

Northern Territory Council of Social Service, Anglicare NT and CatholicCare NT

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 to the table and via videoconference to give evidence to the committee Claire Pirrett, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Northern Territory Council of Social Service; Emma Hohnberg, Director, Business Development, Anglicare NT; and Jayne Lloyd, Chief Executive Officer, CatholicCare NT. Thank you for coming before the committee. We appreciate your 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.

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

Ms PIRRETT: My name is Claire Pirrett and I am the Interim CEO, Northern Territory Council of Social Service.

Ms LLOYD: Jayne Lloyd, Director from CatholicCare NT.

Ms HOHNBERG: Emma Hohnberg, representing Anglicare NT.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms PIRRETT: We have prepared an opening statement and it is just a couple of minutes per person—short. I will start if that is okay.

Thank you very much for having me. It is the position of the Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) that this legislation should not be passed. Impactful child protection reform in the Northern Territory will not be achieved by legislative change; there needs to be increased investment in the prevention of child protection matters, the support of families, early intervention and support for reunification.

The explanatory statement says that the Bill amends the Act to hold parents accountable in caring for and meeting the basic needs of their children and promotes an early intervention model to respond to child wellbeing concerns. This is not achievable by legislative change. It also states that these reforms seek to systemically assess the drivers of statutory child protection and youth engagement, and that this reform will offer early intervention support to parents via family responsibility agreements. This is not evidenced. Early intervention and addressing the drivers is not achievable with legislative change.

The evidence is clear that the drivers of child protection involvement are poverty, domestic and family violence, housing insecurity, service shortages, intergenerational disadvantage and systemic generation. As such, the most effective way to keep children safe is not through increased statutory intervention but through sustained investment in the social and economic conditions that support family wellbeing.

To prevent the necessity of a child protection response in the Northern Territory, we must ensure we are reducing poverty; supporting families long before statutory intervention; investing in the early years, including early childhood education and care; addressing housing insecurity; investing in domestic, family and sexual violence prevention, early intervention, response and recovery, disability support and culturally safe family support services.

Preventing child abuse and neglect requires a shift from predominantly reactive child protection responses to proactive community-based approaches that support families before harm occurs. This is possible in the Northern Territory, but not with legislation alone. It requires a generational strategy with investment in the social, community, Aboriginal community-controlled and other sectors.

The Northern Territory's social and community service sector, of which we are the peak body, can and does prevent child maltreatment. NTCOSS members deliver a broad range of early intervention and family support services—including domestic, family and sexual violence services; housing and homelessness support; youth services; mental health programs; and financial wellbeing services—across the Northern Territory in

urban, regional, remote and very remote communities. These services are often the first point of support for families experiencing vulnerability and are uniquely placed to identify risk early, build protective factors and provide practical assistance before families reach crisis. However, there are not enough of these services to meet the need and the demand.

As such, it is the view of the Northern Territory Council of Social Service and many of our members who co-signed that there should be significant non-legislative investment to increase the safety of Northern Territory children.

I will hand to my colleagues now. Thank you.

Ms LLOYD: Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

Just for context, I have lived and worked in the Territory all my life, and have been at CatholicCare for nearly 30 years. CatholicCare is a Territory-based organisation providing a broad range of place-based community and family services across urban, regional and remote communities. Every day staff walk alongside children, families and communities who are trying to keep their kids safe and strong, often in very challenging circumstances.

I begin by acknowledging the committee's role in the shared goal that brings us together: protecting children and ensuring their wellbeing. I also acknowledge Aboriginal elders past and present and the many Aboriginal families who continue to carry the impacts of past child removal policies, including members of our own staff and communities that we work in.

From CatholicCare NT's perspective, any reform to the *Care and Protection of Children Act* must keep faith with the Aboriginal child placement principle. That principle is not an optional add-on; it is a hard-won safeguard that grew out of the Stolen Generations and the recognition that removing Aboriginal children from their families, communities, culture and country causes profound and enduring harm. We cannot afford in 2026 to drift away from that lesson.

We are seeing now what happens when young people grow up disconnected from family, kinship structures, culture and community. They carry grief, identity loss and trauma into adolescence and adulthood, and too often we see that play out in homelessness, justice involvement, mental health distress and ongoing contact with services. If we weaken the Aboriginal child placement principle or treat it as secondary to notions of permanency, we risk repeating the very patterns that royal commissions and inquiries have urged us to move beyond.

I also want to comment on the emphasis in the Bill on family responsibility agreements and orders. On paper these look like ways to engage families earlier and to avoid court processes, but in practice our concern is that for families who are already disengaged, overwhelmed or dealing with issues like poverty, housing stress, violence or substance abuse, these tools are unlikely to be experienced as supportive. They are more likely to be experienced as coercive. A piece of paper cannot substitute sustained, relational and culturally safe support. If we do not address the structural issues families are facing, agreements risk becoming another pathway into surveillance and sanction rather than a way to help families.

Finally, I want to speak to the way the Bill links stability with permanency. Children in care absolutely deserve stability and continuity, but when stability is framed primarily through long-term placement care orders, there is a real risk that the impetus and mandate for departmental staff to make active efforts with birth families is weakened. Stability should not mean giving up on families; it should mean a stable web of relationships around the child, including kinship structures, culture and community, and a genuine commitment to reunification where that can be made safe.

Meaningful legislative reform, in CatholicCare's view, requires more than updating an historical model for modern times. We would like to see a completely reimagined and different care and protection system that could be designed from the ground up for today's reality—a system that is healing focused, trauma informed, culturally safe and grounded in the social determinants of health and wellbeing, a system that sees safety as not just the absence of immediate harm but as the presence of strong family, strong communities and strong cultures.

Thank you for the opportunity to present.

Ms HOHNBERG: Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

There are few areas of child protection law that have such a profound effect on children's lives. These decisions shape not only immediate safety, but also a child's development, education, wellbeing, identity, connection, trust and love. They affect whether a child grows up feeling safe, supported and connected to culture, family and community. For that reason, this or any change to this legislation must be approached with great care, humility and responsibility. It is critically important when considering reforms of this kind that we hear the voices of those most affected: children; young people; families; communities; organisations; legal services and frontline workers. We must also do our very best for the Territory, which lies in the hands of all our young people.

Anglicare NT supports the importance of child safety and the need for an effective protection system. However, from our work with children, young people and families across the Northern Territory, we are concerned that this Bill risks expanding coercive intervention without adequately addressing the underlying causes of child protection involvement, including poverty, housing instability, disability, family violence, remoteness and lack of access to services.

These changes may also place further pressure on a child protection system that is already under-resourced and understaffed. The system is receiving and responding to thousands of reports each year, all of them about safety, while early intervention and prevention options remain limited. Without stronger investment alongside reform into supports that help families before concerns escalate, there is a real risk of increased demand on an already statutory system without improving the outcomes for children and families.

Our submission is grounded in the view that lasting child safety is achieved by investing in strengthening families and communities with practical supports they need. We urge the committee to carefully consider whether this Bill will improve the outcomes for children in practice or whether further consultation, scrutiny and system reform are needed before the changes occur.

J DAVIS: Thank you all for appearing today.

We have heard from multiple witnesses throughout this inquiry, including legal experts, that child safety is already the paramount concern of the current Act, and that the real reason children are not safe in the Northern Territory is resources, not legislation. If the Bill passes in its current form without any additional investment in those resources, what do you see as the risks for children's safety?

Ms PIRRETT: I am happy to provide an overview of the state of the social and community sector, if that is useful. In 2023 almost half of Northern Territory not-for-profit social services operated at a loss. Between 2018 and 2025 award wages increased by nearly 35% and grant funding indexation increased only by just over 7%. We are in the midst of a workforce crisis within this sector. We did a workforce survey on this in 2025, with almost a quarter of responding organisations having between four and 10 vacant positions, and more than 10% had 11 to 20 vacant positions. Recent media has identified frontline workers carrying more than 60 open cases at a time, so you could imagine the intensity of those workloads and what that does to a workforce and an individual. That is the state of the social and community sector in the Northern Territory at the moment.

J DAVIS: We have heard about issues with workforce, access to housing and the supports that need to be in place to support families. In the NTCOSS submission—or maybe it was Anglicare—you talked about your workers working to support families who love their children but cannot access the services that they need. It is the same question about what will happen if this Bill goes through. Given some of the changes in this Bill in relation to family responsibility orders and the two-year cap on reunification, what will the impact of that be on children's safety?

Ms HOHNBERG: If there is no access to services or they are sitting on a waitlist or are not eligible, then they are not able to comply with agreements or orders. Especially when looking at reunification and the timeframes around that, we are seeing that they are so understaffed at the moment. The department is trying to do so much, but they are not even getting the plans in place within adequate timeframes or at all. It becomes very confusing for families to do what they need to do when they do not have the resources to do it. We do not want to create situations of failure.

J DAVIS: We have heard that if this Bill passes it will risk an explosion in children being in out-of-home care.

Mr HOWE: Madam Chair, that has been brought up multiple times. This needs to be corrected for the witnesses. There was one lawyer who also represents a law firm who was protecting—who provides legal representation to offenders as well, and potentially misled parliament when questioned on that. I would just like the context of that comment on the record.

J DAVIS: It was actually SNAICC that said that, Member for Drysdale.

I will continue with my question.

Madam CHAIR: Keep to the question so that we can give the Member for Daly the opportunity to ask his questions as well, thank you.

J DAVIS: My question for CatholicCare is broadly in relation to that. You said in your submission that past child removal laws were also justified as being in children's best interests and caused devastating harm. What do you see in this Bill that risks repeating that?

Ms LLOYD: I think removal of the Aboriginal child placement principle will not only direct how departments interpret the Act, but I think it is a loss of a really hard-won recognition of Aboriginal people who were removed, and that principle recognises the special place that Aboriginal people have in the Northern Territory. I think that underestimates the actual grief and pain that a law is inflicting on a group of people who are already in a lot of pain. It feels, in some ways, very provocative to be removing the Aboriginal child placement principle when having that principle is a really big protective factor for children.

I think we are seeing in our community now what happens when young people are disconnected from family and culture, and we see this when young people are exiting care and are in our communities. I think we are just creating a big next-generation problem as well as not addressing the real needs for now.

Mr YOUNG: I have a follow-up question from the Member for Johnston's line of questioning and, in regard to getting a position, whether you support the Bill in its current form. Whatever your position is on that, can you expand on why or why not you support it and what amendments could be made to strengthen child safety?

Ms LLOYD: I think safety is inherently the intention of all Acts. I think why we could not accept the Bill in its current form is particularly around the universality principles and the scaling of the importance of Aboriginal people and culture right down as a sort of add-on to the Act. That is something we would not be able to support.

The other thing that really worries us is the emphasis on permanency because, for Aboriginal children, permanency away from their culture or family can never be an option.

Mr YOUNG: Can you expand on the reunification part of the Bill and what it means in a practical sense, given that you provide a lot of those support services in the communities, especially domestic and family violence programs, and why that might be a barrier for some families—the timeframe of two years?

Ms LLOYD: To the permanency issue, I do understand the concerns of foster carers about what their needs are, but the needs of foster carers cannot be the primary concern. The primary concern has to be of the child. Children can go along in foster care for long periods of time, but when children become 13, 14, 16 and 18 exiting care, that relationship changes and young people have a lot of resentment and anger, and that all just plays out in our justice system and other systems, so it is a really short-term view, this view around permanency. That is a significant issue for us, and I think when we are talking about stability for children who may be exposed to domestic violence, housing insecurity or poverty—all of those things—it is about how we maintain genuine connections to culture and family.

Mr YOUNG: Maybe the same question for the other two—but I am conscious of time, if you are happy to keep it short. It is just around the support of the Bill or not.

Ms PIRRETT: I am happy to answer that briefly, which is that no, NTCOSS does not support the Bill. The primary reason for that is we cannot see that the level of child protection reform that is required in the Northern Territory is possible with legislative change.

Ms HOHNBERG: I echo those comments from Claire, but I think there are also issues with the agreements and orders, the way reunification timeframes provide additional pressure. That did create concern. I think that reform needs to be reviewed, considered, consulted and then developed.

Mr HOWE: Thank you all for coming in today and for the work your varying organisations do.

My question comes to the point—we have heard a lot about resourcing and, as we have found, I do not think anyone disagrees with what you have put forward collectively as the things that will drive long-term change. The issue we will have as a committee and as a parliament is what recommendations we will put to the government and then passing this Bill. My question is: what do we say to kids who are in genuine risk tonight and over the coming months? We cannot wait for poverty to end, so what do we say to those children, genuinely, who are at risk right now?

Ms PIRRETT: I would say that you would invest in their families and communities now and for generations to come. From the evidence given by other people to this committee, I would say there is enough safety within the current legislation and that for there to be meaningful change, we have to make long-term decisions. We have to make decisions for generations to come. That is vital; otherwise, we are entrenching this disadvantage and entrenching the problem for children now and for generations to come.

Ms LLOYD: I would support that, because for children who need care now and families who need support, there are not a lot of great options. Particularly the more remote you go, the fewer options you have. What we would also like to say is that we can wrap support around you and your family and get some really good outcomes for you, but at the moment that is very hit and miss. I am not sure that this legislation will be getting us any further to having something good to say to those kids today.

Mr HOWE: Is it the position of the council that there is no threshold for removal of a child?

Ms PIRRETT: I cannot make a comment on that because that is not the expertise that I bring to this committee. The expertise of the NT Council of Social Service and me is regarding social justice, social policy and making social change. The removal of children and the interaction with the Act is a question for the lawyers, legal services and some of the other people who have appeared.

Ms LLOYD: This change is not about saying children should never be removed; it is just about asking what are the principles that guide us when they do need to be, and how do we treat and care for those children when they go into care, if they have to go into care. I think we know this is a complex area of work, and there will always be families who need that extra support or for some reason cannot look after their children. I do not think it would be the view of this group of people that children will never need to go into care. It is just how we do it that is important.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you, ladies. That ends our session for today.

Mr YOUNG: Can I do a follow-up, please? We still have one minute. It will be quick; I promise.

Madam CHAIR: No stories, just the question.

Mr YOUNG: Stories are important.

Just a quick follow-up from that, some of the feedback we have heard from witnesses is about the lack of resourcing with the department to actually implement the current Act when there is a notification of a child. Would you say that is also an issue to look at wraparound services and whatever other principles are within the Act as well?

Ms LLOYD: Absolutely. It is a resourcing issue for our sector, the NGO sector, the ACCO sector and the department itself who do not have the resources they need to do their jobs properly as well.

Mr YOUNG: It is not the current Act that is the issue; it is the implementation of the Act.

Ms LLOYD: Correct.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you, ladies, for coming before the committee today.

The committee suspended.
