



Submission to the Department of Social Services in relation to the National Centre for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

1. Summary

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians has observed that the role and scope of the National Centre for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse has continued to shift since its announcement by the Prime Minister on 22 October 2018.

This shift appears to reduce the emphasis on the experiences of the adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and increase the emphasis on prevention in contemporary settings without drawing on the lessons from the past.

It is unclear whether this shift is deliberate or a case of 'scope creep'.

The role of the National Centre is now largely *different* to that recommended by the Royal Commission.

2. Background

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse's Recommendation 9.6:

The Australian Government, in conjunction with state and territory governments, should establish and fund a national centre to raise awareness and understanding of the **impacts** of child sexual abuse, support help seeking and guide best practice advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment. (*Emphasis added*).

In the Prime Minister's Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse on 22 October 2018, he said:

These survivors also need to be heard, and believed, and responded to with services to address their needs. So today, I commit to fund the establishment of a national centre of excellence, and I call on the states and territories to work as partners in this venture. This centre will be the place to raise awareness and understanding of the **impacts** of child sexual abuse, to deal with the stigma, to support help seeking and guide best practice for training and other services. (*Emphasis added*)

In the 2019 Budget, the language begins to change, with a focus on prevention:

The establishment of the National Centre is part of our commitment to **prevent future abuse** and support victims and survivors. It will ensure the needs of survivors will remain a national Priority. (*Emphasis added*).

During stakeholder consultations in late 2018, and in the *Information paper* accompanying the survey, the balance has tipped towards the prevention of child sexual abuse. In addition, the name of the proposed centre has changed from the National Centre for Excellence to the National Centre for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.

Despite statements about including survivors within the purview of the National Centre, the *Information paper* **builds no bridges between the past and the future**.

In particular, a descriptor under recommendation 9.9 of the Royal Commission's report has nearly been lost in the *Information paper*:

The national centre should partner with survivors in all its work, valuing their knowledge and experience.

3. What is the reason for this drift of scope?

In the absence of information, it appears that the drift of scope for the National Centre away from what was promised by the Prime Minister is the result of activity behind the closed doors of government. The clearest evidence is outlined in paragraph two above, and in the (symbolic) change of name from the Centre of Excellence to the National Centre for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.

AFA would like to know:

- Who made the decision about the change of scope?
- On what basis was this decision made?
- Who was consulted in reaching this decision?
- How does government intend to communicate this decision?

4. Learning from the past

Forgotten Australians, and other survivors, generally want two things.

First, they want to be heard, and to be believed.

Secondly, they want to make sure that the abuse they experienced never happens again.

There are a growing number of children in care. As at 30 June 2018, there were 46,000 children in care. Outcome studies predict bleak futures for these children. Despite this, the *Information paper* places little or no emphasis on learning from the past. Implicit – but unstated in its arguments is that contemporary child abuse is largely *separate from or different to* historical abuse.

The publicly available information on the National Centre is couched in the concepts, language and experience of academics, bureaucrats and service providers. AFA is deeply concerned about the risk that the National Centre may become a bureaucratic monolith, far

removed from lived experience practitioners, in which the views of Forgotten Australians and other survivors is tokenistic.

With the exception of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which for some reason took studious steps to avoid this, all the reviews and inquiries into historic abuse in institutional 'care' have recommended that the adults, who have experienced institutional care as children, need to be recognised as a cohort with specific requirements. It is to our collective shame that governments, at both state and national level, have refused to do this.

The *Information paper* suggests several special needs categories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+), and those in regional and remote communities. These are important categories, and there is a crossover with Forgotten Australians and other survivors. But there is not one mention of adults who have experienced institutional 'care' as children. Once again, government policy and practice inadvertently pits one group against another for recognition.

5. Relationship with the National Office for Child Safety

Given the considerable shift in the role of the National Centre, it increasingly appears to be duplicating the focus of the National Office for Child Safety.

The National Office is overseeing the design and implementation of a National Strategy to **Prevent Child Sexual Abuse** (the National Strategy). (*Emphasis added*).

The National Strategy will be developed in consideration of the Royal Commission's recommendations and will encompass a range of initiatives with a particular focus on cultural change, including through education and awareness-raising, and measures which provide victims of child sexual abuse with access to the right supports at the right time. It will also include specific consideration of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, and regional and remote communities.

The second priority listed for the National Office for Child Safety focuses on prevention:

Improving collaboration between jurisdictions and institutions to support design, development and implementation of national strategies and **prevention** initiatives. (*Emphasis added*).

This duplication is confusing and wasteful. The current consultation around the National Centre does not take the opportunity to clarify roles or sharpen the focus of each entity. Neither does publicly available information about the National Office for Child Safety attempt to differentiate between the roles of the two, let alone set down principles for how they might complement each other.

6. The search for meaning

At the core of the Forgotten Australians' experiences are questions: why did this happen to me? How do I make sense of it all? Does anybody now want to know? Does anybody care? What do I tell my children? How can I make them understand? How will I be remembered? Could this happen again?

Ultimately these are questions for us all; questions of meaning. For many Forgotten Australians, as they get older these questions, become more acute. The National Centre may provide one answer for how the trauma Forgotten Australians have experienced may put to use for the children now at risk.

7. Recommendations

- a) That the role and purpose of the National Centre places emphasis and priority on learning from the past to inform future policy and practice.
- b) That the governance of the National Centre includes lived experience practitioners – Forgotten Australians and other survivors, whether on the board, advisory committee, or staff.
- c) That a priority for the National Centre includes educating health and aged care professionals about the historical impact of institutional 'care', and its impact on the adult survivors now facing the prospect of entering aged care, recognising that this group will largely be gone within the next two decades.
- d) That the role, relationship and scope of the National Centre vis a vis the National Office for Child Safety be clarified.
- e) That DSS urgently clarifies with all stakeholders *why* the role and scope of the National Centre has changed; who made the decision about this change; the basis for the change; who was consulted about the change; and how this change will be communicated to stakeholders.

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