

Executive Summary

Introduction

Appointed in December 2009 and reporting in October 2010, the Board of Inquiry into the child protection system in the Northern Territory has found a system in distress, staff stretched beyond capacity, children living at considerable risk of harm, and a community of children and families with complex needs and problems requiring urgent and ongoing assistance from a system that is overwhelmed.

Children are generally more vulnerable than adults. When their families and communities are stressed and weakened, they are even more vulnerable and at risk of not achieving their developmental goals, of being traumatised, and of being neglected and maltreated. The challenges facing the Northern Territory are enormous but so are the opportunities. What is palpable to Inquiry members is the vigour, toughness and energy of a resilient and diverse population of people most of whom have expressed an eagerness to embrace the challenge of capitalising on cultural strengths, growing community capacity and putting systems in place that can better meet the needs of its children and families.

The challenge facing the Board of Inquiry itself was daunting: an urgent situation brought to a head by Coronial findings following the tragic deaths of young children and public complaints about Departmental inaction; a compelling requirement to understand the complexities and find comprehensive solutions; the need to cover vast distances and convene with and in remote and isolated communities; meetings with traumatised workers, carers and families; an inquiry process that had to be thorough, inclusive and deeply ethical and respectful; and a relatively short time frame. Whilst the time frame had to be extended due to the untenability of achieving quicker outcomes, the product is a comprehensive report that reflects the views of the people and proposes a sturdy framework for the way forward.

The Northern Territory is not alone among Australian jurisdictions, all of whom are dealing with various contemporary challenges in this vital area of public policy and practice. The Territory faces unique as well as familiar problems in developing universal services to facilitate the safety and wellbeing of children and families at the same time that it ensures there are robust protective services for its highly vulnerable children and young people. The constellation of systemic factors that make the Northern Territory situation unique and particularly challenging are identified throughout the Report and include issues such as remoteness, demoralisation following previous inquiries and interventions, cultural diversity, chronic housing deficits and familial and societal trauma. What is absolutely evident is that major re-visioning and organisational and program reforms are necessary in order to locate and then concentrate resources strategically to meet the substantial needs. It is imperative that, in the process of this re-visioning, Government engages with communities, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the people of the Northern Territory.

As a result of the depth and breadth of the Inquiry, this Report provides a comprehensive framework for undertaking such a re-visioning exercise, recommending a range of reforms in a number of discrete and inter-connected areas. However, it does much more than this. The Report examines and comments on the social, cultural and legislative

environment of the Northern Territory and provides historical context for the current situation facing the community and government in relation to services for children, families and communities.

The Report is designed to provide a broad theoretical and intellectual context for understanding current literature and evidence about service systems that work well in the care and protection of children. Against this backdrop, the Report identifies the issues confronting governments and communities as they structure themselves to care for and protect children and support families in the contemporary world. In so doing, the Report honours the voices of the Northern Territory people who contributed, through submissions, hearings, and public forums, to the direction of the Inquiry and, ultimately, to the shape of this Report.

The Report describes communities of children, families, workers and organisations in crisis and provides a detailed and poignant description of what this looks and feels like for the people themselves – both those who need services and those who are trying to provide services.

Background to the Inquiry

The Inquiry was originally commissioned in November 2009 in response to escalating public concerns including findings in two Coronial Reports about the deaths of two children known to the Department. Implicated in these concerns and findings were the alleged failings of Northern Territory Families and Children (NTFC), a division of the Department of Health and Families (DHF or the Department) in its systems and mechanisms for protecting children. These concerns were being expressed in an environment already highly sensitised to findings from a range of inquiries and the ongoing impact of the federal 'Intervention' (the Northern Territory Emergency Response).

The purpose of the Inquiry was to review the child protection system in the Northern Territory and make recommendations to substantially strengthen and improve the system to ensure it meets the needs of Northern Territory children. Specifically, the Terms of Reference required the Inquiry to make findings and recommendations on:

- the functioning of the current child protection system including the roles and responsibilities of Northern Territory Families and Children and other service providers involved in child protection
- specific approaches to address the needs of Territory children in the child protection system, including the delivery of child protection services in regional and remote areas as part of the development of *A Working Future*
- support systems and operational procedures for all workers engaged in child protection, in particular staff retention and training
- quality, sustainability and strategic directions of out of home care programs including support systems for foster parents, carers and families
- the interaction between government departments and agencies involved in child protection, care and safety and NGOs and other groups involved in the protection, care and safety of children.

The Inquiry Process

The scope of the Inquiry was broad, accepting from the outset that a system aiming to achieve the safety and wellbeing of children does not operate in isolation and is affected by the quality and availability of all inter-connecting services including housing, health, justice, education, sport and recreation. Community attitudes to children, degrees of unemployment, levels of racism and various forms of discrimination also have a huge impact on any system aiming to care for and protect its children. Therefore, the Inquiry explored the roles and responsibilities of a number of statutory government agencies and NGOs and also conducted a series of both specialised and general community forums. The Inquiry collated all of this information and undertook a protracted and in depth analysis of all the subsequent data as well as seeking supplementary information as the need arose. It undertook all of these activities within a well articulated principles and ethical framework that acknowledged at its core the absolute requirement for a respectful and collaborative exchange that recognised the inherent power imbalances and vulnerabilities of various peoples and communities. The following are amongst the multiple sources that were utilised:

- Public forums across the Northern Territory. There were open forums for members of the public and others specifically for child protection workers, health workers, education staff and the police
- Written submissions from around the Northern Territory and interstate and hearings which were held in the major urban centres. The Inquiry received a total of 156 written and 80 oral submissions
- Specific requests for information and data from both government and NGOs. The largest number of requests was to DHF and the Division of Northern Territory Children and Families (NTFC)
- An expert Reference Group provided advice and information to the Inquiry. This Group was made up of local service providers as well as experts and academics from across the country
- A number of policy, research and investigation specialists who assisted with the particular subjects and/or the shaping of the analysis and documentation
- Reviews of numerous recent inquiries and investigations that covered similar content areas
- Numerous visits to urban, regional and remote areas and communities to hear from individuals and organisations and to see both the local conditions and the work that was being undertaken
- Plentiful consultations with people engaged in various facets of child safety and wellbeing work and related fields. These included those involved in initiatives such as *Working Future* and Commonwealth funded programs
- Assessments of some matters and referral of other matters to various statutory authorities — due to the number of specific complaints and allegations that required urgent attention
- Dedicated forums for foster carers and legal practitioners — because of the large number of issues raised in early forums and submissions.

Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

The major recommendations that connect with the specific Terms of Reference are identified alongside a brief overview of the findings in relation to each item. The Inquiry has made a total of 147 recommendations. Some of these pertain to significant reforms whilst others focus on smaller initiatives or on improving existing programs and procedures. Inevitably, many of the recommendations relate to more than one of the Terms of Reference. A detailed list of recommendations is provided at the end of this Executive Summary.

In broad terms, the Inquiry found that on most indicators the children of the Northern Territory, and particularly Aboriginal children, are significantly disadvantaged and exposed to more harm than their counterparts in other jurisdictions. They have much higher rates of diseases, and accidents and death rates for children are elevated across all age categories. Children in the Northern Territory are more likely to be raised in unsatisfactory environments and to be exposed to various forms of harm such as exposure to family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse and neglect. They are more likely to be exposed to alcohol *in utero*, to contract *otitis media* with the resulting hearing loss, to be anaemic, and to experience the impact of developmental trauma. Alarming numbers of children in remote areas do not attend school or only do so episodically, and their achievement levels are far below minimum acceptable standards. In many areas, children wander aimlessly around communities and become involved in dangerous or illegal activities. Recent data on developmental vulnerability (the AEDI) demonstrates that Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory are significantly more developmentally vulnerable than children in any other jurisdiction, Aboriginal or otherwise.

Ironically, although the overall substantiation figures are higher, reporting rates and substantiation rates for abuse and neglect are relatively low when compared with comparable figures for Aboriginal children in all other jurisdictions. This might indicate that there is a distrust of and lack of engagement in the mainstream child protection system, a disinterested acceptance of the plight of Aboriginal children, and/or a lack of capacity to respond. As one paediatrician commented, in the Northern Territory we see ‘the normalisation of the abnormal’.

Families of children in remote areas are more likely to be experiencing significant disadvantage, to have health and addiction problems, to be living in crowded and unhygienic housing conditions, and to be reliant on welfare benefits. Compared to the rest of Australia, the number of young, single women having children without the skills or resources to provide for their safety and wellbeing is alarmingly high. The Inquiry was repeatedly told that older women are being asked to assume the child rearing tasks that usually fall to parents as so many of the latter are affected by alcohol and other drugs. Many parents told us that they need help with parenting skills, and are losing the ability to appropriately discipline their children.

We also found exceptions to this depressing picture. There are a few communities that appear to be much stronger, that have vibrant commercial enterprises, that have active sporting teams with regular fixtures, that have not had alcohol problems for years, that have few serious health problems, and that are rarely subject to investigations by child protection authorities.

Terms of Reference

1. The functioning of the current child protection system including the roles and responsibilities of Northern Territory Families and Children and other service providers involved in child protection

The Inquiry found that the statutory child protection system (mainly involving NTFC) is overwhelmed by the demand on its services, understaffed and under-resourced, plagued by very high turnover rates, defensive after having been subject to numerous public complaints, audits and investigations, in conflict with key stakeholders, uncertain about its role, beset by internal stresses, and struggling to meet even the most basic expectations. For example, the public would naturally expect that when they believe a child is being harmed and report this to the agency, the matter will be investigated speedily and effectively. This has not been the case for some time in many service delivery areas. At the end of June there were over 870 children who had been reported to be 'at-risk' who were awaiting a formal investigation by NTFC. The Inquiry has requested that the Minister for Child Protection and the Department take immediate action to address this serious issue.

The lack of capacity within the agency extends to the initial processing of notifications, normal case management activities and out-of-home care as well as specialist work units such as training and policy units. In short, the current system is unable to adequately respond to expressed concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children.

It is clear that NTFC, as with equivalent agencies in other jurisdictions, is burdened by some quite unrealistic expectations about its role and capacity. There seems to be an expectation that it can and will protect all children from harm and that it can and should fix a range of individual, behavioural, social and systemic problems that are beyond the scope of any individual statutory or other agency. It was made apparent to the Inquiry that the pressures of meeting the enormous and variable expectations and needs are impacting very negatively on relationships between various government agencies that are working with ambiguous mandates about their own roles. This has resulted in a cycle of guilt and blame as over stretched workers attempt to accommodate impossible demands on their time. However, alongside of these organisational difficulties we also found a number of innovative programs and initiatives, excellent examples of collaborative policy and practice and cutting edge services that are comparable to those of any other jurisdiction, many dedicated, enthusiastic and idealistic workers, and an openness to change.

The Inquiry found a broader NGO system of child and family wellbeing services that is small, under-resourced and predominantly located in the two major urban areas of Darwin and Alice Springs. Likewise, it found that the services that are provided are not always focused in the areas of highest need. These services experience many of the workforce issues experienced by the statutory and other government agencies but tend to be more flexible and open to innovation. Many have successfully and creatively adopted a community development and capacity building approach and are working in partnership with their local communities and in particular with Aboriginal people and

services. Cooperation and collaboration between the government and NGO sectors is described as, at best, poor and, in many cases, non-existent. In many instances relationships between the sectors are marked by overt hostility. In some cases, the NGO sector had taken the initiative to develop interagency agreements and MOUs but they report that these attempts are being frustrated due to the difficulties in working collaboratively with government services. Again, there were exceptions. For example, there appears to be a promising inter-sectoral, interagency initiative around the youth service sector in Alice Springs.

Equally problematic and most disturbing to the Inquiry and commented upon in very many of the submissions is the fact that there is no Aboriginal-operated and controlled child safety and wellbeing service in the Northern Territory. We consider this to be a major deficit and unless addressed as a fundamental matter of urgency, will continue to significantly impede the capacity of child safety and wellbeing provision in the Northern Territory.

What the Inquiry has recommended

In acknowledging the magnitude of the problems in the functioning of the current child protection system in the Northern Territory, the Inquiry has made a number of expansive recommendations aimed at major reform that included re-visioning and re-orienting policies, programs and services. In re-affirming the centrality of principles, it captures the importance of a principle-based and ethical foundation to the work of caring for and protecting children and confirms the importance of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). Included in these recommendations is the call for a significant new investment in a range of child and family support and therapeutic services over a five year period. These new services must include the development of Aboriginal-operated and controlled child safety and wellbeing services generally known as Aboriginal Child Care Agencies (ACCAs) — in Darwin and Alice Springs.

The Inquiry has not made a specific recommendation about establishing a stand-alone department for child safety but, in the absence of this, it does urge the Northern Territory Government to make an early decision on this issue and to strengthen the profile of NTFC. It also recommends that, in the interests of engaging the Northern Territory public and workforce in visioning a system that provides for the safety and wellbeing of its children and families, NTFC utilises collaborative methods to develop and articulate its values and principles. The Inquiry proposes that services engage with the media in developing an awareness of ‘the incredibly difficult work of the sector’.

2. Specific approaches to address the needs of Territory children in the child protection system, including the delivery of child protection services in regional and remote areas as part of the development of *A Working Future*

Information from submissions and hearings was consistent in terms of the requirement to change the way that the needs of Territory children are met. The Inquiry found that the system for protecting children in place in the Northern Territory is beleaguered and preoccupied with reporting and investigation requirements while also trying to attend to the safety and wellbeing needs of children within the context of their family

and community. This reality reflects the history of mainstream child protection systems which have evolved from ideas and services designed to detect child abuse and neglect in a small number of situations in which dangerous parents intentionally inflict harm on their children. It is clear that the Northern Territory child protection system has become overwhelmed because the mandate and role of the statutory agency has expanded without a simultaneous expansion of prevention-focused programs across the whole of government and the non-government sector.

The Inquiry was advised and understands that, in the absence of a strong family support sector, child protection services have been expected to respond to a range of concerns and reports about child wellbeing, family difficulties and entrenched community problems rather than responding to reports of harm and injuries to children. The result is that these services struggle to do both tasks and have not been able to do either very well. This failure has reached the crisis point where large numbers of children reported to be at risk are not even being assessed. In the view of the Inquiry, a far more integrated model for proactively responding to the needs of children and their families to prevent and respond to harm to children and to promote their safety is essential. This will enable the much needed forensic investigatory services to focus on assessing and caring for children whose needs for a protective service are evident and critical. The philosophical and structural components of a new framework are detailed in Chapter 6 and include the adoption of a public health approach to the protection and care of children.

The need to change the paradigm for conceptualising and providing services to meet the safety and wellbeing needs of the Northern Territory children and the adoption of a new framework of services is highlighted by the unique geographic, social and population realities of the Northern Territory. Approximately 60 per cent of the Aboriginal population live in remote areas and welfare dependency remains the dominant situation in most remote Aboriginal communities.

The Inquiry heard again and again the now 'common knowledge' that children in remote Aboriginal communities live with inadequate housing, nutrition, education and safety. It is not surprising then that children subject to child protection concerns in the Northern Territory are more likely to live in families with poor diets, in overcrowded and substandard housing, engage inadequately with schooling and live in communities where poor health, violence, alcoholism and drug abuse is common and where basic safety needs are not met.

What the Inquiry has recommended

A set of recommendations is made relating to a re-configuration of child protection services. These involve the development of a dual pathway intake and assessment process along with a refinement of the primary focus for NTFC; the creation of Community Child Safety and Wellbeing teams for the 20 Growth Towns; the establishment of place-based, interagency, Community Child Safety and Wellbeing teams; an expansion of the scope of children and family centres in remote areas to include secondary and tertiary level services; the development of more children and family centres in areas of need; a new collaborative approach to child protection decision-making in urban areas; and a re-development of the child safety and wellbeing roles of other government agency workers. These recommendations can be found in Chapter 11.

Strong themes in all the recommendations are the adoption of processes characterised by

cooperation and collaboration, partnerships between government and non-government services, and capacity building within the Aboriginal services sector. Some of the recommendations are the responsibility of one or two agencies whilst others involve a 'whole of government' or a 'whole of service sector' perspective. All the proposals assume that promoting the safety and wellbeing of children is a shared responsibility.

3. Support systems and operational procedures for all workers engaged in child protection, in particular staff retention and training

The Inquiry heard from many members of the public, workers in government and non government organisations and NTFC staff themselves about the difficulties for workers in the current child protection system in the Northern Territory. The examples and stories about commitment, burden, burnout, stress, bullying and exhaustion provided unqualified evidence of a non viable system. Without a strong and supported workforce there is no point in developing any program let alone ones that adequately provide for the safety and wellbeing of Northern Territory children and their families. Limited resources, overwhelming demand, inadequate facilities, lack of support and supervision, high rates of absenteeism and dramatic rates of staff turnover are reported as being endemic in the Northern Territory. Whilst clear evidence was provided of excellent induction, training and supervision policies, the inability to operationalise these policies was very apparent. No retention policies were sighted and most workers were of the view that they were an expendable commodity — the poor cousins in a Northern Territory workforce that are differentially remunerated and rewarded on the basis of whether or not they were categorised as 'an essential service'.

Many of the submissions talked to the urgent need to value this important workforce and to recruit an occupational and professional staff cohort that is culturally literate and equipped and able to work in complex often isolated communities in ways that engage with the capacity of these communities as well as helping them to develop increased capacity. It is also clear to the Inquiry that this staff cohort needs to be competent across a wide range of skill areas, to be flexible and to be able to manage the huge tensions required when one is involved in protecting children from harm. Recent overseas recruitment strategies have come under heavy fire from professional associations and Aboriginal organisations despite the valuable contributions that many such recruits have made. The demand from these critics sits well with the wishes expressed in many submissions and hearings that there needs to be a renewed and energetic focus on 'growing our own' workforce that represents the cultural mix of the Territory.

The NTFC staffing profile itself is not easy to understand. The Inquiry could not obtain a clear or comprehensive picture of the workforce arrangements and requirements within the even broader Northern Territory child, family and community services of interlocking government and NGO services funded in a myriad of programs by multiple authorities and different levels of government. As with other jurisdictions, there is much complexity in the Northern Territory service delivery landscape where there is competition between all services for competent staff. There is an evident and urgent requirement to increase partnerships, collaboration and relationships between programs, agencies and personnel and to develop a more integrated child and family welfare workforce plan for the Northern Territory.

What the Inquiry has recommended

The Inquiry has made a large number of recommendations concerned with meeting workforce needs. These address the macro issues of workforce education, training and recruitment in general as well as the more operational requirements for developing, supporting and maintaining the range of workers needed in this important, challenging and rewarding area of service.

Of significance are the recommendations about developing a clear resource allocation model and a comprehensive workforce strategy, including a commitment to 'growing our own' and capitalising on this opportunity to increase the breadth and depth of the Aboriginal workforce. In reinvigorating its workforce strategy, the NTFC is urged to develop stronger partnerships with local tertiary education institutions, to invest more in cadetships and to facilitate multiple entry points and robust pathways through training for local people in both urban and remote areas.

The Inquiry is unequivocal that it is essential to resource and support the workforce and we make a series of recommendations about induction, training, support and supervision — acknowledging that there are already strong policies in place to address some of these needs. Going further than this, we recommend that regular supervision, and locally based practice and training advisers, are essential if quality practice is to be developed and maintained.

4. Quality, sustainability and strategic directions of out of home care programs including support systems for foster parents, carers and families

The Inquiry found serious problems in the policies for and provisions of out of home care (OOHC) services for children in the care of the Northern Territory. Many gaps and limits in care provision and support systems for foster carers were identified in hearings and in oral presentations to the Inquiry. In part, these deficits and problems are connected with the complex and unique history and set of circumstances in the Northern Territory. However, many of them are amplifications of problems experienced in all other jurisdictions as they struggle to find ways to accommodate and nurture children who they determine are no longer able to live with their parents.

OOHC includes all of the alternative accommodation arrangements that are put in place by any state in order to accommodate and care for children under 18 years of age who are assessed as no longer able to live with their parents or caretakers. The purpose of OOHC is to provide children who are unable to live at home due to significant risk of harm, with a 'home' that ensures their safety and healthy development. Similar to other Australian jurisdictions, there has been a steady increase in the number of children coming into OOHC in the Northern Territory. Aboriginal children constitute 43.3 percent of the children in the Northern Territory but make up 74 percent of the population of children in care. NTFC relies heavily on foster care with the majority (64 percent) of children placed in this type of care while another 22 percent are placed with kin and relatives. Juxtaposing this knowledge with the heart rending stories from foster carers about their agonizing experiences of the care system, highlighted for Inquiry members the urgency of the problems facing OOHC.

It is clearly evident from the submissions and hearings that problems exist at every level of the OOHC system. These included: problems with entry into care; meeting the particular needs of children with disabilities; the paucity of foster carers; the bitterness and alienation experienced by many foster carers; a lack of adequate support of carers; the lack of capacity to develop localised and suitable models of care; challenges with assessing and supporting kinship carers; problems in maintaining contact with families and communities for the children in care who are accommodated outside of their communities; the burgeoning costs of care including an exponential increase in 'the very costly 'fee for service' placements; confusion about principles of care; the inability to provide supports during care; the absence of therapeutic services for children in care; the need for a larger mix of care options; and meeting the needs of young people leaving care as well as their aftercare requirements.

The Inquiry understands that there has been a strong and costly recent growth in residential care in response to an increase in demand with the existing home-based system unable to meet the need. This has resulted in rapid, ad hoc growth. This, among all the other findings, confirms that a comprehensive review of residential service provision in the Northern Territory is needed.

We also understand that the Northern Territory Government has made ongoing attempts to deal with a number of these issues and to build capacity in the system to provide for the increasing numbers of children and young people in OOHC. However, it is clear from the hearings and submissions and the data presented, that the system still does not have the capacity to meet current needs let alone any projected growth. There is a need to build breadth and depth in the care system and this will require careful analysis, planning, realistic timeframes and adequate funding to develop.

What the Inquiry has recommended

The Inquiry proposes that there be radical alterations to the way the current system of OOHC operates in the Northern Territory and the recommendations capture this imperative for change. A number of urgent capacity issues within the out-of-home care programs will need to be addressed at the same time by way of the recruitment and training of further workers, in order to address serious staffing shortages and workload concerns. Equally, there is an evident and urgent need to listen to, engage with, and support foster carers. The Inquiry supports a focus on placed-based child protection decision-making as outlined in Chapter 11. It recommends a total review of residential care and foreshadows the possibilities of partnering with other jurisdictions to develop a new residential care strategy. It also proposes that current practices around important models of cultural practice be reviewed and we recommend the adoption of the 'Looking after Children' — or a suitable alternative — framework for children in care. Most of the recommendations relating to OOHC can be found in Chapter 9.

5. The interaction between government departments and agencies involved in child protection, care and safety and non-Government organisations and other groups involved in the protection, care and safety of children.

The development of partnerships between government, non-government providers, and private contractors, for the delivery of community services has steadily grown over the past two decades and many jurisdictions are rapidly expanding their partnership arrangements. It is increasingly considered essential that partnerships provide more flexibility in service delivery, profit from different perspectives and are far better equipped to package and deliver services for particular populations of people.

It is clearly apparent from the submissions and hearings that many individuals, organisations and agencies are aware of the severe shortage of NGOs in the Northern Territory, the failure of the current arrangements to capitalise on what partnerships are possible, and the need to recognise and build on the benefits of interagency cooperation and coordination. Many contributors expressed concern, if not despair, about the lack of coordination in the delivery of child wellbeing and protection services to children, young people and their families in the Northern Territory. There is evidence of a lack of shared understanding and expectation, in the submissions and hearings, of the role or limitations of many associated government and NGOs involved in programs to secure the safety and wellbeing of children. Poignantly, many submissions and hearings observed that, with a resourced capacity for early intervention, non-government services could reduce the need for forensic child protection services.

Written and oral submissions to the Inquiry identify many and diverse views about the factors that may be operating to hinder the development of genuine interagency cooperation and coordination. There are underlying and consistent themes in these views. While many of these focus on the role of NTFC, others recognise that problems do not all rest within one agency and that there is a need to look further if an effective solution is to be found. In particular, most submissions recognise that responsibility for the protection of children must be shared across agencies. This applies to relationships between government agencies as well as with NGOs. Most submissions from government agencies addressed the lack of clarification of role boundaries and recognised the need to address this and to engage with inter agency training in order to maximise individual service capacities.

Many non government agencies commented on the confusing implications of contractual obligations. In the submissions they reflect contemporary views of the inherent risks in becoming involved in a contractual relationship with government as a provider of a services including: restrictions around the sharing of information; perceived threats to the advocacy role of the non government agency; the refocusing of the mission of the organisation that might threaten to divert it from its core purpose; the administrative cost of complying with reporting requirements which may burden the administrative capacity of the organisation. Related to these is the risk that an organisation may be encouraged to expand beyond its capability.

What the Inquiry has recommended

There is an urgent need to change the culture that informs the partnerships essential to the delivery of services to children and families in the Northern Territory. This change must be underpinned by significant transformation to relationships, systems and practices across all levels of government, within DHF, with the NGO sector and communities to create the necessary cultural change required to build a sustainable, responsive, comprehensive care and protection system. Essential to this development is the need to engage across all levels of government and, in particular, to enlist the co-operation of the Commonwealth.

To achieve what is required will necessitate: a robust commitment to collaborative policy development and planning and sharing information about children and families among service providers involved in the care, wellbeing and support of children and families; improved capacity and adaptable service integration across all levels of government and the non-government sector — one that does not allow children and families to ‘fall through the cracks’ — Territory-wide client accessibility to quality and timely responses to family support and statutory intervention; and, genuine, tangible, and accountable, collaboration across government and non-government service providers.

These improvements include: legislation that enables coordinated planning and investment including information sharing in the best interests of the child and family; a commitment to new, integrated service model affirming that making child protection is everyone’s business; a whole of government approach to policy and planning; strengthening NGO delivery of care and protection services across the Northern Territory; and, strengthening the capacity of Aboriginal NGOs to deliver care and protection services across the Territory. In particular, new interagency, inter-disciplinary approaches to child protection decision-making are recommended for both remote and urban areas. Recommendations about these changes are encapsulated in most chapters of the report but are primarily found in Chapters 10 and 11.