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, by translating this and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations into organisational standards and practices. Feedback provided to the Centre by our members identified that while this was promising to see, this is not the only avenue for government in upholding the rights of the child, and that the Strategy should reflect the broader accountability of the Government.

### **Government accountability**

The introduction of a New Commission for Children and Young People, the Independent Implementation Monitor, and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations now enshrined in legislation as Tasmania’s Child and Youth Safe Standards, are positive steps to keep children safe in Tasmania. Implementation of the Victim-Survivor Advisory Group in addition to the Lived Experience Advisory Panel will help make sure that the voices of those impacted by sexual abuse are heard. The ability of the Independent Implementation Monitor to hold to account the Premier, Ministers and others responsible for the implementation of the Strategy gives this reform a strong sense of credibility and independence.

*Areas for further clarification and consideration:*

### **Child Safety Reform Implementation Monitor**

As above, the Centre commends the introduction of the Child Safety Reform Implementation Monitor. However, the final draft of the Strategy could be strengthened by identifying how and when the Monitor will be appointed. As of August 2024, 44 of the 191 recommendations have been completed. Further clarity could be provided on how the Government is overseeing the implementation of these, and what processes will be in place to ensure independent monitoring and review until the Monitor is established.<sup>5</sup>

### **Out of Home Care priority area**

Recommendation 9.2 of the Strategy outlines the plan for Out of Home Care (OoHC) to be transitioned from government to the community services sector. The Strategy also commits to working with Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) which deliver OoHC services. This transition process will require time, effort, and resources with clear expectations and specific details. The commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being placed in the care of Aboriginal organisations and with Aboriginal families (where possible) is welcome but also needs further clarification as to how this will be achieved.

### **Youth Justice reform priority area**

The Strategy commits to raising the age of criminal responsibility in Tasmania from 10 to 14 years by 2029 and to increase the minimum age of detention of children to 16 years. UNICEF and other international bodies suggest that 14 should be the minimum age of criminal responsibility consistent with children’s rights.<sup>6</sup>

The Centre supports the closure of the Ashley Detention Centre and suggests that the timeline (by June 2026) be brought forward to reduce the number of young people incarcerated there. The safety and security of current residents must be prioritised.

### **Disability framework**

The Strategy acknowledges that children with disabilities face higher rates of sexual abuse. However, the policy document referred to in the Strategy is now 3 years out of date and written in a pre-Covid world. The

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<sup>5</sup> Keeping Children Safe (2024) Recommendation Status. <https://keepingchildrensafe.tas.gov.au/recommendation-status/>

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF (2024), Legal Minimum Ages and the Realization of Adolescents’ Rights, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/2771/file/PDF%20Minimum%20age%20for%20criminal%20responsibility.pdf>, p.2

Strategy needs to acknowledge the impact of Covid and the need for a new and updated Accessible Island policy framework.

### **Prevention**

While the Strategy recognises the importance of preventing child sexual abuse - and the underlying issues which make children more vulnerable to experiencing institutional abuse (such as involvement in the youth justice system or OoHC) – the Centre would like to see an even stronger focus on prevention in the final draft of the Strategy. Prevention of abuse is a government and community-wide commitment, and clear communication and community education are essential to the ongoing change that will reduce harms to children and young people.

### **Conclusion**

As the peak body for children and families in Tasmania, we look forward to supporting the Government through the reform phases to improve outcomes for children, young people, adults and families who have been impacted by child sexual abuse.