

### **Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council**

**Madam CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I welcome everyone to this public hearing into the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026.

I welcome via videoconference to give evidence to the committee representatives from NPY Women's Council, Andrea Mason, Alexandra Liddle and Steven Bruce. Thank you for coming before the committee. We appreciate you taking the time to speak to the committee and we look forward to hearing from you today.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being webcast through the Assembly's website. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website. If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask the committee to go into a closed session and take your evidence in private.

Could you please each state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing.

**Ms MASON:** Thank you. I would like to commence with an acknowledgement of country and then each of the speakers will introduce themselves.

I begin by acknowledging the Larrakia people, the traditional custodians of the land on which this public hearing is being held today. I pay my respects to elders past and present and I extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here with us today. I recognise the continuing connection of the Larrakia people to their land, waters and culture and I honour their enduring stewardship of this country.

My name Andrea Mason OAM. I am the Acting CEO of Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council. I am also a Ngaanyatjarra southern Pitjantjatjara woman. I have worked in NPY Women's Council for many years—from 2008 to 2019; 10 of those years as CEO—and then for the past 12 months.

**Ms LIDDLE:** My name is Alexandra Liddle. I am, Luritja and Preteme. I am the Assistant Manager for the Child and Family Wellbeing Service. I have worked with Aboriginal children and families for the past 10 years, and I have been with the women's council for the last four.

**Mr BRUCE:** Hi, everyone. I am Steve Bruce. I am joining from Dja Dja Wurrung country in Victoria. My role is to provide leadership support within the Child and Family Wellbeing Service. I have almost 20 years' experience working with Aboriginal children and families.

**Madam CHAIR:** Ms Mason, would you like to make any opening statements?

**Ms MASON:** Yes, I would like to do that now.

We acknowledge that Margaret Smith, NPY Women's Council Chairperson, who was due to appear with us today as a witness, sends her apologies. She could not be here due to urgently attending sorry business in Pukatja in South Australia.

**Ms LIDDLE:** Margaret is Women's Council's longest serving director and current chairperson. Margaret has lived experience with her own family of being a kinship carer, having children taken away and the grief and loss associated with the rupturing of critical relationships and identity for children. Margaret has been a tireless advocate for women and children in the region and integral to the recent tri-state protection reform advocacy. We will do our best to speak on her behalf and represent her voice which has spoken to child protection issues affecting Anangu and Yarnangu children for over 20 years.

**Ms MASON:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today and speak to our submission regarding the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026. We appear today on behalf of Anangu and Yarnangu children, families and communities across the NPY lands who have been affected by the child protection system. Our organisation works closely with families, navigating child protection systems across some of the most remote communities in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. We know the focus of this presentation is in the Northern Territory. We see firsthand the realities families face, the barriers they encounter and the long-term impacts child protection intervention can have on children, families and communities.

We want to express our concern about the content of this Bill and the process through which it has been developed.

Since 1992 women's council has followed the action and research model created and developed by Mrs Tjikalyi Collins, now deceased. This way of working is the foundation and framework that has kept the practice strong in women's council for close to 40 years. This approach has not been taken with this Bill, and I will read out the principles of the women's council action research model.

Firstly, black and white sitting together, discussing and considering over a long period of time. Secondly, relating to Anangu from a kinship position defined by them. Thirdly, always working with an Anangu friend or mentor. Fourthly, listening and looking over a long period of time, not just observing but being part of the community and gaining an understanding of their perspective. Finally, to keep on discussing and reviewing what you make and design over a long period of time.

**Ms LIDDLE:** Our position is clear. This Bill moves the Northern Territory further away from culturally safe community-led child protection, and further away from the commitments made under Closing the Gap and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. We acknowledge and practise the importance of child safety. We acknowledge that government has a responsibility to respond where children are at risk of harm; however, this Bill does not adequately address the underlying factors driving child protection involvement in our communities. Instead, it expands intervention while failing to invest in the supports families need to thrive.

We have been working with children and families since 1993, providing services in child nutrition, youth, family and domestic violence, disability and aged care, as well as family support in domestic violence. These experiences are why we have led the push for a new initiative called Ngura Kutju which means 'one place', which is there to drive better child protection practice across the tri-state region with direct input from women's council leaders and members.

From our experience across the tri-state cross-border region, the drivers of child protection involvement are overwhelmingly linked to poverty, housing insecurity, overcrowding, disability, domestic and family violence, lack of access to services, intergenerational trauma and the ongoing impacts of colonisation. These are structural issues; they are not evidence that Anangu and Yarnangu families do not love or keep their children safe to the best of their ability. Despite this, the Bill lowers the threshold for intervention, increasing government surveillance of family life, shortening reunification pathways and making it easier for children to enter long-term care.

We are particularly concerned by the weakening of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. The proposed replacement of this principle with the universal child placement principle risks undermining decades of hard-fought protections developed in response to the Stolen Generations and the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

**Ms MASON:** For Anangu and Yarnangu children, culture, language, country, kinship, customs and community are key. Stability and permanency must not come at the cost of identity and belonging. Ninety-three per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the NPY region speak at least one or more languages. This demonstrates the critical importance of ensuring language—and interpreters are central to any system, but particularly this is one where the stakes are really high.

We understand there has been a lot of discussion about the word 'safety'—its definition, visibility and implementation. We highlight the importance of intrinsic safety. This is psychosocial wellbeing and hazards that Anangu and Yarnangu manage. In our communities, Anangu and Yarnangu provide specific forms of safety—physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural—that cannot be replaced by a *piranpa* or non-Indigenous person or mitigated through statutory regulation. This type of safety is intersectional, with connection to culture, country and kinship networks through language, and underpins community relationships, safe places and wellbeing inherent to Anangu and Yarnangu way of life. The Western definition of safety is particularly linked to physical safety. Yes, this is important.

We also urge the committee to consider any inherent bias when thinking about who can provide safety for an Yarnangu or Anangu child, and the risk to child wellbeing when other forms of critical safety such as intrinsic safety in the community, are compromised or obstructed from demonstrating strength—another reminder that the ability of a child to communicate with an adult in their first language is perhaps one of the most positive, significant psychosocial enablers to accessing multiple forms of safety in a community.

Thanks, Steve.

**Mr BRUCE:** Thank you, Andrea.

We are also concerned that the Bill fails to recognise the practical reality families face in remote communities. Families are already being asked to comply with requirements that are often impossible to meet due to limited service availability, long waitlists, language barriers, lack of interpreters, limited transport, poor internet access and cross-border mobility. For example, the very remote communities of the NPY lands experience additional barriers to seeking supports due to distances, travel time, transport availability, cost of fuel and poor weather and roads, among other things. The tyranny of distance for Anangu and Yarnangu is felt acutely in the context of child protection, where parents are often provided inadequate timeframes and insufficient support to comply with child protection or court requirements.

As mentioned earlier, one of the ways NPY Women's Council is working towards solutions in this cross-border context is through an initiative called Ngura Kutju. Ngura Kutju is working to ensure that families engaged in the child protection system are not penalised because they live near and across state and territory borders. Ngura Kutju is working to uphold the elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Child Placement Principle by ensuring families are fully assessed as placement options, regardless of which side of the border they live on, that family contact happens across borders and parents understand the different legislation and processes that apply to them across the tri-state region.

Most importantly, we are working to ensure that families are seen, heard and respected through child protection processes. The proposed family responsibility agreements and orders risk unfairly penalising families for circumstances outside their control. They also risk drawing more families into child protection responses simply because they are experiencing structural disadvantage and hardship.

We are especially concerned about the implications for Anangu and Yarnangu women experiencing domestic and family violence. In our experience, women are often navigating impossible circumstances while trying to keep themselves and their children safe. Many are misidentified as perpetrators, blamed for violence committed against them and threatened with child removal if they cannot immediately secure safety in systems that are already failing them. For women who are highly mobile within the NPY lands, using spaces and relationships across the land to keep safe, this poses an extra burden if threatened with the prospect of not meeting system obligations required by the department.

This Bill does not provide a sufficiently trauma-informed or culturally safe response to domestic and family violence in the context of child protection; nor does it adequately account for the unique cross-border realities experienced by women and children in the NPY region. Combined with shorter reunification timeframes and an increased emphasis on permanency, these changes are likely to increase the permanent separation of children from family, culture and country.

**Ms LIDDLE:** As part of both my and Steve's and at women's council, we work with the Walytjapiti team which is our intensive family support service. At the request of our directors, we have been providing this service for the past 13 years to support children and families at risk of child protection intervention in the remote communities of the region. A social return on investment study found that this service returns \$3.59 for every \$1 invested in it. This service is a crucial part of the way that women's council supports children and families.

**Ms MASON:** We believe that this Bill has the potential to increase harm. We are urging the committee to carefully consider the long-term consequences these reforms may have for future generations of Aboriginal children and families in the NPY region and, indeed, in the Northern Territory.

We respectfully recommend that the Bill be withdrawn, pending genuine consultation with ACCHOs, communities and leaders as we exemplify through our action research model. We further recommend that any future reforms:

- fully align with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and Closing the Gap priority reforms
- strengthen family participation and reunification
- recognise poverty, housing insecurity, remoteness and disability as structural issues rather than parental failure
- invest in early interventions—this is critical—for healing and prevention
- prioritise culturally grounded Aboriginal community-controlled responses

- consider cross-border implications and look to projects like Ngura Kutju, the tri-state child protection hub in women's council, that demonstrate the need for programs delivering services in the region to be further supported, expanded and funded.

Finally we urge the committee to recognise the expertise of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the lived realities of Anangu and Yarnangu. Sustainable child protection reform cannot occur without genuine partnership with community.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will go to the first question.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you for appearing today, for your submission and for outlining issues in terms of the context that you are working in. It is really helpful for us to hear that.

You have answered a lot of my questions in your opening statement, including things that we have not talked a lot about before the committee, like the impact on women who are dealing with DV and how that might roll out in this Bill and the women and families you are working with who are navigating a lot of cross-border issues.

One of the things that this Bill does is put a two-year cap on being able to apply on reunification. Could you talk through what that might mean for the families and children you are working with?

**Ms MASON:** Because Alex and Steve work with the women and closely in this area of children protection, I will ask one of them to respond.

Also, can I be introduced to the members who are there today?

**Madam CHAIR:** I beg your pardon; sorry about that, Andrea.

My name is Oly Carlson. I am the Chair and the Member for Wanguri. I have the Deputy Chair, Clinton Howe, the Member for Drysdale; the Member for Fannie Bay, Laurie Zio; the Member for Daly, Dheran Young, from the opposition; and the Member for Johnston, Justine Davis, the Independent.

**Mr BRUCE:** From our perspective one of the issues with that change of putting that set timeframe in place is some of the issues that we raised in our opening statement which is the impact of those cross-border realities and the tyranny of distance for the families that we work with. What that means in reality is that it is not the same as being in a metropolitan setting where you have a child protection office and a worker right there and they go out and do a home visit on the same day and start engaging with mum and dad. In reality the worker is jumping in the car and driving for five or six hours to do a visit to a community where that parent may or may not be. To do that work takes a long time to build relationships and to provide the support that is required to make a reunification happen. By putting a shorter timeframe on that, it is potentially limiting the opportunity for families to go through that reunification, to be fully assessed for reunification and have the best opportunity to have their children returned to their care.

I think it is worth noting that similar legislation in Victoria was introduced 10 years ago and has just been repealed this week where they found that this type of legislation was more harmful rather than helpful. By putting in timeframes it reduced the ability of child protection to be responsive and individualised in their approaches to families.

**Ms LIDDLE:** For Anangu borders do not exist, so a form of safety is for women to travel across borders which, like all the reasons Steven has stated, can also make it more challenging for access to services where they are so remote. It is not always easy to identify where a family member might be because that is them acting protectively by moving across the borders to keep themselves safe.

**J DAVIS:** I want to ask quickly about the family responsibility agreement provisions, the proposed amendments to that and how that might impact on the people you are working with at the point of intervention. Do you want me to explain more what I mean?

**Ms MASON:** Yes, please, if you could give some more context.

**J DAVIS:** Under the new proposed amendments, the language is around intervention and the department being able to intervene, and the threshold for intervention is far lower than it has been. For example, things can escalate much more quickly around things like non-school attendance et cetera. I can give you some

more specific examples, but that is one, if you could talk briefly to that, and how that might impact on the people you are working with.

**Mr BRUCE:** One of the concerns is that earlier child protection intervention does not necessarily increase safety. With earlier child protection intervention, you also need to match that with support services. What we find in our region is that those support services are under-resourced or non-existent in some of the communities that we work in. By reducing the threshold for that involvement, it is introducing families earlier into the child protection system, but not matching that with the support that would allow them to benefit from that intervention.

**Ms LIDDLE:** Families are being punished for failing to access services that do not actually exist for them locally.

**Ms MASON:** We heard a similar account during the disability royal commission when we looked at First Nations people with disability and children with disability. Children in remote areas may not and did not get referred to services because those services did not exist for children with disabilities.

During the NT intervention, when there were concerns around children and school attendance, for example, there were no interventions or plans regarding assessments to do with the underdeveloped learning during those early learning years. That issue of disability was not highlighted nor considered in those factors to do with school attendance of children, particularly in remote areas, because there is this circle of not being able to refer to services because those services did not exist at the time.

You have to be very sensitive and aware to each of the important factors of providing support to families when we are looking for support in the best interests of the child that those services exist in a timely way to work with families and parents.

**Mr YOUNG:** I do not think we have met. As an introduction, I am a Yaegl man from northern New South Wales. I have been up here for 13 or 14 years now. I represent the region of Daly River, out to Wadeye and that region.

Thank you for your submission. I really appreciate it.

My question is in regard to the impact this Bill may have, if it is passed in its current form, on vulnerable children and young people, particularly Aboriginal children and young people and their families. Given that we have heard many submissions from various stakeholders regarding the lack of resourcing with the Department of Children and Families to be able to help implement the Aboriginal child placement principle, would you be able to talk more broadly if this Bill was to pass and what impact that would have on children and families?

**Ms LIDDLE:** We are here on behalf of Anangu and Yarnangu. Something that they have been advocating for tirelessly over the last 20 years is for young people, children and families to stay connected to culture, community and country. If this Bill passes, it moves us further away from all that advocacy that they have been fighting so hard for.

Steve, do you have anything?

**Mr BRUCE:** I agree. There is the risk that we have already touched on of introducing families into a child protection system that is not equipped to provide the support to improve their lives. There is a lot of evidence to suggest what happens when you introduce a family into a system that links to the justice system—that comes alongside being introduced to the child protection system. It is tricky. It is likely that we would end up with more children involved with the child protection system and then the known flow-on effects of that, like Alex mentioned, of children being less connected to their communities and country as a result.

**Madam CHAIR:** Our apologies for the technical difficulties earlier. Thank you for your time today, coming before the committee. Have a good day.

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The committee suspended.

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